

SELENA

MAFIA
Princesses

Mafia Princess

Valenti Family Ties

Book One

Selena

Mafia Princess

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Unabridged First Edition

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one

Trigger Warning: This book contains themes some way find triggering, including a character who endured child/sexual abuse. While these scenes are not graphically described, I know that even vague details can be disturbing to some, so proceed at your own risk. Only you know your limits. Please read responsibly.

King

I stand in the doorway to our Manhattan brownstone, inhaling the scent that used to be the smell of home. Now, it's more like nostalgia, like when you hear that song on the radio from a simpler time, and it punches a hole right through your gut. It's not the song or the smell that gets you, it's going back for a second, to a time when you still thought your parents had all the answers and made the right decisions so you didn't have to worry about knowing right from wrong and knowing they're both valid choices. In the end, I suppose the sum total of a man is whether he chooses right more often than wrong.

I've done plenty of wrong, but maybe I'm still naïve enough to think I can do right sometimes, even in the

profession that's been chosen for me.

“King? Is that you?”

Ma's voice starts the nostalgia loop all over again. I haven't seen her in six months, and though that shouldn't be long enough to make her feel like a memory, it is. A lifetime has passed in those months—my sister's life, to be exact. Ma refused to join the family for any of the it—the search for the body, the final acceptance that we'd never find it, the funeral, the grief over the gaping hole left in our lives. I can't really blame her. She specializes in cocktails and parties on yachts and high-pitched, tipsy giggling fits with women she pretends to like but wouldn't hesitate to viciously destroy if she overheard a piece of gossip that could achieve that.

Pain is not her drug of choice. Glamour is.

She wraps me in an embrace, and the scent of a childhood that seems a distant memory swirls around me, a boozy mixture of old houses, Chanel No. 5, and gin. “Aren't you a sight for sore eyes,” she murmurs against my chest before pulling back to look up at me. “You look just like your father. So tall. And handsome! Just look at you. You'll make some girl a very lucky woman someday.”

I snort at that. “I doubt it. I couldn’t risk it. I don’t know how any man in the Life can get married, knowing he could be putting his family in danger with one wrong move—or leaving them without a father.”

“A man doesn’t have to be killed to leave a woman without a husband,” she says with a little pout.

“Come on, Ma,” I say, dropping my bag off and heading into the den with her. “Are you really playing the victim here?”

“Are you saying your father didn’t move halfway across the country and leave me here on my own?” she challenges.

I sigh. “No. He did.”

“I just never thought you’d all take his side and go with him,” she says, giving me a wounded look as she settles herself onto the sofa, folding her legs prettily beside her as if she’s posing for a picture. “Make us a drink, would you, love?”

“Sure, Ma.” I pour us each a gin and tonic. After the flight, I could use it. I take the recliner, not sure what else to

say to her. On the one hand, she's my ma and I love her. On the other... Well, there's too much shit to unpack on the other.

"You told us to go with Dad," I remind her at last. "Remember? You said you wanted to be alone and find yourself."

"Well, I'd never been on my own," she protests. "I went from my father's house to your father's. I've never been a single gal in Manhattan. It looks so glamorous on TV."

"Ma, if you didn't love him, why'd you marry him?"

She takes a long swallow and closes her eyes in contentment before speaking. "My father wanted me out of the Life, and Uncle Al knew this up-and-coming Italian businessman who would provide for me and keep me out of immediate danger. And your father can be charming when he puts his mind to it. Just ask all his little teenage *comares*."

I shake my head and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. I know the mafia arranges marriages sometimes, but my parents loved each other at some point. Not something I'm dying to dissect right now, with a big day coming up tomorrow.

“Ma, can we talk about this job?” I ask. I’d never show it, but my stomach has been fucked up for days. I barely know Al Valenti. He’s mom’s uncle and the boss of one of the New York families. But I’m not sure anyone really knows him. He’s quiet, a watcher, not the boastful hothead people picture as the leader of a successful mafia empire.

My service was promised to him in some business deal long before I knew who he was. What job he gives me depends on factors I don’t even fully understand, including who my mother is, our family’s image, money, and our status with him. Probably no one really knows what goes into the assignment except his consigliere.

“You’ll do great,” Mom says, smiling proudly at me. “Uncle Al loves you.”

I’m not sure Uncle Al loves anyone, but I know I can’t let him down. I can’t let our family down, either. It’s up to me to represent the Dolce branch, to make my father proud. Ma, too. She’s a Valenti by birth, and I know that even if I don’t carry that name, I’m supposed to be tougher than I am. I’m supposed to be as tough as someone who grew up in the Life, even though I didn’t. I’ve always known I’d have to leave the nest, that I was duty-bound to step into the Life when I turned

eighteen, but knowing and experiencing are two different things.

“I’ve never killed a man,” I say, voicing my greatest concern.

Ma waves a hand as if to brush away my fears. “You’re eighteen, King. Just out of high school. Al doesn’t expect you to be a seasoned veteran.”

“He doesn’t?” I ask, relief gnawing at the edges of my nerves.

“Course not,” she says, tittering into her drink. “You grew up in the lap of luxury, and he’s the one who put us there. He knows the life you’ve led. You’ll probably have a babysitter for a year or two before you even get your hands dirty.”

“A babysitter?” I ask, bristling at the insult. I may not be a hardened criminal, but I have my pride. It doesn’t help that my own mother is laughing at the thought of me being dangerous.

She’s right, though. Sure, I’d fight to the fucking death to protect my family, but that’s instinct, not ruthlessness. The thought of killing a stranger in cold blood doesn’t do anything

for me. The truth is, it scares the fuck out of me. My greatest fear of all is that when the time comes, I won't have it in me to pull the trigger. I know how much a life is worth. I know what the loss of one life can do to a family.

I won't have a choice, though. If Al Valenti says someone needs to die, and it's my job to make it happen, then I make it happen or take their place. High school is over. I'm no longer a bigshot. I'm just a lowly soldier now. I don't make the calls or the rules. My job is to take orders. So that's what I'm going to have to do. My personal preferences and feelings have no part in this life.

So, I'll forget I have them. I'll tuck away my weaknesses until I forget they exist. Feelings are a weakness. Love is weakness. I warned my sister of that, but she didn't listen. In the end, she chose love anyway, and love claimed her life. Nothing's going to claim mine, not love or fear or hesitation. I know what I have to do. I have to walk into my initiation tomorrow like I already am the man Uncle Al wants me to be, not the fuck-up I am. I have to make sure that I'm so good at my job that the Valentis think they need me. Everyone knows what happens to members of the mafia who aren't useful.

Tonight, I will ask my mother these questions. After this, I'll never speak of them again. I will be Ma's son tonight. I will still belong to this fucked up family with a dead sister, a mother who couldn't be bothered to come to the funeral, a father who promised his first-born son to the mob, and three brothers I had to leave to their own devices. Tonight, I'm a Dolce, with all my failures and regrets hanging around my neck like a noose.

I know I'm lucky Uncle Al still wants me. Not everyone gets a second chance. Not everyone gets to start over a new man with a new family. And I'm not going to fuck this one up. Tomorrow I will close the door on this life and become a Valenti man, and I will devote my life to being the perfect mafia soldier.

Dutiful. Loyal. Heartless.

two

Eliza

A voice rumbles through the wall of excited, drunken giggles and squeals and chatter going on around me. “Miss?”

I ignore my bodyguard. God, he’s such a... I’m too drunk to think of the word.

Prude? Boomer? Buzz kill?

Tommy groans and grinds his dick against my ass, his hands tightening on my hips, his lips attached to my neck like a leech. I know better than to go down that road again... Which is exactly why I’m entertaining the idea.

My motto might as well be, “Smart enough to know better, still too cool to care.”

I didn’t even really like Tommy to begin with, but he was just dangerous enough to give me a little thrill, and that’s what I was after. The thrill wore off pretty quick when I realized he was dumb as a brick. He’s just a sack of muscles with a gun strapped to his hip. I was bored in a month.

But then Daddy said I had to break up with the idiot, and suddenly, Tommy Fatone didn't look like a big, dumb, easy conquest. He looked like a goldfish in a bowl to a kitten, and that kitten was me.

“Hey, asshole,” Vince barks, grabbing Tommy by the shoulder and hauling him off me. “Mind hoovering someone else's neck? Boss'll have my head if she comes back with a mark on her.”

In any other business, he might be kidding. But his boss happens to be Anthony Pomponio, the head of one of the five New York mafia families, who also just so happens to be my father. So, in this case, losing his head is a literal danger. Especially if Daddy finds out who left the hickeys.

“We're just hanging out,” Tommy protests. “I know we can't do nothing.”

Didn't stop him from trying when we were together, but whatever. All the boys know the mafia princesses have to be “pure,” and they're all obsessed with trying to deflower us. Tommy would never admit that to someone higher on the food chain, though. He's just a soldier, a grunt for my family. The only person worse suited for me would be a Valenti, the family

mine has been at war with for a decade. And even I wouldn't go there. I may be defiant, but I'm not dumb.

“Go *hang out* with some other girl,” Vince says, elbowing past Tommy to hover over me at the bar.

Tommy gives my ass a squeeze, and I grin up at Vince while he glowers at Tommy like he's deciding if that's an offense worthy of the death penalty. I like Tommy that way. He's daring.

But he doesn't have a death wish, so he scurries off to find some other girl who will let him get a whole lot further than me.

In truth, it's a relief to have an excuse to keep from taking that particular step. Sex is like this whole big scary thing I don't even want to think about. You'd think I'd have done it with Tommy or any of the meaningless boyfriends who came before him just for curiosity's sake. It's an experience, and I'm all about experiences. But from what I've heard from my non-virgin friends, it sounds too complicated to deal with. I like my life. It's simple. It's fun. It's safe.

Plus, if I ever have one too many drinks, there's one not-so-little catch named Vince standing in the way of any experimentation. For my Sweet Sixteen, Daddy got me a

Ferrari, a birthday bash that everyone worth knowing in the entire city attended, and a chastity belt named Vince. Vince is my third bodyguard—I got my first one, along with a pony, when I turned eight—and his sole purpose is to guard my vagina. His life literally depends on my hymen.

Because the mafia lives and dies by its prehistoric Italian traditions, Daddy's job is to pick a suitable husband for me. My husband's job is to kiss Daddy's ass for allowing him the honor of marrying the daughter of a don. And my job is to bleed like a stuck pig on my wedding night.

I shiver at the thought.

But if I don't, Vince's head will roll, and that would be a shame. He's sweet, despite the stick up his ass. I can't really blame him for being the way he is. I don't exactly make his job easy now that I've started hitting the party circuit. I'm not going to be responsible for his execution, though. I like the guy. He's good at being a human chastity belt.

The bartender slides a round of shots across the bar, the ice glasses melting enough to make them glide in their own liquid like drunken ballerinas. This club just opened, so it's still hot enough to be exclusive, with its notorious ice shot

glasses, glass bar, and crystal chandeliers. I feel like I'm in Elsa's ice castle, and I'm here for it.

I snatch up an ice shot glass filled with electric blue liquid and hold it aloft. "To tonight," I scream into the noisy bar.

"I think you've had enough," Vince says, glowering down at me.

Lizzie Salvatore runs her tongue along the edges of her teeth, shooting a predatory grin at Vince. "You obviously haven't had enough," she says. "Take one with us."

"I don't drink on the job," Vince grumbles.

"That's too bad," she purrs, shaking back her honey-brown waves and batting her eyes at him. "I'm awfully drunk, just ripe for being taken advantage of. You could put it anywhere you wanted, and I wouldn't even remember it in the morning."

Vince shifts around, looking uncomfortable, which sends my friends into a tizzy of laughter.

"Oh, leave the poor guy alone," Bianca says, hooking her arm through Vince's muscular one. "You're making him blush."

We throw back our heads and let the sweet, sticky nectar of the gods run down our throats. Then we all smash our glasses on the floor, which is already coated with a sheen of water from the melting ice other people have dropped.

Bianca Luciani is my best friend and sometimes enemy, depending on the month or year. She's the perfect frenemy—totally different from me but with similar life experience; hot enough to hate her for it when we're at war and be part of our squad when we're not. As the daughter of one of the other dons, we're as likely to go to war as our families. But right now, my family has hate only for the Valentis, and Bianca and I share the common goal of getting fucked up, though probably for very different reasons.

Lizzie... Well, she's a whore, but she's always down for a good time, and that's what I'm after tonight. When she takes yet another shot, I reach for another for myself. Before I can take it, Vince grabs my hand. "Miss," he says sharply. "You're only supposed to have three drinks, and you're well beyond that."

I burst into howls of laughter. I must be going on a dozen shots by now. I'm drunk off my ass, but I don't care. We're young and rich and we own the city. When anything

new opens up in New York, we're on the list. When a new luxury handbag or jewelry line comes out, we're on the list. We get invited to the best parties, are the first to know the best gossip. What's it all for if not to enjoy it?

It's not for sticking to a three-drink maximum, that's for damn sure. Not when I know that any night could be my last. That one day, Daddy's going to put the brakes on this. But not tonight. Tonight, I'm going to go all out, balls to the wall, and no one, not even my bodyguard, can stop me. So, I enjoy this night like it's my last, just as I soak up each night, reveling in my freedom, glutting myself with it, even when I'm puking it out and the fun is long gone. I attack partying with a determination that is beyond hedonism. I want more than to feel good, more than fun. I want life. *My* life. I want anything I can call my own, even my own mistakes.

"You're going to make yourself sick again," Vince snaps. I grab another shot, swaying on my feet, and throw it down my throat like a dare. I stare back at Vince, whose jaw twitches in annoyance. Without breaking eye contact, I reach for another.

"No more," Vince says, snatching it from my hand and tossing it onto the floor without even taking the shot first.

What a waste of good alcohol.

I try to get another shot, but he steps between me and the bar, blocking my way. Even sober, I wouldn't be able to fight this buffoon. He's a giant, all muscles and tattoos and flinty eyes.

Instead of backing down, I grab a barstool and climb on. Vince makes a grab at me, but I'm already stepping onto the bar in my Manolo's. I reach down and grab a bottle of liquor from behind the bar.

“Eliza,” Vince barks. “Get down!”

My friends scream and cheer me on, their voices urging me to go harder, to be bigger, to live larger. To grab life by the balls and ride it hard. I stand and thrust the bottle into the air, raising my arms above my head in a symbol of victory. My head swims in the noisy bar, my voice dancing with the crystals in the chandeliers overhead, echoing off the mirrors on the ceiling. I shake the bottle and scream at the world, “You can take my drink, but you can never take my freedom!”

three

King

At the head of a long, mahogany table stands one of the most dangerous men in New York. Around it sits a group of stone-faced men ranging in age from eighteen to eighty. They're all armed, all staring at me. But I am not afraid. I'm solid, my muscles made of steel, my blood of ice.

“This is King Dolce, my great nephew, and he's going to make a fine soldier,” Al says, laying a hand on my shoulder. I can feel the strength in that hand even though he applies no pressure. I can feel the ability to take lives, to make calls that take lives. Al Valenti might as well be a god, and I carry his blood. I've always been proud to call myself a Dolce, but this time, I have a reason to feel pride. This man didn't promise a son or daughter to be paid as a debt for a loan he took twenty years ago. This man didn't take loans to get where he is. He spilled blood.

I stand tall, swelling a little just standing beside the legendary don. His blood runs through my veins. Al Fucking Valenti. I will make him proud. I will make him trust me, need

me. I will become more than a made guy, more than a soldier. One day, I'll be a fucking god like him.

I don't waver. My voice is sure, my resolve strong. I take the oath of *omerta*. The code of silence. The vow to see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. To take care of our own business and ourselves, and not bring in outsiders. We don't need them. We have each other.

I spill my blood for them. It's an honor.

I walk out of the room with my head held high. This is my life now. Forever. There's only one way out once you've taken the oath.

I'm confident in my path.

We entered through a back door at the bottom of a set of concrete steps. The door led into a below-ground conference room where the group gathered. Al dismisses them, and we step out of the room into a hallway. We pass a game room with tables for pool, foosball, and ping-pong. Another room with a theater set up. A few closed doors remain, but Al isn't giving me a tour. He leads me upstairs, and I find myself in a house—his house, I assume.

We enter a study that smells of leather and scotch and cigars. Al takes a seat behind a heavy walnut desk. The walls are lined with shelves of leather-bound books that remind me more of a professor's office than a mafia boss's.

Al gestures for me to sit, so I do. I expected bodyguards and servants, but it's just us. And even though I'm sure of myself, sure of my decision, being alone with him is more intimidating than being in a room full of armed men. Al watches me, his green eyes taking in everything, as if he can read my soul and see my unworthiness.

After a minute, he pours a finger of scotch into two glasses and hands one to me. "You're a made guy," he says, his gaze boring into me. "How's it feel?"

"Feels great," I say, taking the glass. It does. I'm still a little high off the adrenaline. I'm part of a new family. One where the rules are clear, where my role is clear, where there's no waiting for inept authorities to find a sister they never find. One where I can be proud again.

Al waits, his watchful gaze making me want to squirm. I don't, though.

"You ever shoot someone?" he asks after a minute.

“No, sir.”

“Taken a bullet?”

“Yes, sir.”

He nods, not looking surprised, though he must not have expected that. My mother assured me he knew my past. That I grew up with everything handed to me, that I went to private schools and played sports and had the world at my feet.

“Tell me about that.”

I nod, shifting in my chair and sipping the stinging liquid in my glass. “I was helping my father take down a family he didn’t like in his town,” I say. “We were torching some houses, and one of the guys came out and shot at my brothers.”

“Not you?”

“He was aiming at my brother,” I say. “I did what anyone would do.”

“You didn’t have a gun?”

“No.”

“You know how to handle one?”

“Of course.”

“If you’d had a gun, would you have used it?”

“I would have killed him,” I answer honestly. I thought I couldn’t kill a man, but when I remember that moment, I know I would have shot without thinking twice. When that asshole leveled a gun at my little brothers, there was nothing but murder in my heart.

Al pulls a set of keys from his pocket and unlocks a drawer on his desk. He opens it and hands me a gun, sleek and black and made for killing. I don’t ask where it came from or who owned it before me, don’t ask how many more are in that desk. I don’t want to know how many lives it’s taken.

“Did your father succeed in destroying the family?” Al asks.

“Yes.”

Not the way the mafia would have. He didn’t kill them all and walk away proud. He was sneakier, dirtier.

Al busies himself slicing off the tip of a cigar. I’d give a thousand bucks to know what’s on his mind, but he gives the cutter his full attention. At last, he leans back in his chair and lights the cigar, watching me again. His eyes narrow as he studies me through the smoke.

“I have a partner in mind for you,” he says.

Damn it. A babysitter, just like Ma predicted.

“Don’t worry, all the new guys get a partner,” he says.
“Most of the old guys, too. Helps me know who to trust.
Keeps people accountable.”

I nod. There’s no use in arguing, no reason to make him think I’m a little punk. This isn’t high school. I don’t call the shots here. I put my nose to the grindstone and obey orders and survive. After a few years, I’ll have proven myself, and I’ll start working my way up. Al doesn’t have sons. Maybe someday, I’ll be sitting in his seat. There are probably a dozen guys with more years, more experience than me already eyeing that seat, though. I’m not ready for it, and if I put myself in the race, I’ll just get myself killed. I’m not going to shoot myself into the position. I respect Al already. If I end up in line for his position, it’ll be when he puts me there.

“I’ve got an assignment in mind for you as well,” Al says, pushing the cigar cutter toward me and handing me a cigar. “It’s a big one.”

Adrenaline spikes inside me. I didn’t expect to be making a hit on my first job.

This guy doesn't waste any time.

That's fine, though. I like his direct approach. If he wants to test me right off the bat, I can respect that. Besides, the sooner he tests me, the sooner I can prove myself.

"Yes, sir," I say, carefully slicing off the end of the cigar. "I'm ready."

I light the cigar and take little puffs to get it started. It tastes like ass.

"The five families are always at war with each other," Al says, settling back in his chair. "This is the closest to a peace we've had between the five in a decade. There's just one holdout."

I nod, waiting.

"The Valentis and the Pomponios have been killing each other for ten years," he says. "We're both sick of it. We're ready for an alliance. We just need a symbolic union, a signature in blood, a gesture of goodwill between us."

I nod again, waiting with a cigar in one hand and a scotch in the other. I can sense it coming. He's going to ask me to kill someone from another family, a Pomponio's enemy. The enemy of my friend is my enemy, after all.

“Mr. Pomponio has offered his daughter,” Al says,

I stare at him for a second, the implications of his words not quite sinking in. Instead, my mind races through the facts, laying them out as carefully as my analytical little brother would. I’ve always tried to keep up with the five families, but the Valentis are the ones I studied most closely. I wrack my brain for what I know about the Pomponios. I know more about the men, the mafia side.

Anthony Pomponio’s son was killed about ten years ago. His only daughter is a notorious tabloid-courting socialite my sister would have known more about than I do. She would have studied her fashion choices, her misdeeds recounted in the gossip rags. But whatever she knew about Eliza Pomponio, it can’t help me. I know next to nothing.

“To be frank, I think he expected me to take her for myself,” Al says when I don’t respond. “But I promised to love one woman forever, and I intend to take that promise to the grave.”

I nod again, muttering an apology for his loss. Everyone knows Al’s wife died a few years back.

Al continues without acknowledging my condolences. “Not to mention she’s a more suitable age for you. What do I

need with a wild eighteen-year-old?”

My chest begins to tighten as I become aware of the guillotine of his words hanging over my head. What do *I* need with a wild eighteen-year-old? I’d rather kill a man. I was in charge of protecting one girl in my life, and she wound up at the bottom of the ocean somewhere, her body never found. I’m sure as shit not keen on repeating that mistake.

“Sir,” I begin. “I’m honored you’d consider me for such an important assignment as establishing peace between our families. But I’m not sure I’m the man for the job. I expected you to have me take down an enemy.”

“I know it’s a bigger job than most get in a lifetime,” Al says, his face entirely serious and even sympathetic. “A hit takes a little planning, a moment to execute. This... This assignment takes a lifetime.”

I swallow hard, the implications of his words sinking in. He expects me to be around for a lifetime. He’s not planning to use me as disposable muscle. But there’s one other option that seems more likely than him grooming me to take over.

“Is Mr. Pomponio hoping to do what you did when you married Ma off to my father?” I ask, just to clarify. “Get her

out of danger, away from the Life?”

Al puffs on his cigar. “No. Eliza’s not like your mother. I like to keep the women in this family safe, get them out of danger when I can. Anthony has a different philosophy.”

He doesn’t frown, just states it matter-of-factly, but I can sense the disapproval there under the surface. He may be ready to make peace with the Pomponios, but that doesn’t mean he likes them.

“Anything I need to know about him before I marry his daughter?” I ask. “Or her?”

“Eliza’s a smart girl,” Al says. “She knows what she’s doing. And she knows more about the Life than half the men in my family.”

I know he’s not just talking blood family. This could work to my advantage, I realize. It might be nice to have a partner who knows about the Life, who can clue me in before I do something stupid without realizing mafia etiquette and get myself killed. If Al’s planning to keep me in the middle of things, I’ll need all the help I can get. Hell, just marrying her would make me indispensable for a minute, enough time to get my feet under me and prove myself. They’re not going to pick

off the guy who's supposed to make peace—at least until the peace is established.

And then there's the matter of what this means to the Valenti family. Uncle Al could have chosen anyone, but he chose me. There's got to be some higher ranking single guys in the family. Is he positioning me for better things than a soldier—maybe even an heir? I run through the family tree, ticking off potential heirs in my mind. He has only daughters, so no heirs there. But Ma has several male cousins, men ranging in age from late thirties to early fifties, who will all be vying for the position. There's also one grandson a few years older than me, though you'd never know Al was a grandfather by looking at him.

He's in his fifties, but he's still tall and broad shouldered and intimidating as fuck. If anything, the silver streaks in his hair only make him look more formidable. Not a lot of men last that long in this profession, let alone his position. Do I want that position, that responsibility? One thing's clear. He's at least tossing my name in the hat with this move. A great nephew isn't close to the throne, but by tying me so closely to the don of another family, he's shoved me

halfway to the front of the line. It's up to me to decide what to do with that advantage.

After a pause, I nod. There was never really a choice about this. It was probably decided before I showed up at all. I know better than to argue with Al Valenti, even if his decision knocks my entire life off its axis. There's no going back from this. There's no out. Divorce is not an option for us, so for the rest of my life, I'm going to be tied to this rich party girl who has nothing in common with me.

Not only that, but from the moment I put a ring on the daughter of a don, my life will be a tightrope walk. I don't just have to please Al Valenti now. I have to please Anthony Pomponio, too. Everyone in New York will be looking to me to make peace between these families.

It's up to me to decide what to do with that advantage, too.

If I fail, I know what happens.

If I succeed... Well, it's a pretty nice boast to be able to say you stopped a war. And hell, it's an arranged marriage. It's not like we have to love each other. We don't even have to like each other. This is a business deal, nothing more. Having nothing in common will make it easy to keep things

professional. Her family will recognize that, too. They don't expect more. Her father probably just wants someone to stop her partying, which is why he thought Uncle Al would be a good choice. That should be easy enough for anyone, though. The hard part will be keeping both families happy, ending the war.

Al Valenti's a smart man. He knew who to pick for that job. After all, I've always protected my family, and this is no different. Now, I have a new family. To protect them, to keep more blood from being shed, more lives from being lost, I have to end the war, bring the rival families together. If that means teaching a spoiled little mafia princess to be a wife, that's what I'll do. Love plays no part in the Life, and it will play no part in mine.

four

Eliza

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about,” Dad says, tucking his napkin into his collar like the old man he is. Parents are so embarrassing.

“Okay, Daddy,” I say, smiling at him across the table. We’re at *Jean-Jean*, a fancy little bistro down the street from our place. Anyone walking in would think we’re alone, but I know better. At the next table, four of his men sit eating their own dinner with ears out to every conversation, eyes on every person who walks in or walks by the place. Outside, it’s a beautiful early summer day, the sun shining. Blink twice and you’d miss our driver keeping watch on the door, ready to whisk us away at the slightest sign of danger. When you’re the don of a family at war with the ruthless Valentis, you can’t be too careful.

“As you know, there comes a time when every Pomponio has a duty to fulfill,” Dad says.

“I know.”

“You’re eighteen now, but you’ll always be my little girl, Liza.”

I look up, startled by what, for him, is a downright sappy speech. Alarm bells go off in my mind, and my heart does a little stutter step.

Please don't let this be what I think it is...

“I’m still your little girl,” I say. “I’m barely eighteen.”

And sure, I’ve seen more than my fair share of blood and death, but that doesn’t mean I’m an adult, ready to take on the responsibilities of a mafia woman. All this talk of duty and growing up makes dread sink heavy into my gut. I grip the table, feeling lightheaded. I’m not ready for this.

“There’s been bad blood between us and the Valentis for too long,” Dad goes on. “It’s time we put an end to it.”

“Really?” I ask, drawing back. “You’re going to forgive them for everything they’ve done?”

“Forgive?” Dad asks, then laughs quietly and shakes his head. “We’re both ready for it to be over, that’s all. You know, it started as a turf war. But during the past ten years, the lines were clearly drawn. There’s no reason to keep fighting.”

They've got their territory and we've got ours. Happened naturally."

"Okay," I say slowly. "I guess that makes sense. No reason to lose more men without cause."

"I'm glad you understand," he says. "We've all made sacrifices, sweetheart."

I wonder if he's thinking of Mom. I know I am. She sacrificed everything for her freedom—including us. Dad could have tracked her down and had her killed, but he didn't. He let her go.

"I know, Daddy," I say, reaching across the table to pat his hand. I stare down at it, surprised by how rough and wrinkled his skin feels. I can't remember the last time I touched him. His fingers are thick and calloused, his knuckles cracked. When did he get so old?

"Now it's time for us to make another one," he says. "A marriage shows our good faith with the Valentis, that we're all one family now."

"A marriage pact?" I whisper, my blood turning to ice. Even though I knew it was coming in some part of me, I'm still horrified by the outcome of this conversation.

“Al and I agree it’s the right move.”

“Oh, now it’s *Al and I?*” I ask incredulously. “Like you’re good buddies who haven’t been trying to kill each other for the past decade?”

The families always have plenty of drama and feuding, but the Valentis are pure evil. Even I know that. Growing up, that was the one family I wasn’t allowed to associate with at school or anywhere else. Because Daddy knew how ruthless they were, how treacherous. I was a child when they started this shit. They killed my brother. They’re the reason Mom left. How can Dad just decide that doesn’t matter?

“You’ve been having a lot of fun running around in the city,” Dad says. “I may not have always been the best father to you, but I do notice what you’re doing. And I think it would be good for you to rein it in a bit, don’t you?”

His voice may be gruff, but his eyes are pleading. He wants me to be okay with this. But how can I?

“I can do that,” I say desperately. “No more parties, no clubs. I’ll call up Gianna and hang out with her instead of Lizzie and Bianca. I’ll be good, Daddy. I won’t even drink. You can have Vince report back. I can be good. You’ll see.”

Dad bobs his head once. “We all make sacrifices for this family, sweetheart.”

I’m not making a sacrifice for this family. I *am* the sacrifice.

“Daddy, please,” I beg. “Not Al Valenti. He’ll kill me as revenge!”

“He won’t kill you,” Dad says, shifting around and glancing at the table of bodyguards, probably hoping I won’t make a scene.

Sorry, Daddy. Scenes are my specialty. How else is a girl supposed to get shit done? It’s not like I *want* to cry and beg in public, but sometimes, it’s the only way to get a man’s attention.

“Please,” I wail, really getting into it as I reach across the table to clutch his hand in both of mine. I’ve replayed my last conversation with Mom a thousand times.

“I didn’t even know you liked acting,” I said to her as we sat on the edge of my bed and she explained that she was going to be just across town, that she’d visit any time my father would let her. That she felt a calling to follow her own passion, and it was time to do that.

“I’ve never been in a play before, but they’ll say I’m a natural,” she said. “I’ll know differently, though. I’ve got years of experience. Ninety percent of being a mafia wife is acting.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything. I’d been numb since my brother died, walking around like a zombie, my body going on like usual while my mind had disengaged from everything.

“It’s what I have to do,” Mom said, wiping away a tear. “It’ll be best for everyone. You’ll see.”

“You’re right,” I said, and I smiled big at her, just the way she liked. I didn’t know about being a mafia wife. But I already knew something about acting.

I didn’t know what she meant about marriage then. I was eight fucking years old. But somewhere along the way, I figured it out. I figured out something else, too. The best actors aren’t the best liars. They’re the most honest. All I have to do is call up the seed of fear at the thought of marrying the monster who destroyed my family, and *voila*. There’s the start of a great scene. It only needs to be nurtured in order to grow. Give it the sunshine of your attention, dwelling on the horror of it. Add some water in the form of tears. Soon, the little seed

has exploded into a shaking, tear-stained, snotty mess that couldn't possibly be fake.

That's the key to acting. It isn't fake. It's real.

I always knew the day would come when Daddy would marry me off to someone important, either a boss of another family or some old retired don who's no longer in much danger but hides out like he's in wit-sec in case anyone finds him. Knowing my father, with his insistence on me having three bodyguards, he'll want me as far from danger and as guarded as possible, so that's the route he'll take. He'll give me to some old geezer who paid his dues and deserves to be rewarded with a virgin sacrifice.

Because that's what marriage is to a woman—the sacrificing of her freedom. Men in the Life get to run around doing whatever the fuck they want, shooting up their enemies and dunking their dicks in whoever they please. Wives are nothing more than glorified maids and baby factories. If I had my way, I'd rather be someone's *cumare*. At least they get the passion while it lasts. Then they can walk away. You can't walk away from marriage. It's a noose tied around two people's necks, two people who make a life out of looking the

other way and pretending not to feel the shame of their own dirty secrets.

Wives get to sit around resenting their children and worrying about their straying husbands, worrying which night he won't make it home. And when he does drag his ass in at dawn, he's more often covered in someone else's perfume than blood. I grew up in the Life. I know how it works.

And now I'm being resigned to the same fate. Al Valenti is three times my age, but it's not enough. I'd rather have someone five times as old. Still, Al's a don. He could go at any time. He has at least as many enemies as Dad.

"Calm down," Dad orders, yanking his hand from mine and casting furtive glances around the bistro. Lucky for him, there's only two other tables occupied by strangers. "Al's not interested in marrying again."

"So... Who?" I ask, wiping at some of my tears.

"A relative of his," Dad says. "Don't worry, he's a made guy. We both thought it would be a good match. You'll be meeting him next week."

So, this is it. The day I knew was coming, the one that made me party hard and try to forget. But that's all over. Too

soon, I'll be slaving away in some man's kitchen and his bedroom, waiting for him to keel over dead or get whacked by some hired muscle like Tommy Fatone.

Maybe I could get Tommy worked up into a jealous rage, have him do it...

If I'm lucky, it's Al's old man or something, someone too old to get it up more than once or twice a year. One too many Italian feasts will catch up to him, and his heart will give out if a hit doesn't find him. I'll bury him with gravitas, mourn like a good little wifey for six months, and then I'll be a free woman before I'm twenty-five. By then, I won't have the lure of virgin flesh, and my father won't get to marry me off. That's the best-case scenario.

I won't think about the worst.

I'm sure as shit not going to make the mistake of getting married again after my husband croaks. I don't want to be owned by any man. I want to be my own woman, living life as I choose. And I'll choose exactly what my mother did—freedom. I don't blame her for leaving any more than I blame my brother for getting killed. It's not Mom's fault that she left. It's Al Valenti's. Dad may be ready to forgive and forget, but I will never forget what that family took from mine.

five

King

I sit with my back to the wall watching a pretty blonde walk into the bar, a swanky little joint in midtown with potted plants hanging above the polished wood bar. The hostess catches my eye and smiles, but I'm not looking for women here. My hand is already promised, and the last thing I need is word getting back that I'm not taking this shit seriously.

The blonde sits at a table for two, though it's just her. I check the other patrons, wondering if my guy is already here, if he's casing the joint or checking to see what I'll do. I don't do anything. I just wait.

"Can I get you anything?" a waitress asks, coming by my table for the second time.

"Water," I say, tossing a five on the table. "Thanks."

The waitress smiles and asks if I'm sure. I don't even look at her. I'm sure.

She leaves, stopping by to take the order of the blonde at the table by herself.

A tall, dark-haired guy enters and glances around, his eyes landing on me. He swaggers over, giving me time to size him up. He's got Al's athletic build and Roman nose, but he's thinner and not as hard looking.

"You the little punk I'm babysittin'?" he asks, sliding in across the booth.

"King Dolce," I say.

"No kiddin'," he says. "Any relation to Donny?"

"He's my uncle."

"No shit," he says, flashing a smile and slapping his thigh. "Donny's been cuttin' my hair since I got too big for Ma to put a bowl on my head and embarrass the shit out of me."

I smile. "Sounds about right."

"Well, I know you know who I am," he says. "My tombstone will say Alfred De Luca, but everybody just calls me Little Al."

Of course they do. He's Al's grandson, next in line for the Valenti throne unless one of Uncle Al's cousins steps in and snatches it out from under him. I don't know if it's a good thing that Uncle Al is keeping me close, or if it means he doesn't trust me and wants to keep an eye on me.

“How does this work?” I ask. “You going to train me or something?”

“Listen, don’t take it personal,” Little Al says, dropping his voice and leaning forward so as not to be heard by the booth behind him. “My grandpa is paranoid as fuck, and with good reason. You know half the city wants him dead. Everybody gets a partner. Keeps us in check, right?”

“So I’ve heard.”

The waitress stops to check on the blonde, looking somewhat annoyed.

Little Al twists around toward her. “Hey, sweetheart,” he calls, raising a finger to get her attention and pointing to our table. “Get me a beer, would you?”

He turns back to me. “You read the Bible, King?”

“Sure,” I say.

“You know who the most hated man in the Bible is?”

“The devil.”

“Well, yeah, you’ll meet *Il Diavolo* soon,” he says. “We aren’t him. But we’re the most hated profession.”

“Tax collectors?”

“That’s the one,” he says, sitting back in his chair with a grin and pointing a finger at me. “You’re gonna be fine, kid. I can tell already.”

“Because I know the Bible?”

The waitress sets a beer down in front of Little Al, and he waves her off before she can ask if we want food.

“Look, my *nonni* filled me in on what you been livin’ like,” he says to me. “You’re new to this, so I’m gonna spell it out for you. Don’t come in here with any big ideas about ascending through the ranks too quick. You’re a soldier, just like me. And you know who my grampa is.”

I nod.

“He don’t do any favors to any of us, even family. We all start at the bottom. And everybody who works for us, for our family, they hate us. Just the way it is, kid.”

“Because we come to collect,” I say, realizing what my job will be. Beyond marrying a Pomponio, that is.

Little Al downs half his beer in a few swallows. “We’re like two cops on the beat, right? Except if we meet cops, they get beat.” He laughs and finishes off his beer.

“My uncle’s a cop.”

“Oh, yeah,” he says. “There is a Dolce on the force and in our pocket, isn’t there? Don’t worry, I’m joking. We don’t beat cops. We just avoid ‘em. Don’t need ‘em. We make our own laws, and we enforce them ourselves. You eating, kid?”

“I already ate,” I lie. I wasn’t sure what kind of work we’d be doing, and the last thing I wanted to do was look like a little pussy by losing my lunch on my first day.

“That’ll cover us both,” Little Al says, nodding to the cash I threw down. “Let’s go, kid.”

I toss down another bill and follow him out, glancing at the blonde who is looking at her phone with an irritated expression. She got stood up, I decide. New York is like that. You can pass a hundred people in a day and never see them again, never know their stories or struggles.

“Where to, boss?” I ask. I notice the way Little Al swells when I call him that, the way his shoulders square just a bit, and he stands a little taller.

“Gonna pay a little visit to Jimmy the Nose,” he says. “He’s late with the rent again.”

“Okay.” I took a taxi here, as most people in the city do, but he must have driven, as he heads for the nearby

parking garage. It smells like exhaust and tar cooking under the sweltering summer sun.

“You don’t say much, do you?” he asks.

“When I’ve got something to say,” I answer honestly. “I’ve got a lot to learn before I run my mouth.”

“Then watch and learn, kid.” Little Al gets behind the wheel of a flashy, souped up Porsche, and I slide into the passenger seat. “Two rules when you ride in my car,” he says. “Don’t touch nothin’ and don’t say nothin’ about the music unless you’re givin’ up the pussy tonight.”

I nod in agreement and watch the streets go by, memorizing the way. Uncle Al showed me a map with our territory marked out with pins, real old-school, to show me the places we do business. But being here makes it real, and I want to get a feel for the real place.

“I hear you’re tying the knot with Eliza Pomponio,” Little Al says as we make our way into a smaller neighborhood with little shops along each side of the street.

“So I’m told.”

“Makes me wish I wasn’t married,” Al says with a grin. “I’d pop that cherry so hard you’d hear it in the next

county.”

I tense. “What?”

“All the daughters gotta be virgins, bro,” he says. “It’s our reward for services rendered, you know?”

“I didn’t know.”

He laughs and slaps the steering wheel. “Don’t tell me you been fuckin’ around,” he says. “You gotta save yourself for her, too.”

I don’t say anything.

“You have been saving yourself, right?”

“No,” I say, glowering at him.

He hoots with laughter and reaches over to slap my shoulder. “I’m just kidding you. Relax. How you supposed to show them who’s boss if you don’t know what you’re doing? I got so much pussy before I was married. Still do, if you know what I mean. But Eliza Pomponio? Shit, man. I’d love to make that bitch bleed.”

“That’s my wife you’re talking about,” I growl, wanting reach over and knock the shit out of this guy. I’ve never met my socialite fiancé, but that doesn’t mean I want her disrespected.

He just laughs and whips the Porsche into a parking spot. “Relax, bro. You know her?”

“No,” I admit, still glaring as he throws the brake and hops out.

Little Al laughs again and shakes his head as we approach a nearby shop. “You’ll understand once you do,” he says. “I would tap that ass in a sec, but marry her? Nah, man. That bitch is nothing but trouble.”

He stops at the end of an alley and gestures down it. “Jimmy the Nose likes to run like a little bitch,” he says. “You take the back door. I’ll go in the front and flush him out. Don’t get any ideas about being a big shot. Number one rule in our business: A dead man don’t pay. We’re just here to collect.”

“And if he doesn’t have the money?”

“Of course he don’t have the money,” Little Al says. “You think he’d hold out on us if he did? Get hard or get had, kid. We can’t be soft on nobody. They’ll all take advantage the moment you show weakness. If Al wants him gone, he’ll send an Enforcer. Then you’ll meet *Il Diavolo*.”

I nod, heading down the alley while Little Al goes in the front. I hear shouting, and not two seconds later, the back

door bursts open and a forty-ish guy with a beer gut and crazy eyes comes shooting out like he's propelled by rocket fuel. I grab him and throw him to the grimy asphalt without thought, catching him around the neck before he can move. That's when I see where he got the nickname. His nose is blunted, the nostrils showing like a skull's, a scar forming the end of what's left of his nose.

“Don't kill me,” he shouts, grabbing at my arms and flailing wildly.

“Nice job,” Little Al says, stepping out the door. “We ain't here for your life, Jimmy. We just want our money.”

“I don't got it,” Jimmy says, his voice going high with terror when he sees what Al's holding, some kind of clippers, like a small pair of garden shears you could hold with one hand. My stomach starts to turn, and I'm glad I didn't eat.

“Then what's it going to be today, Jimmy?” Al asks, snapping the clippers open and shut, a malicious gleam in his eye. “You know what happened last time you didn't pay.”

“I can get it by tomorrow,” Jimmy says. “I just need one more day. My ma's been in the hospital. She's been real sick, or I would have gotten you the money already. I'll have it first thing in the morning, honest!”

“It wasn’t due first thing in the morning tomorrow,” Little Al says. “It was due yesterday.”

“Please,” Jimmy sobs.

“What do you think, kid?” Little Al asks, holding out the shears. “Want to do the honors?”

I know what I have to say. It doesn’t matter if I think this guy is telling the truth, if I think it’s crazy to cut someone’s nose off for being a day late on payment. This isn’t the world I grew up in, where pardons were acceptable. This is a different world, a different life. One where I have to prove myself worthy. If I’m not capable of violence, I might as well sign my own death warrant.

I steel myself, closing off the place in my chest that aches, the place in my stomach that twists at the thought of those clippers. There’s no place for pity or feelings in this world, and if I have them, there’s no place for me.

I stand and aim my foot at Jimmy’s knee, delivering a swift kick. My heel connects with precision and effectiveness. My chest is hollow of emotion. The only thing I feel is the bone give way, his kneecap separating from his knee.

“Next time, you won’t run,” I say.

“We’ll be back next week for the money,” Little Al says, stepping over Jimmy’s writhing body. “With interest.”

I turn, and we exit the alley, leaving Jimmy howling behind us.

“Damn, kid,” Al says, slapping my back. “For a second there, I thought you were going to puss out on me. But we’re going to get along just fine. I can tell already.”

As I slide into the passenger side of Little Al’s Porsche, I know this is where I belong. It’s easy, really. All my life, I cared too much about my family, my name. I thought that mattered. Here, none of that matters. Brothers kill each other without blinking. Couples marry without feeling. What matters is survival. The slightest hesitation, the slightest emotion, is a death sentence.

Everything in the Life is black and white. It’s simple because it’s all business. Nothing is personal. You play by the rules, or you pay. You have the money when the tax man comes, or you get hurt. You give a little taste of what’s to come if they don’t pay, or you learn how quickly you become expendable. You don’t think about his ma in the hospital, and you don’t hear him screaming. You think about what will let

you live one more day, and you know it's easier to feel nothing than to feel pain.

six

Eliza

“Do you know who he is?” Bianca asks excitedly over brunch the following Sunday.

“No,” I admit, misery weighing down every word I speak. “Just a name. I’m supposed to meet him this afternoon. I’ve never even heard of him.”

That’s not surprising. I don’t know anyone in the Valenti family because they’re all self-serving assholes who don’t do anything without evil motives. I know all I need to know—stay away.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” Bianca says with a sly smile. “Maybe he’ll be cute. I mean, I’d fuck Al Valenti.”

“Well, it’s not Al. Who, let me remind you, is three times our age.”

“And hot as fuck,” she says decisively. “Not to mention he’d know what he was doing. We’re virgins, E. I know I don’t need no high school boy who’s only out to get

his. I need a man with some experience, who knows how to keep his old lady happy.”

“I don’t need a man at all,” I say, draining my mimosa and tipping the glass toward our live-in cook, who also serves the meals when it’s just family or a few friends. “Why do we have to get married so young, anyway? I like my life how it is. I don’t need a change.”

“Because they’re afraid you’ll let some guy float the love canal before tying the knot. We’re lucky they wait until we’re eighteen now. In the old days…” Bianca wiggles her eyebrows.

I push my plate away and slump back. “I guess at least I wasn’t engaged from birth. That shit still happens, even if they wait until we’re eighteen to marry us off.”

“You knew this day was coming,” Bianca points out, munching away on a piece of cantaloupe with a glimmer of smugness in her eyes. Fucking frenemies. She’s probably laughing on the inside, hoping I’m miserable for the rest of my life.

“It’s coming for you, too,” I remind her, accepting my third mimosa of the morning with a nod of gratitude. “You’re seventeen.”

“I just pray I don’t get some creepy old dude who can’t get it up,” she says, wrinkling her pretty nose.

“Dear god, I’d pay to get some creepy old dude who can’t get it up.”

“You’re crazy,” Bianca says with a wild laugh. “Don’t you want to have sex? Besides, they only give you to someone like that if you’re done for, and they want you out of the way.”

“Fine by me,” I say. “Out of sight, out of mind. I could live my own life.”

“Not me,” Bianca says. “I want to be right in the middle of things, not shipped off to some old guy’s mansion in Montauk where nothing ever happens. I’d die of boredom.”

“Want to trade places?” I ask. “You can have my engagement.”

“No way,” she squeals. For all her big talk, she wouldn’t trade with me even if she could. Men may have brainwashed women into thinking marriage is something they want for the past few centuries, but *our* eyes are open. Marriage is the end for women. Not the end goal, but the end of any other goals.

*

“Are you ready?” Sylvia asks, peeking her head into my room.

“What, am I supposed to put on a ballgown and descend the stairs in slow motion so my future owner can get a look at the goods he’s getting in this transaction?” I ask, rolling my eyes.

Sylvia tuts and comes into the room, tugging at the hem of my sundress. It’s the same one I wore to church and then brunch. I’m not about to change even an outfit for this guy. It’s bad enough that I have to marry him. I don’t have to change who I am for him.

“Never hurts to make a first impression,” she says, standing back and looking me over.

“I’ll make a first impression either way,” I say. “I’m not looking to make a good one.”

She shakes her head and sighs. When Mom left, Dad tried hiring a nanny to watch out for me while he was gone, which was always. Too bad he couldn’t keep his hands off her—or any of the ones that followed. I spent more than half my life watching a parade of young women full of promise come into our home to teach and guide me, only to leave it a few months later with tear-stained faces and broken hearts.

After all that? I'd still rather be one of them than a wife. They left him cradling their wounded egos, with stories to tell their friends. Mom fled like a refugee in the night with stories of her former life she could never tell a soul.

“Look at you, all grown up and ready to start your new life,” Sylvia says, looking like she might actually cry. She's toughed it out a lot longer than most of the others, lasting a few years now. She tries to be both my sister and my mother, which makes me a little sad for her. It also ensures I don't confide in her like a sister or respect her like a mother, though I do like her. Dad stopped paying her when I turned eighteen, but she sticks around for the other benefits—the posh lifestyle and, I assume, the dick.

Yes, I know more about my dad's sex life than the average girl wants to, but he's never hidden things from me, which I appreciate. Bianca's always grossed out at the thought of her parents getting busy, but it's so obvious in my house that there's no squeamishness around it. It's an unspoken but well-known fact that my dad gets all the pussy he wants. I grew up sitting on his knee while he played poker, for fuck's sake. I know way more about the Life and all it entails than I probably should.

“Can we just get this over with?” I ask, sighing as Sylvia rummages in my handbag. She produces a tiny bottle of breath spray and brandishes it at me.

“How much did you have to drink at lunch?” she asks in a scolding tone.

“Not nearly enough,” I mutter, but I open my mouth and let her make my breath minty-fresh nonetheless. She leads me out of the room and down the hall. And even though I got a good buzz going so I wouldn’t be nervous, I can suddenly hear every beat of my heart echoing like the thud of a drum leading soldiers into a doomed battle where they’re outnumbered three to one.

“Wait,” I say, grabbing Sylvia’s hand. My mind is skittering over the possibilities. Who did Al Valenti pick for me? Probably someone hideous inside and out, someone who will punish me for all the lives my family has taken. Suddenly, my mind flashes to the tattooed giant they call Il Diavolo, someone so brutal the devil himself would be terrified, and my knees go weak. “Did you meet him?”

Sylvia gives me a conspiratorial smile. “He’s a looker,” she whispers, squeezing my hand.

“Who is he?”

“I don’t know. Some new guy.”

“A *soldier*?” I ask incredulously. They picked a nobody for the daughter of the legendary Anthony Pomponio?

I’m too offended to come up with a response. It’s not Sylvia’s fault. I know she thinks it’s an honor to get to be anyone’s wife, but a *soldier*?

Before I can ask more, I hear my father’s voice from the study below. I can’t make out what he’s saying, but I focus on trying while I wobble down the steps. I drank too much to cope with this situation, but oh god, it really wasn’t enough. The desire to stop by the wet bar grips me, and before I know what I’m going, I’m heading in to grab a shot or ten before I have to meet this asshole. I need something to calm the urge to tell the guy he’ll never marry the likes of me.

“Just to settle my nerves,” I assure Sylvia as I snag a bottle of Patron and pour myself a shot.

Ten minutes later, my father arrives in the doorway, a scowl on his face. “What are you doing in here?” he demands, his bushy brows lowered in a glower.

“Isn’t he supposed to come sweeping in here to court me?” I ask, throwing my arms wide. I stumble a bit, bumping

into the leather sofa and collapsing back onto it.

“Get her some coffee,” he snaps at Sylvia. “I’ll bring him in here. But you’re not getting out of this, Liza. It’s already been decided. Nothing you do now will change that. And I won’t have you making a fool of our family.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I say sweetly.

A minute later, he’s back, a tall figure towering behind him like a shadow stretched out on pavement in the late afternoon, larger than life. But the man who steps in behind him isn’t boisterous like someone you’d use that term to describe. Instead, he’s stiff and formal, a frown knitting his fine brow. His sculpted jaw is clenched, and his angular features are set in angry lines. The moment my eyes meet his dark chocolate gaze, everything in my body reacts. I must have had too much to drink because suddenly my belly does a little flip like I might be sick, and my heart starts racing, and my blood seems to tremble in my veins.

One look in his dark, cold eyes, and I can tell I’ve made a terrible mistake. I should not have taken those tequila shots. I should not have expected Al’s ugly-ass uncle to come to collect. No, this guy is so much worse. He’s not some old guy who can be manipulated into doing my bidding with

insincere flattery about how hot and young he still is. This guy *is* still hot and young. Too fucking hot, and way too fucking young. He's not going to be dying of too much cream sauce anytime in the next fifty years.

Suddenly, I can't breathe. My marriage won't be over before I'm twenty-five. It will never be over. This isn't a sacrifice for the family. It's a life sentence. I can feel the shackles around my ribs tightening with each breath I try to draw as he holds me pinned with his gaze, the cold cruelty in his expression boring into me as if he already hates me more than I hate him. He is a Valenti, after all. My family has killed as many of them as they have us. And now I'm at his mercy. He's probably already thinking up what sadistic tortures he'll inflict upon me for the rest of my life.

Oh god. I'm doomed.

He strides to the sofa and stands over me like he's lordling his height over me, just looking down at me expectantly. When I don't jump up to bow at his feet and tell him how happy I am that I'm being sold off like a head of cattle to an absolute no one, he frowns even harder. Then, the dude sticks out his hand like we're in a fucking business meeting.

“I’m King,” he says. “You must be Eliza.”

Damn it. Even his voice is sexy, rich and smooth like butter.

But despite his looks and his voice, he’s too uptight to be sexy. I mean, the guy is seriously trying to shake my hand like some stuffy old guy from a Jane Austen novel.

Yeah, fuck this. I’m not doomed. I’m not going to give in that easily. I don’t lie down and roll over for anyone, even my future husband. In fact, it’s even more important that I show him I won’t be controlled. If he were old, maybe I could stand it for a few years. But if I’m going to spend the rest of my life with this prick, I’m going to have to lay down the law real quick. Starting with the fact that I don’t respect anyone who hasn’t earned it.

Ignoring his hand, I cock an eyebrow and meet his gaze with a challenge in my eyes. “You’re supposed to be able to handle me?” I ask. “You can’t be any older than I am.”

He takes his hand back, looking momentarily speechless, like he doesn’t know what to say.

“Eliza,” Dad barks. “Stand up and meet your fiancé.”

“Oh, right,” I say, struggling to rise from the overly soft couch. “Sorry, Daddy. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

King offers a hand again, this time to help me up, but I ignore it again. I heave myself up and find myself staring straight at his chest. Damn, this guy is tall, easily six foot four and clad in an Armani suit. I thought he was just some grunt like Tommy. He must be important to afford that kind of wardrobe—or at least rich.

For a second, I check out the way he fills out that suit from his broad shoulders to the sculpted muscles I can see hinted at beneath his white shirt. When at last I raise my eyes to his, he’s scowling even fiercer.

“Let’s give these two a moment to get acquainted,” Sylvia says, edging toward the door. “I’ll have sandwiches sent up.”

“Good idea,” Dad says. “I’ll be right here.”

I almost laugh. No way is Daddy leaving his little girl alone with a Valenti. Maybe there’s still hope for me yet. I may have cried and begged at the bistro, but there are other ways to get what I want. I have no power here, so I have to rely on the power of manipulation. But hey, a girl has to work with what she’s got.

King is still glaring daggers at me, not stepping back. He's so close I could reach out and touch him if I wanted, see if those muscles are as hard as they look.

"Are you drunk?" he asks, an edge of incredulousness in his voice.

"Are you judging me?" I shoot back.

He just stares at me a long moment, the muscle in his jaw working like he's holding back from saying what he wants. Good. He should be intimidated. If not by me, then by my father. I have to hand it to the guy, he's got balls, coming in here alone while our families have been at war for a decade. It could have been a trap. Still, he's smart enough not to insult Daddy's little girl in front of him.

"It's nice meeting you," he says flatly. "Let me know if you'd like to get together again before the wedding to discuss specifics. Otherwise, I trust that you're more than capable of making the arrangements."

Now I'm the one left speechless. I gape at him, caught between indignation and anger. He seems as uninterested in me as I am in him. Much to my annoyance, I find myself feeling resentful, even a bit insulted, by his indifference.

“Haven’t you come to woo me?” I ask, a mocking edge to my voice.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” he says. “If you need my approval on any wedding decisions, you can email me, and I’ll sign off on it.”

“Email you?” I repeat incredulously. “*Approval?*”

“Unless you’d like to meet again before that,” he says, leveling me with a look my father can’t see from his position behind him. King is challenging me.

Well, two can play that game.

“No need,” I say, lifting my chin. “We’ve got an event coordinator.”

“Then it’s settled,” King says. “I’ll see you at the altar.”

Without another word, he turns and strides over to shake my father’s hand. “Your daughter is as lovely as I’d heard,” he says. “I’m honored to have the opportunity to bring our families together with this union.”

I want to scream and hurl the bottle of tequila at his head, but my father already looks like a pressure cooker about to blow its gasket, so I settle for sloshing more alcohol into the

two shot glasses I retrieved earlier. As soon as King is gone, Dad strides over to the bar and rips the shot glass from my hand.

“You will not disrespect our family like that again, do you understand me?” he roars, his face twisted in rage. The legendary Pomponio temper is nothing to mess with. Dad doesn’t have a short fuse, but when his fuse is lit... I scurry off the chair and around the bar, putting the solid oak between us.

“I’m sorry,” I wail. “It’s just that he’s so horrible, Daddy! He’s going to kill me! He’s going to make me pay for the war between our families. I can’t marry him, Daddy! I just can’t! I’ll die!”

My father’s nostrils flare, and he heaves a series of heavy breaths as he stares at me, his face returning to something closer to its normal color. He used to always fall for my tantrums, but I think he’s catching on. Maybe he’s right. Maybe it is time I moved on to a new family, a new man who doesn’t know my tricks quite so well.

“The wedding is happening,” he says. “And that’s final. Do you understand me?”

I nod, swallowing down the lump in my throat. I might have been faking the hysterics, but that man really was

terrible. And I really do fear what the future holds, what punishments he'll consider fitting to pay for the crimes of my family. As much as I hate it, I know there's no escaping fate.

I've always known this is my duty to the family, the price of being a Pomponio. I'm proud of my name, and proud of where I come from. Part of that heritage means marrying for political reasons. I'll just have to make the best of it. Maybe King has one of the more dangerous jobs, one that will make me a widow before I'm twenty-five, anyway. If not, I'll just have to put my foot down from the start, show him I'm not some obedient, subservient little house slave. I've always been a rebellious daughter. Now I'll just be a rebellious wife instead. I'm going from being my father's property to my husband's, after all. Does it really matter which man is trying to control me?

Dad takes my silence for obedience and lets out a heavy breath. "Sylvia can help you plan. I would also like you to involve the daughters of the other families in some way. One from each family as a bridesmaid along with some of our girls. With all five families together, we look stronger than ever."

I don't have to ask who they're showing unity to. I know there are other organizations in the city. Besides, Dad will want to show the other families that we're now good with the Valentis. It protects us from their allies and makes us look stronger than ever.

"Do I have to invite Lizzie Salvatore?" I ask, dreading the thought of the trashy little New Jersey princess being one of my bridesmaids. Yes, she's fun to party with because she's been doing it since she was thirteen and she knows all the party spots. But she'll probably cut her dress to right below her ass, get falling-down drunk, and conveniently forget to wear underwear. I might not care for my groom much, but that doesn't mean I don't want a nice wedding. Every girl deserves that, even if she has to marry a monster.

"All the families," Dad repeats. "You've got six weeks. You'll use the place in the Hamptons. And I expect you to call your future husband and make an apology. A man doesn't want to marry a drunk."

With that, Dad takes his leave. I slump back to the couch, laying my head back and taking a deep breath. Despite the day's events, I'm not a drunk. I wish I were. Then I could

just numb out the whole thing. Swim through the soup of life in a disoriented fog.

Even I know I wouldn't be happy with that, though. Yes, I like to party and get stupid on occasion, and lately I've been doing it more than I should. But alcohol is a rebellion, an assertion of my independence. It's not something I use to cope with life's traumas. I can deal with those just fine on my own. I don't need help. I've fought too hard for my little freedoms to walk into a cage of my own making.

seven

King

The music starts, and all eyes go to the entrance. The audience stands. I've been standing, but suddenly, I need to sit down. This is real. I'm getting fucking married to a girl I've met exactly three times—once for an introduction, once for engagement pictures, and once for the rehearsal dinner last night.

At the photo shoot, Eliza apologized for being drunk during the first meeting, but I told her I understood. She probably thought it was some kind of platitude, and I wasn't going to go into the details about my sordid family, so we left it at that, the words sounding hollow and insincere. I may not have been happy to see her that way for our first meeting, but I do understand. After all, it wasn't my father who taught me how to survive the Life, how to go numb and feel nothing. Ma taught by example, showing me firsthand the one rule you need to make it in the mafia.

My bride steps into the aisle, and a funny little ache starts in my stomach, right below my sternum. She's so damn

pretty. Her black hair falls in loose curls down her back, a little braid of some sort going around the top like a crown. She chose to wear her veil back, so everyone can see her face, the delicate lines of her jaw, her full lips, her thick, inky lashes and luminous, whiskey colored eyes.

She pauses for one moment, as if waiting for everyone to take in the sight of her, all beauty and pure innocence in that flowing white dress. She doesn't look like a virginal, blushing bride, though. There's nothing delicate in her gaze when it meets mine. Hatred burns in her eyes, and she marches toward me with the determination of an assassin going in for the kill. I may not relish the idea of marrying a stranger or a lush, but her feelings are beyond that. A knife could be easily concealed by all that fabric...

Let her fucking try it. I'm not going to be taken out by some mafia asshole, and I'm sure as fuck not going down by my own wife's hand. If she pulls a weapon on me, she'll see who ends up paying.

Mr. Pomponio kisses her cheek and leaves her with me. She's in my hands now. My wife. My responsibility.

She looks up at me with those big, doe eyes. The priest goes on for a minute while I stare back at her. God, she's so

fucking pretty. Too pretty for a mafia asshole like me to put his hands on. Her skin is dewy, her cheeks glowing. She lowers her eyes to her bouquet, her long lashes curling against her cheek. She looks like some kind of fairy, too fragile to touch, too pure for any man, let alone one like me. I haven't been saving myself for her. I've fucked lots of girls, all of them meaningless. And now here is this girl who should mean something, the only girl who should mean anything, and I can't let her.

I can't give her what she deserves. I can't love her.

As I repeat the vows, I mean the rest of the words. I will give her what I can, making up for the missing parts of myself, the ones I can't give. I can't give her my heart or my innocence. I no longer have either of those things. But I'll give her everything else. I can still be a good husband, even without love. I will honor her, respect her, and value her. I'll listen to her. I will treat her as an equal. I will be faithful. I will provide for her. I'll take care of our children if we have them. I will protect her heart by making sure she never loves me, even if she tries. Because the one thing I can't promise, the thing no made man can promise, is that she won't end up a widow.

Those things aren't in the vows, so I don't say them aloud. But I vow them to myself, and that's more binding than saying them to her or a priest.

Eliza hands her bouquet to her bridesmaid, the one who's been eye-fucking me every moment I'm in her line of sight since we met at the dinner last night, where she not-so-subtly suggested that she could be my last hurrah before married life.

I've been to enough weddings to know the bride usually hands off the bouquet before the vows, and I can't help but wonder if Eliza kept them between us on purpose, not wanting to be closer to me than she has to, not wanting me to take her hands as we repeated the vows.

I slid her ring on while she held the bouquet in her other hand, and now she slides mine on, shoving it into place with her slender fingers, cold despite the heat of a New York summer.

"You may now kiss the bride," the priest says.

Eliza gives me a look that says if I dare kiss her, she'll cut off my dick. But she's my wife, and there's no use in marrying at all if we're not going along with what's expected. I step forward and slide a hand behind her head, under her

hair. She goes stiff as a board in my hands. Her lips are plump and pink, ready to be kissed, but I hold back. I lean closer, so close I can feel the heat of that fuckable mouth against mine. “You will kiss me,” I say, my voice so low no one else can hear it, not even the priest.

Her lips pull into a smile, not moving as she speaks through clenched teeth. “Touch me and die.”

“If I don’t kiss you, this is off, and we’ll both die.”

“Oh, I won’t die,” she assures me, her smile turning smug. “I’m a fucking princess. You’re nobody.”

“I’m your husband,” I grit out.

I can hear the crowd getting antsy, but I don’t take my eyes from hers. Someone yells, “Shut up and kiss her!”

Eliza smirks. “You’ll never be my husband in anything more than name.”

“In name, and in public,” I say, curling my fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck and pulling her forward, so she stumbles against me. I clench my fingers tighter, so she has to go up on tiptoes, her head back and fury burning in her eyes as my mouth descends to hers. Her squeal of protest is muffled by the kiss. Our first kiss isn’t tender or even passionate. It’s

rough and harsh. She struggles against me, but I force my tongue between her lips. It's not because I want to taste my new bride. It's not even to silence her muted denial. It's to show her that this is how it is.

Her father gave her away—literally. He gave her to me, and she's mine now. I swipe my tongue across hers, making sure she knows what I'm doing, that she gets the point. I'm the one in control here. Her teeth clamp down, biting into my flesh. I don't stop, though. I don't pull back. Let her taste my blood. It only proves my point more fully. We are bound in blood now, just as I'm bound to the Valentis.

She recoils, trying to break free when the salty warmth of my blood spreads through our kiss. I thrust my bleeding tongue against hers, our teeth clashing one more time before I draw back. People are laughing and hooting and clapping. I don't know how long I kissed her. Long enough to send a message, that's clear.

“I hope you die,” Eliza hisses. “Then I won't have to marry you.”

I smirk down at her, slowly releasing my grip on her hair. “Too late,” I say. “I'm your husband, and you'll show me the respect that title deserves.”

“You don’t deserve respect until you earn it,” she shoots back.

“I just did,” I say. “Behind closed doors, do whatever the fuck you want. In public, you’re my wife, and you obey me.”

She stares at me, her nostrils flared and her breathing coming quicker. I notice her lip trembling, but I can’t tell if it’s anger or fear. A funny little tug starts behind my sternum, but I crush it before it can get a good hold. It doesn’t matter if she’s pissed at me or terrified of me. Her feelings are as irrelevant as mine. For a second, we don’t move. Something shifts in her eyes, though, and when the priest steps forward, she turns to face the crowd with me.

“It is my honor to present you Mr. and Mrs. King Dolce,” he says.

I grip her hand in mine, and she doesn’t struggle. Her fingers feel soft and delicate against mine, and I feel the slight tremor in them, too. Ignoring it, I step forward, and Eliza follows my lead as we descend the step to walk back up the aisle. I squeeze her hand, trying to calm whatever storm is brewing inside her. She leans into me like she’s any bride excited to be starting a new life with a man she loves. With her

free hand, she waves and blows kisses, suddenly all smiles, her performance worthy of a fucking Oscar. You'd never know she was spitting and hissing up there on the altar.

We make our way to the back of the church. I smile at my family, my parents sitting together like Dad didn't up and leave my mother here by herself. My brothers have been here for almost a week, throwing a bachelor party for me and helping me prepare. Duke hired a pair of blonde identical twin strippers, and I'd bet money he and Baron banged them after the party. Royal was up at the altar with me, my best man and the one I left to watch over the twins when I came back to New York. Even though they're all here, I can't help the instinctive sweep of my eyes as they search for the last member of my flock, like I'm a fucking sheep dog.

I turn away, pressing my lips together and pulling Eliza toward the door of the church faster. I don't want to think about who's not here. My sister should have been up there with Eliza's bridesmaids. But she's not. She's not here. She's not anywhere. We didn't even get to bury her. And it's my fucking fault. If I had seen how bad she had it, that disease called love, I might have saved her. If I'd seen what it would cost her, what it would cost all of us, I would have found a

way to put a stop to it. Even if I had to kill the asshole she fell for, I would have. He ended up dead anyway—and he took her with him.

We pass the photographer, and then we're out of the church, blinking into the blazing July sun, trying to see. Light doesn't just help you see. It blinds you. It seems a fitting metaphor for the day, for love and weddings and all this shit. Suddenly, the charade feels exhausting beyond what I can bear.

And it's only getting started.

As soon as we step out the door, Eliza rips her hands from mine, grabs up handfuls of her skirts, and charges behind some shrubbery.

“Eliza,” I say, a warning in my tone. This is too public a place for our first fight.

She doesn't come out, though I can see half her skirt still trailing out, so I know she's not doing the whole runaway bride thing on me. I sigh, rake a hand through my hair, and glance back at the church. People are going to come spilling out at any second.

I step behind the bushes and face my wife.

The moment she sees me, Eliza rears back a hand and slaps me across the face. I balk, too stunned to react for a second. Only a second, though. That's the last time she'll catch me by surprise.

I grab her hand and squeeze her fingers together until her nostrils flare and her eyes go wide. She doesn't whimper, though. I can see her gritting her teeth together to keep from crying out as she glares at me.

"That was for kissing me like you own me," she snaps. "Now let me go."

"I do own you," I snap back. "I'm your husband. You may have gotten away with this shit with your parents, but not with me. Understand this, little wife. I'll let you go, but you *will* come back."

She snorts, but I release her hand anyway. If she tries anything, she'll find out how seriously I take those words. I wasn't making a smug prediction. I'm not arrogant enough to think she wants to come back to me. My words are a threat.

She rubs her wrist and stares up at me, her eyes calculating as she weighs her next move. I can already tell I've underestimated her. She's probably used to that, and she's figuring out how to use it to her advantage. But I'm onto her

now. She's not the spoiled, drunk party girl I read about in the gossip columns when I did a little research over the past month. Or rather, she's more than that. It'll take more than a curfew to rein her in.

Behind me, the church doors open, and I hear the first guests spilling out, talking about the beautiful ceremony, the kiss, Eliza's dress. I don't turn. I stare down my bride, resisting the urge to drop my gaze to her plump, pink lips.

Her eyes dart to the crowd, then back to me. "Did you mean what you said in there?" she says, her words coming out in an urgent rush. "That you won't control what I do behind closed doors if I'll be your wife in public?"

I have only a second to decide. In a moment, we'll be noticed. She'll scream I was hurting her and get me executed. Just because it's a wedding, that doesn't mean anyone's unarmed. You can bet your ass every guy in here is carrying, plus half the women, not to mention the number of nondescript guys hanging around the bosses, guys I know must be bodyguards. This wedding is probably the FBI's wet dream—if they could pin anything on anyone. All the families are here. They could take down the entire New York mafia. Or they

could try, anyway. They'd probably only succeed in getting a lot of their own men killed.

Just as I know better than to refuse her outright, I know better than to agree to anything binding with this girl. I can already tell she's sneaky and fake as fuck.

"Show me what a good wife looks like to you today, and I'll decide tonight."

"Not good enough," she says, lifting her chin and giving me a haughty look.

"Eliza," calls the woman I thought was her young stepmother until Little Al corrected me and told me she was Mr. Pomponio's *cumare*. She comes tottering our way on the paving stones, her heels making her wobble.

I grit my teeth and resist the urge to tell the woman to get lost as she waves and calls out again.

"Be my good little wife today, and you can choose your reward tonight," I say to Eliza. "Act like a little brat today, and I choose your punishment."

Something flickers across her face, some unreadable expression. I could dissect all I saw in that one flash of her eyes, but I don't. It doesn't matter. She slips her hand into

mine, lacing our fingers like we're a real couple, but I know the gesture for what it is—a handshake. She's agreed to my deal. She smiles serenely at her father's mistress, and I can't help but wonder about the true feeling she harbors for this woman. She's too good at faking it, better than I am. But I won't be outmatched. I won't be outsmarted and manipulated.

My life depends on doing my one job—bringing our families together. So, that's what I intend to do. If I have to make a new bargain with my bride each day, so be it. I'll compromise, like a good husband. One bribe at a time, she'll give me what I want. If she doesn't, she'll get what she's asking for.

eight

Eliza

“Girl, why are you still here?” Bianca asks, staggering against me and throwing an arm around my neck. We stumble a few steps into the water, which is frigid even in July. “That’s what I don’t understand. Shouldn’t you be bleeding on that beautiful man’s white sheets right now?”

Even in my drunken state, my heart lurches at her words. I know better than to believe the promise of a Valenti, to believe he’ll leave me alone tonight. That’s why I’ve postponed the inevitable, why I’ve gotten myself sloppy drunk with my bridesmaids instead of spending the reception next to my groom. If I take enough shots, surely it won’t hurt too bad. If I drink enough, maybe I won’t even remember it tomorrow.

I don’t do well with pain. I live for pleasure. What really scares me is that once I do this, once *we* do this, it’s real. The deal is sealed. There’s no undoing it, no getting out of the marriage. Part of me knows it’s already too late, but that’s the rational part, the one that recognizes the ring on my finger and the marriage license in the safe.

Some other part of me, somewhere that doesn't care about signatures and official documents, the real Eliza, inside my heart, knows. It knows that once he's been inside me, he owns me. There's no going back from that, no getting out of it. Once it's done, King will control me. He'll have all the power. And maybe that's an illusion, but it's all I have to hold onto. The only bit of control left to me. My own body.

Because I can't control where I've been forced to move or live, who I live with. My whole life uprooted from the bedroom at Daddy's I've slept in since I was a baby, when Mom went through an artistic phase and painted giraffes and lions and safari animals on the walls.

The same room where I got my first period, and Mom wasn't there to ask, and I didn't want to ask Daddy, so I just lay there in bed bleeding all night, thinking I was dying, that something in my belly had ruptured and that's why my abdomen hurt so bad. The next day, the housekeeper found my bloody sheets and had to tell me about periods because that wasn't the sort of thing I learned about in Catholic school. Then she told the whole staff, and everyone knew, and shame burned in my cheeks every time I passed them, as if they could see what they hadn't before, that I was *unclean*.

But at least the nanny asked if maybe it was time we painted over the babyish safari animals still on my walls. It wasn't the kind of thing my father would notice or think to ask, and I was grateful when she offered me buckets of pink paint with a hopeful smile that I thought was about me and not her bid to ride the Anthony Express. I didn't have the heart to tell her I didn't even like pink.

Back then, I hadn't understood Mom like I do now. I'd been angry. But those animals had made me feel like maybe one day things would be right. As if knowing she'd once cared enough to hand paint each stripe and spot on every zebra and giraffe proved that she somehow loved me, even though she hadn't contacted us once in the two years since she left.

But now that I was a woman, as the housekeeper informed me, I had to accept the truth. I had my dad and the nanny parade, and that was all the family I'd ever have. My brother was dead, and my mother was dead to me. I told the nanny I loved the paint, even though it was hideously bright and looked like something an eight-year-old would pick. I even asked if I could help. I relished each stroke as I rolled the garish paint in wide stripes over the beautiful animals my

mother had painted with love and care. It felt positively criminal—and I loved it.

I halfway expected her to walk in as we were doing it and scream at us for ruining her hard work. Or to call the very next day and casually ask, and I'd have to admit what I'd done, slathering on the pink paint so thick it ran like Barbie blood down the walls.

I didn't understand then. Now I get it. Now I know why she left, what was worth so much that she'd disappear from her own daughter's life forever, not even showing up at her wedding, what people say is the most important day of her life. Mom knew. She had one when she was eighteen, too. She knew this day isn't something to celebrate. It's something to dread.

“If you don't fuck that man tonight, I will,” Lizzie purrs, swaying her hips in a seductive slow dance as she twirls at the edge of the water, her hands twining into the breeze above her head like silk scarves. I wonder if she's dancing for my husband, if he's watching her, wishing he could fuck her instead of the frigid little bitch he ended up with. An ugly streak of jealousy darts through me, but I push it away. I don't want his eyes on me. If he's watching her, wanting her, he can

have her. I hope he goes to bed, and she sneaks into his room and fucks him for me.

I glance at the bay windows overlooking the beach, but I don't see him there. I turn back to my friends, enemies, and competition.

“Like you'd bleed,” I scoff at Lizzie, and the other girls break into a chorus of giggles.

“Oh, I'll bleed for my husband,” Lizzie says. “You just have to know what you're doing. Let him rough you up a little when you're still dry, and you can bleed any time you want.”

“Really?” Bianca asks, gaping at the other mafia daughter.

I've never met someone as in love with herself, with pleasure, as Lizzie Salvatore. I hate her out of envy as much as anything. She said a big fuck you to tradition and had sex when she wanted to, consequences be damned. And she never looked back. The rest of us are simultaneously in awe of her and disgusted by her, but I'm sure the other girls are as envious as I am. For all our talk about carving our own paths and making our lives, Lizzie has really done it, in her own way. Maybe she only owns her sexuality, but it's something.

“Sure,” Lizzie says, giggling. “It’s not exactly pleasant, but it gets the job done if anyone wants proof on your wedding night.”

“You should have told me that years ago. I would have slutted it up like you,” I lie.

“Hey,” she protests.

“Like any guy will think you’re a virgin,” Bianca says, linking her arm with Lizzie’s on the other side. “Everyone knows you spent half of high school on your back.”

“I probably won’t get lucky enough to marry a guy as young as Eliza’s King,” Lizzie says. “So it won’t matter. No one past high school knows about my rep.”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” Gianna says quietly. “I know my family keeps tabs on me everywhere.”

“Oh, who the hell cares?” Lizzie says, the liquor making her braver than she is. We all care what our families think. They might love us, but that doesn’t erase what they’re capable of.

“To not caring,” I yell, kicking at the little waves washing up at the edge of the water.

“Hell, yeah,” Bianca squeals, thrusting a fist at the sky.
“Fuck caring!”

The other girls link arms, and we kick at the waves together like some kind of chorus line, our drunken laughter carrying up the beach to the house and over the water to the houseboat bobbing expectantly before us. I’ve avoided looking at it all night, the place I’m supposed to spend my wedding night with a stranger. Sylvia and some of the other women in the family spent hours setting it up, so we’d have privacy and not have to stay in my father’s beachfront mansion with the rest of the family. The thought makes me nauseous—or maybe it’s all the champagne and tequila churning in my belly.

When I finally look up, I see a figure standing alone at the railing Sylvia twined with twinkling fairy lights. He’s watching us.

My heart flips, and I swallow hard. I don’t know when he went across to the boat, but then, it’s three o’clock in the morning and most of the guests are long gone. Maybe if I stay long enough, if I put it off until it’s no longer tonight, he’ll fall asleep on the deck, and I can crawl into bed alone at dawn, as is the norm on party nights. And this isn’t just a regular party night. It’s the biggest party of my life. It’s supposed to be the

best day of my life. I tried my best to make that happen, even though the dread of tonight sat heavy in my stomach like a threat. I could still revel in the attention, feel beautiful, and have fun being young and dancing with my friends.

That's all I want.

But I know that's not all I'll get. King will want to make me pay for the sins of my family, and he'll extract the debt he thinks we owe one punishment at a time. He's already threatened. If he's unhappy with my performance today, there will be consequences.

It doesn't matter how gorgeous the guy is. His eyes are cold and terrifyingly cruel, making my blood shrink away instead of longing for his touch. Mafia men are violent by nature. Sometimes it carries over into their marriages and sometimes it doesn't. Not two minutes after saying "I do," I had my answer to which one of those categories King falls into.

I can feel his watchful eyes on me from across the water, and I know I'll be in trouble when I get there. That doesn't make me want to rush over and apologize. It makes me want to stay out longer, to milk every drop from this night, the last night that's mine. Yes, we're married now. I'm his, as

he so bluntly pointed out. But everyone knows a wedding is for the bride. It's my party, and fuck crying if I want to. I'm going to *party* if I want to. I don't care that the salt is ruining my dress, that the edges are already stained and bedraggled from the water and sand. I just don't want it to end. When tonight ends, reality sets in. When tonight ends, so does my freedom.

So I stay a little longer, drinking in the night, running in the foamy salt spray of the waves, dancing at the bonfire, throwing down more shots. At last, light creeps into the sky, and I'm too tired and worn out to go on. I collapse onto the sand next to the embers in the firepit and lay back against Tommy Fatone, who passed out hours ago. A couple fresh bodyguards sit off toward the house, drinking coffee and not speaking in the silence of the morning. Vince is not among them. My chastity is no longer in danger.

I rest my head on Tommy's belly and close my eyes. This is a victory. One more night until I'll be tortured by a sadistic Valenti. I sigh and fold my hands on the bodice of my ruined dress. My stomach is sour and churning, the world is spinning, and my head is already pounding, but I made it to sunrise without giving in to the enemy. I smile to myself. He

must have fallen asleep hours ago, waiting for me. The thought of him lying there waiting fills me with smug satisfaction. I know there will be countless nights ahead where the roles are reversed, where I wait for him to come home from doing a job or visiting a woman who isn't me, where I wait in terror for the sound of the door opening and my husband returning to brutalize me.

For this one night, I got to make him wait. It's not much, only one night out of the thousands to come, but I take what I can get, as tiny as it is. I'm lulled by the morning, the alcohol and exhaustion, the rise and fall of Tommy's belly under my head. The only sounds are the rush of the waves at the edge of the beach and the sighs of a handful of people sleeping on the sand around the dead fire.

Suddenly, strong hands grip my wrists, pulling me up in one swift motion.

"Who the fuck is that?" King asks, glaring down at me.

For a second, I don't know what he's talking about. Then I realize he's talking about Tommy. "No one," I say, trying to wrest my hands from his punishing grasp.

"That's right," he says slowly. "That's no one. And I'm your husband."

He releases one of my hands and drags me to a little rowboat rimmed with roses, the one in which Sylvia thought my groom would romantically row me out to the houseboat. I stumble along after him, tugging at my arm. He stops after a few steps, scoops me into his arms, and carries me to the boat like a conqueror capturing his unwilling bride. That's what carrying a woman across the threshold represents, after all.

King dumps me into the rowboat, gets in, and starts rowing us across the water.

This is it. I'm about to become his wife in the last way I want to. I grip the side of the boat, considering if I should jump. I might drown in my drunken state. Maybe that would be better. Anything would be better than what's about to happen.

A wave bumps against the little boat, and the rocking motion is the last straw. My alcohol-infused stomach rebels, and I lean over and vomit out the side of the vessel.

We reach the boat, and King ties up the little rowboat and drags me onto the deck of the houseboat. I steel myself, ready for his words, his violence, his touch. Instead, he just looks at me. He doesn't even look angry. He looks tired and a little disgusted. "Are you done?" he asks, his voice icy.

I nod, feeling suddenly vulnerable standing in front of him. We're alone. No one to save me. No bodyguards, no scary father. I'm on my own. It doesn't feel good or freeing. I feel like a scolded child. He's blurry to my vision, as if I'm seeing him through water, a bad girl being punished at the bottom of the tub when she didn't obey.

His lips tighten into a line, and he takes my hand and pulls me down a small set of steps. We turn and enter the bedroom, all decorated with flowers and candles, with a bucket of ice beside the bed where a bottle of champagne sits untouched. Rose petals are strewn across the white bedspread. My heart lurches into my chest, and I'm so lightheaded I barely keep my feet. I wish I hadn't been sick already. I want to puke again, but my stomach is empty.

"You should get some sleep," King says, turning away.

"Aren't you going to collect your prize?" I ask, cringing at how childish and scared I sound even as I try for a taunting edge to my voice.

King lets out a quiet scoff. "Believe it or not, the last thing I'm interested in right now is your cunt."

I wince at his harsh tone and crude words, even as a swell of euphoric relief rises inside me. "You're not going to

punish me?”

King doesn't speak for a minute. He loosens his tie and slowly pulls it free of his collar. “You think sex is a punishment?” he asks at last, not bothering to watch my response as he folds his tie in fourths.

“For a girl,” I answer honestly.

He shakes his head but doesn't speak as he slides out of his jacket, turning his back to hang it over the back of a chair before he begins undoing his cufflinks. “You really are a virgin, aren't you?” he says, watching me in the mirror.

“I am, but...” My eyes catch on the gun tucked in the waistband of his slacks, and I swallow hard. He might be new to the Life, a lowly soldier, but he'll deal with things the way mafia men do. And he'll treat me the way mafia men treat their wives. He's my husband now, after all. He might spare me tonight, but no matter what I do or say, he's not going to spare me forever. Our families will expect a baby to cement this union. He's going to force me to do what good wives do no matter what I say. So why even try to explain my fears?

“What?” he asks, his hands going still. He stares at me in the mirror, and I sink onto the edge of the bed, avoiding his gaze.

He's a ruthless Valenti. The most mercy I can hope for is that he'll find a mistress soon, like my father did after marrying my mother.

"Nothing," I say. "Don't worry. You got what you paid for. I'm as pure as freshly fallen snow. Go ahead and ruin me."

He moves to the bed and sits down beside me, and I tense. He watches me for a long minute, then reaches to gather my hair and drape it over my shoulder. Without a word, he slowly begins to unbutton the long row of buttons down my back, his fingers gentle. But I know what they're capable of.

"You're shaking," he says quietly.

"No shit," I say. "You would be, too, if you were the sacrifice to pay for all the murders your family had committed."

"I don't want to hurt you, Eliza," he says, his voice gentle but firm. "Whatever our families have done to each other, that's on them, not on us. I don't know about you, but I have enough sins of my own to pay for without paying for the sins of our fathers."

I don't answer. I can't absolve him of this. His family destroyed mine. If my brother had lived, everything would

have been different. He could have saved us all if he'd lived past sixteen.

But he didn't have the chance—because of this man's family. How can I forgive him for that? And how do I know he's not lying through his teeth, getting me to let my guard down so he can hurt me even worse than when I'm expecting it?

King's fingers stop unbuttoning at my lower back. Their tips brush across the bare skin beneath my dress, and I freeze, a little hiccup of fear racing through me even as warmth shimmers through me. The conflicting sensations, my body getting pleasure while my mind screams no, paralyzes me. I feel like I'm floating above, watching this and wanting to become a giant like Godzilla, to rip King away and crush him in my fist and hurl him across the ocean.

“Eliza?” he whispers. When I don't answer, he takes my chin gently and turns my face toward him. His dark eyes search mine, but I can't look. I squeeze my lids closed, my throat suddenly aching and tears stinging the backs of my eyes. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head.

He slowly reaches up with his other hand, brushing his thumb along the fringe of my lashes. Shame burns through me. He knows I'm crying. He knows I'm weak, and broken, and all the things I try so hard to pretend I'm not. "What's wrong?" he asks, his knuckles stroking my cheek.

I take a shaky breath. "I just... I'm not ready, if that's okay."

He doesn't say anything for a long minute. So long that I have to know what's going through his mind, or at least a glimpse. I open my eyes, blinking away the tears. His brow is creased with a frown, but it's not an angry one. It's more... Confused. And that's worse.

"I did what you asked," I say. "I stayed by your side and acted like your wife, like I was happy. You said I could choose my reward."

"For your reward, you want me not to touch you?" he asks.

"I've just never had any desire," I say, trying to make him stop studying me like he wants to cut me open and expose all my feelings. "I think there's something wrong with me. It's like that part of me is frozen. I never developed those feelings."

“What feelings?” he asks, gently tugging the dress down over my shoulders.

“You know,” I say, clutching the material to my chest and casting my eyes down. “Sexual feelings.”

His hand falters only a moment. “Oh,” he says. “Is that why you got hammered tonight? You think it’ll make sex better? Because I assure you, it won’t.”

Is this self-righteous asshole really going down that road? I drank to escape his dumb ass. And what right does he have to judge me? I’ve dealt with more in my life than he’s even imagined.

But I only nod, because this is going so much better than I could have hoped when he grabbed me off the beach. I don’t think he’s even going to rape me tonight. I’m not about to run my mouth and make him change his mind.

“Can we just... Wait?” I whisper.

“Okay,” King says with a defeated sigh. “We’ll wait as long as you need.”

As long as I need. That sounds an awful lot like freedom. A thrill of triumph mixes with the shame I feel for

manipulating him. I may be a horrible, fucked up person, but I do what I have to do to survive, just like everyone else.

“Let’s get you out of this dress, and you can sleep it off,” he says. “We can talk later.”

It’s all I can do not to get my drunk ass up and do a victory dance. Yeah, I cried in front of him and showed weakness, but hey, it’s worth it to keep this Valenti asshole off me. After all, I can’t just let him lay down the law and then follow it like an obedient little sheep. I don’t want to be someone’s property. I want to be an independent woman, free to follow her dreams, like my mom was after she left the yoke of marriage and domesticity. And the only way to do that is for *me* to lay down the law, to let him know from day one that I won’t be owned and controlled. I just did what it took to make that happen.

King peels off my dress and lays me down in the bed in my underwear, and a shiver races over my skin when he looks down at me. As I stare up at him, feeling every bit as exposed and vulnerable as I am, I notice again how fucking beautiful he is, all angular lines and dark shadows. I shiver, my skin prickling into goosebumps as his gaze moves over me. For a second, there’s nothing cold about him. His eyes are

pools of melted chocolate, his gaze heated as it moves over my lace bustier and white lace panties.

I watch his Adam's apple bob as he swallows, and something swells inside me, a weird sense of pride at having a man who looks like him look at me that way, like he finds me every bit as sexy as I find him. I'll be damned if I'm ever going to love a heartless, sadistic bastard from the Valenti family, but it doesn't mean he's not attractive. It doesn't mean that when his gaze strokes across my skin, I don't feel sexier than I've ever felt in my life.

I can't delight in the sensation, though. It should be nice to be wanted, even if it's by a man I can never allow myself to want, but it's not. It's terrifying.

Because one day, he'll be done waiting, and he'll take what he wants. And there's nothing I can do to stop him, or to stop that day from coming. After all, every day of my life belongs to this man. He became my keeper and my owner the moment he put a ring around my finger like a brand, and he can do whatever he wants with me. I don't even get to be my own person, to keep my own name. I'm not even Eliza anymore. He erased my identity. Now I'm Mrs. King Dolce.

nine

King

The morning after the wedding, I leave Eliza sleeping and join the families for brunch, ready to make excuses for my new bride and take the inevitable ribbing. I enter the Pomponio's beach house through the back door, passing a handful of guards on my way. I'm still getting used to that part of the Life. Sure, Dad was rich, and we had a few crazies try to get to us, but we didn't use bodyguards. He's a businessman, not a celebrity. Now that I think about it, the mafia ties probably kept him safe. He's not involved enough to warrant his own guards, but everyone knows what happens when you mess with Al Valenti's most valuable associates.

“Where's the bride?” my brother Duke asks, slapping my shoulder as we meet in the doorway of the dining room. “Don't tell me you wore her out already.”

“Why not?” Baron asks. “We wore out our bridesmaid.”

They crack up and shove each other like the idiots they are, too immature and sheltered for their own good. I let it

slide, though, because they're the youngest, and they're only sixteen, and if you can't be an idiot at that age, you'll never get the chance. I envy them, in a way. I never had the luxury of being so carefree. It's a good look for them.

“What's this I hear about the lady of the hour skipping her own brunch?” Uncle Al asks, appearing at my side. I can see my dad just about popping wood at the sight of me and Al getting close. He always knew I'd work for Al, but this is even better. Now, he's really connected. I'm in with the Valentis *and* the Pomponios, and he hid none of his relish at the prospect of increasing his influence and standing when we talked before the wedding.

“I thought I'd let her sleep in,” I say to Al.

“You keep her up all night?” Little Al asks, joining us.

“She's just not feeling too well this morning, that's all.”

“I bet she's not, you dog,” Little Al crows, slapping my back.

Anthony Pomponio is holding court at the head of the table, and he waves me over. “I expected to see my daughter here,” he says, gripping my hand with his big, hard one. His

fingers are thick and rough around mine, squeezing like a threat.

“She’s fine, sir,” I assure him, though I’m not too sure. “She just wanted to sleep in.”

“I should probably warn you,” he says with a slight smile. “Eliza’s used to getting her own way. I’ll admit I was lenient with her growing up. After losing a son and a wife, I wanted to give my little girl everything. Raising a kid’s hard—you’ll know that soon enough. But raising one by yourself...”

He breaks off and shakes his head. I don’t say anything, but I’m thinking, how the hell am I going to have a baby and bring our families together when Eliza won’t even let me touch her? I didn’t expect her to love me, but what’s the point in joining the families by marriage if we can’t have a baby? And yeah, maybe I’m a dick, but I expected sex. I’m not into the whole mafia lifestyle that lets a man have a mistress on the side. When I took a vow to be faithful, I meant it. If I can’t fuck anyone else, then I damn well expect to be fucking my wife.

“A man’s not cut out for that work,” Anthony says. “Not when it’s as much work as that girl. For the sake of all of us, you’d better pray for a son.”

He laughs, and I swallow the bile that wants to rise in my throat. My veins feel cold and slow, like they're filled with the ugly frozen slush left after snow begins to melt. How can I tell him there won't be any sons or daughters either?

I can't. It's that simple. Eliza will just have to find a way to get over her hang-ups at least until she's pregnant. And then what? I'm supposed to live like some kind of monk while sleeping next to my beautiful, irresistible wife? I guess I was a dumbass to think we'd treat our marriage as a business. She's a woman. She probably *wants* love. And that's the one thing I promised I would never do to her.

"Life's short, you know?" Anthony says, releasing my hand and clapping me on the shoulder. "You never know when that day will be their last. I spoiled my little girl. She's got some growing up to do, but I'm sure you kids will figure it out together. Just don't you be afraid to show her who's boss. A man's gotta run his own family."

Run my own family. How do I do that when my own wife is scared of me? Or is she just fucking with me, trying to avoid me because she hates me? Is she scared I'll find out she's been fucking that guy on the beach, or whoever it is she's

been with? If I tell her I don't care if she's a virgin, will she relax and give us the son we need to unite our families?

When one of Anthony's brothers slides in at his other side, I move away with relief. I find my way to the next table and take a seat next to Little Al. "Don't have too much fun on the honeymoon," he says. "You'll think that's what's coming for the rest of your marriage. Trust me, kid, it don't happen that way."

"Sure," I say.

"Just a fair warnin'," he says. "But guys like us don't have to worry about that, am I right? There's plenty of pussy out there. You don't have to marry it to fuck it."

"I think I'm pretty set," I say, glancing at Little Al's wife, who is making her way toward us, a baby on her hip.

Al follows my gaze and turns to more wife-friendly topics as she reaches his side. "Don't be gone too long," he says to me. "I got jobs piling up startin' this afternoon."

"I could probably do a couple this afternoon," I say. "The flight doesn't leave until six."

"Forget about it," he says, putting an arm around his wife. "Go relax with your honey."

“I’ll do it,” I say, frowning. “As long as I’m back in time to catch the flight.”

My things are already packed and back in the boat if Eliza hasn’t thrown them overboard. Now that she’s unburdened me of the delusion that sex could be a perk of an otherwise empty marriage, a honeymoon seems even more ludicrous. I don’t know why we’re even going through with it, other than my mother already planned the whole thing. I have no interest in a fucking vacation, but I don’t want to make Eliza’s family think I’m not making an effort, that the marriage is as meaningless and hollow as our words on that altar. So, we’ll go through with it, even though neither of us have any interest in each other.

If there’s one thing our families won’t let go of, though, it’s tradition.

I wait until we’re on the way to a job before broaching the subject with Little Al.

“You’ve been with a lot of women, right?” I ask, knowing full well that he has. If I’ve learned anything by working with the guy for a month, it’s that he loves women just as much now as he did before his marriage.

He cracks up, and I immediately realize I sound like a fucking virgin, and he's about to give me shit. "Dude, you going to ask me how to fuck a firecracker like your wife?" he asks at last, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

Ignoring him, I get to the point. He's not a guy who needs a delicate approach. "You ever been with someone with... Issues?"

"All women got issues," he says, grinning like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard.

I frown. "Then maybe some kind of trauma."

He snorts with laughter. "Eliza Pomponio's had dudes guarding her pussy since before there was hair on it. She's got trauma like my ass got trauma. And that's to say, none."

I don't say anything. I'd thought of that. I just don't know what else would make a girl so fearful about sex. She called it punishment, for fuck's sake.

Suddenly, a thought makes bile rise to my throat. She's only eighteen. The only person punishing her up until now would have been her father. That frozen, slow, ache builds inside my chest again, like it's filled with the dirty slush after a snow is scraped off the roads. Anthony Pomponio looked right

into my eyes and told me I should handle his daughter with a firm hand.

And bodyguards don't protect a girl from her own father. Especially when that father is a mafia king who pays their salaries. Chances are, even if they found out, they'd look the other way out of fear for their lives. Just like I will, like a fucking pussy. Because there's not a goddamn thing I can do about it except sign my own death warrant by trying to kill the bastard. I'd probably fail, anyway, seeing as how the guy has about six bodyguards. Then she'll be right back where she started—at his mercy.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. There were other people in her life. Uncles. That boyfriend she was on the beach with last night. People who work for her father.

“What if one of the bodyguards did something to her?”
I ask.

Little Al just shakes his head. “Dude, her dad's a don. Anyone touched her, he'd have them and their whole family executed with a quickness, you feel me?”

“I guess.”

“Look, Kid, I don’t know what she’s trying to get out of it, but she’s pulling one over on you. She may be smarter to the Life than some of the daughters, but that girl’s so sheltered she may as well have lived in a bubble growing up. No way she’s had any trauma besides reaching the credit limit on her AMEX.”

“Yeah,” I say, staring out the window without seeing. “You’re probably right.”

But I know what I saw. Eliza was upset. She cried. I saw her tears. I heard her words on the shore with her friends. She wasn’t lying.

Was she?

*

“So, this guy Luigi, he’s behind a few payments,” Little Al says as we stop in front of a walk-up apartment. “You gonna take out his kneecaps, or should I bring a baseball bat? I got one in the trunk.”

“I’ll handle it,” I say, getting out of the car without waiting. My blood is still churning funny in my veins, like it

hasn't quite thawed from the thoughts that hit me in the car, the ones I can't shake. Al is probably right.

But if he's not...

It had to be her dad. Al's right about that part for sure—no one else would dare touch her.

When we knock on the door, a woman answers. Two little kids peer around her wide hips. She gasps and steps back when she sees us, tries to shut the door.

I wedge my shoe in before she can slam the door in our faces. My chest knots up when I see the scared eyes of those little kids, so I tear my eyes away. "We're here to talk to Luigi."

"H-he's not here," she says.

I glance at Little Al, wondering if we should come back later. I don't want to hurt a guy in front of his family.

Al nods, telling me to go ahead.

"Mind if we come in and confirm that?" I ask.

I hear a noise in the background, the squeak of a door or an old window opening. Without waiting for the lady to answer, Little Al shoves past her and charges in. The window

is open, and a guy is silhouetted inside the frame like a picture as he gets ready to go down the fire escape.

I push past the lady, too, racing to grab the guy and help Little Al wrestle him back inside. He twists like an eel, wrenching free of our grip only to lose his balance and go sprawling on the floor on his back.

“Where’s the money?” Little Al barks, his voice deeper and fiercer than I’ve heard it before. He grabs the guy by the collar and pulls back to punch him. The guy does the usual groveling and begging, making excuses. The first time, I had to convince myself that I could stomach it even while thinking, what would it hurt to wait one more day for the payment?

Now, I barely hear him. I know what it would hurt. Our reputation, for one. If we give one guy a day, he’d be asking for a week, a month, a year. If we did it for one guy, we’d have to do it for the next. They all have the same story, some sob story. Our job isn’t to listen to their sob stories. It’s to collect. That’s it.

But when I look up, I see three pairs of terrified eyes watching. I put a hand over Little Al’s fist, stopping him.

“Tell your family to wait in the bedroom,” I say to Luigi.

“No,” he sobs. “They need to see what you monsters do.”

“You don’t like the business, don’t be in it,” I say. “Now tell them.”

“No,” he howls, probably thinking we’ll go easy on him in front of his wife and kids.

I turn to the wife. “Go in the bedroom and don’t come out until you hear the front door close,” I tell her. “You don’t want your kids seeing what’s about to happen.”

The little boy is already crying and clinging to her leg. The girl is just staring with big, silent brown eyes that remind me too much of my sister’s. Maybe she needs to see this. Maybe protecting her from it will turn out as well as protecting Crystal turned out for my family. Her family is in this, and at some point, she’ll have to face the hard truth.

But I can’t do it, and not just because she’s only a child, and there are things no child should have to see or know. Maybe that’s why I shielded Crystal for so long, too. I didn’t want her to have to know the truth about our family, but more than that, I didn’t want her to know that I was capable of something like this. That I was the bad guy.

“Go,” I bark at the woman when she looks uncertain. Luigi keeps telling them not to move, but the woman is smart enough to want to protect her kids, and after a last, longing glance at her husband, she hustles her kids into a bedroom down the hall.

I grab Luigi by the front of his shirt, and when I look into his face, I don't see him. I see Anthony Pomponio, who probably ruined my wife. I see Devlin Darling, who my sister fell in love with and died with. I see my father, selling the services of his unborn son to a crime lord. I see the face that looks back at me from the mirror each morning, so ordinary you'd never know it belonged to a man whose job is to make other men suffer.

I pull back and punch him in the face. I can feel his nose give way, and he howls in pain, flopping around and trying to hit back. I don't feel his blows that rain down on my shoulders, my head. I don't even feel my own fist connecting with the bones in his face. Little Al helps pin him while I hit him again and again and again, until blood splatters the floor and my arms, my hands, my face.

After a while, Little Al pulls me off. “Remember, a dead man can't pay his debt. We made our point. Let's go.”

I stand up, stumbling back. Blood drips from my battered fist. My skin is peeled back from my knuckles, already swelling and turning dark beneath the red. Luigi lies motionless in a pool of blood on the floor. Not Anthony. Not the man responsible for my sister's death. Not my father.

Not me.

“Yeah,” I say. “Let's go. I have a plane to catch.”

*

As I predicted, our honeymoon is anything but romantic. That's fine with me. I'd rather be at home working with Little Al than going through with this empty tradition. Still, I try to engage Eliza in conversation a few times, only to have my questions met with resentful silence or hostile glares. Apparently, sex is not the only thing we won't be having.

I suppose that's fine, too. I did tell her she only had to be my wife in public. Conversations aren't part of that.

Still, it's hard to spend a week in a room in all-inclusive resort without getting to know someone a little. Despite her sullen attitude toward me, Eliza isn't unhappy. She

participates in the activities at the resort and excursions with excitement. She's got a big personality that can't be dampened by my presence. She makes friends with the boatmen, the dive guides, the waitresses.

And she's never sloppy with herself. She gets up each morning and puts on nice clothes, ones befitting whatever excursion my mother planned for us. She's meticulous with the scant amount of makeup she wears, her hair, her clothes. She obviously respects herself and isn't going to let herself go or try to discourage my attraction by making herself unappealing. Her clothes are obviously expensive but on the alluring side—a silk shirt without a bra, a flowing dress that clings to her curves when she walks, tiny shorts that show every inch of her strong, toned legs.

Sometimes, I have to stop myself from reaching out and touching her. I remind myself I can't love her, that it's a good thing she hates me. It makes everything easier. At night, I turn my back and stay on my side of the bed, feeling every tiny movement she makes through the expanse of mattress between us, the tension in her body as she lies there, stiff as a board, barely breathing until I fall asleep. Despite what Little Al said, I don't think she was faking it on our wedding night.

She's scared. And even though I tell myself I don't care about her, it fills me with rage to think of anyone hurting her.

We have dinner together each night, and each night, she wants to go to the bar afterwards. I go with her for the first few nights, though I have no interest in drinking. I sit and watch her make friends with other guests at the resort, and a dark feeling creeps between my ribs. Why is it that she can make friends with the bartenders, waitresses, and strangers she's just met, but she can't stand to even speak to me beyond the absolute necessities—asking me to hand over her toothbrush in the morning or pass the salt at dinner. A comment on the food is the extent of our casual conversation, but at the bar, she can throw her head back and laugh, swatting the arm of the waitress like they're best friends already.

I'm relieved when, on our fourth night, she calls me a psycho stalker and insists I stay in the room while she goes down to the bar. I fall asleep easily for the first night since we've arrived, without the dark tendrils of resentment licking at my ribs or the cold, thick feeling crawling up my throat like it does every time I wonder why she's so frigid.

The end can't come soon enough. At last, it arrives. On the last evening, I start picking up random pieces of clothes

and things left around the room, wanting my bag packed and ready to get out of here the moment I wake in the morning. I know being home won't change much, but at least I won't have to spend every day with a woman who despises me.

Eliza reclines on the couch in a silk robe that's parted over her knee, revealing her bare leg as she watches a show about a boy band breaking up. Cute little freckles randomly scatter across her olive skin, from the beauty mark on her cheekbone to the spot on her ankle just above the gold bangle she wore on our boat outing. From her position, I see new ones on her inner thigh I haven't seen before, and I wonder how many more I don't know about. I've seen her in her underwear just once, the morning after our wedding, and in a bathing suit several times on our trip, but I can't help but wonder if there are more under those garments. It seems like something a husband should know.

I push the thought away and snatch up some socks from under the bed. "Want to give me a hand with this?" I ask, tossing a pair of her sandals toward her suitcase.

Eliza tears her eyes away from the TV, some trashy gossip channel my sister used to watch on occasion, and scoffs. "I'm not your fucking maid," she snaps. "If you think

I'm going to clean up after you and cook you dinner like some sad little housewife, you can forget it."

"What exactly are you going to do?" I ask, thinking of my mother at home drinking herself silly and gossiping on her phone all day.

"Two things," Eliza says, counting them off on her fingers as she speaks. "One, whatever the fuck I want, and two, none of your goddam business."

I grit my teeth and yank the zipper closed on my suitcase. "I get that you wouldn't have chosen me for a husband, but remind me... Exactly why is it you hate me so much?"

"You're a nobody," she says, giving me a dirty look. "Why should I even bother explaining it?"

"That's it?" I ask. "You think I'm not good enough for you because I'm not some bigshot like an underboss or heir to one of the families' empires?"

"You really don't know anything about the families, do you?" she asks, staring at me. "It's not my job to fix that. You should have done your homework."

Her judgmental tone makes me want to shake her, but I try to remind myself she has a reason for the way she is. She may look like she has it all, like a spoiled mafia princess who needs a firm hand to guide her, but her life hasn't been easy. I'm the last person to believe the myth that money makes problems disappear. It only makes them disappear from the public eye.

“Then what is it?” I ask, bitterness creeping into my tone. “You had a boyfriend you wanted to marry? That asshole you were cuddling on the beach the morning after I fucking married you?”

Eliza just blinks at me a few times like she can't believe I'm this stupid. “You really don't know, do you?” she says. “King, you killed my brother.”

I open my mouth to argue, to tell her I haven't killed anyone yet, but then I get it. I shut my mouth and turn away. So, that solves that. If I was hoping for a breakthrough with her, which I wasn't, I can stop now. It doesn't matter if I did it myself or if it was Little Al or Al Valenti himself or some random enforcer. My family killed her brother. It doesn't matter which one pulled the trigger. It might as well have been me. It's my family. We're all the same to her.

And if I was going to argue, all I have to do is imagine how I'd feel about her if one of the Pomponios was responsible for Crystal's death. Just thinking about it puts an empty pit behind my sternum that makes it hurt to breathe, and I know I can't ask her forgiveness.

"Okay," I say, thinking it would have been real fucking nice if someone had told me that before. Not that it matters. If anything, this makes my life easier. I don't have to wonder or think I did something to piss her off. "Okay. That's fair, then."

She gives me an incredulous look. "Fair? Is that what you call it? Fair would be if I killed one of your brothers."

"You're right."

She cocks her head to one side and studies me for a long minute. "Okay, your turn," she says at last.

"For what?"

"Why do you hate me?"

"I don't hate you," I say. "I just can't love you."

She looks like she might ask further, but then the commercial on TV ends and the show about the Wilder brothers comes back on, and she shrugs and goes back to that while I finish packing.

When I'm done, she stands up and flips off the TV before stretching her arms over her head, her tight little body draped in silk like a prize I can never touch.

"I think I'll eat alone tonight," she says. "I'd like to look over the beach one more time before we go."

"Our flight leaves first thing," I say. "Don't stay out too late."

She rolls her eyes. "Not that it's any of your business, but yeah, I'll probably have a few drinks afterwards. You don't have to wait up."

She goes into the bedroom to get dressed, and I try not to dissect her words, but I can't help it. We're like two points on lines that look parallel but are actually moving infinitesimally closer, and one day, they'll intersect. I want to keep going straight, to stop it from happening, but I can't get off the line, can't prevent the inevitable collision.

Eliza leaves looking like a girl who needs to get fucked, in a little black dress that barely covers her ass and looks like it's made entirely of elastic with the way it clings to her body. I bite back a comment, bite back the urge to forbid her to go out in that. I'm not her father. I have my life, and she can have hers, separate from mine. That was the deal we

made. If she wants to go get drunk with her new friends, that's her business, not mine. I need to be sharp for a job as soon as I get home tomorrow.

But I can't help but wonder, are we already following in my parents' footsteps? Eliza is certainly no stranger to drinking too much, and she seems intent on doing only what she wants, on having fun and ignoring her obligations, just like my mother. And me, am I like my workaholic father who never had time for the family he created, so we had to fight each other for scraps of his approval? And not just by doing the regular things like being a football star or doing his job and looking out for the family, but by going to such extremes as colluding to fake our own kidnappings and fucking the wives of his enemies and rivals to ruin their families so we could pretend ours wasn't already ruined.

Yeah, I'm probably more like him than I want to admit, and it's not by accident. I made myself just like him because it was the only way to get a pat on the back. But I won't be like that with my kids. I'd rather spoil them with all the love they could want, smother them with attention, than the opposite.

The thought brings back Mr. Pomponio's words, and that brings me back to my suspicions, and the sick, churning,

dirty slush forms in my stomach again.

I think about the man I beat on the floor of his apartment until I didn't know what I was doing. It was like I went somewhere else, like it wasn't me. I think about what Little Al said about Eliza. I think about her dress that clung to her ass like a fucking billboard advertising sex. Her words on the beach after our wedding. On the boat after that. How different she is with me and with other people. I don't want to blame her for being a bitch to me. But I do.

ten

Eliza

After a couple drinks, I know I should stop. I'm not looking to get wasted, and I'm too smart to get drunk by myself in a strange place. But, like, I know it will end. I know King won't let me go on like this forever, so why not enjoy every minute I can before he takes it all away? Tomorrow we're going back home, and he'll want to play house. So, I might as well make the most of tonight.

Some guys want to buy me and the waitress shots, and it's her night off, and we became fast friends my first day here, so why the hell not? No one knows who I am unless they read the gossip columns religiously. It's not like I'm famous. I'm pretty well known in New York, but outside of the city, I'm practically anonymous. And as much as I enjoy the attention I get at home, it's nice to be somewhere that no one will know me or judge me or take pics of my drunk ass and sell them to *Your Celebrity Eyes*.

So we take some more shots, and dance the night away, and it's nice. It's nice to lose myself, to not be myself. It's nice

to be free and young and wild and take shots with strangers on a tropical island with my new best friend whose name I'll probably forget by my first anniversary. I don't even care that I'm not with a guy. I've spent most of my adult life making sure I don't get too wrapped up in a man and let it cloud my judgment and make me stupid. Marriage doesn't change that.

Sometime after midnight, the luster wears off, though. If King's not going to fight me on this, what's the point? Why bother rebelling if there's nothing to rebel against? I was having so much fun, but after hours of dancing, I just can't seem to get into it anymore. I excuse myself, and a few minutes later, I find myself sitting at the bar, just tipsy enough to chat with the stranger beside me. He offered to buy me another drink, but I don't even want one.

"The thing is, I think I'm done going out clubbing," I say after rambling for a bit. "I just don't know what to do instead. Like, this is boring. But what else is there?"

"So, let's go somewhere else," he says with a little smile.

I roll my eyes. "I'm serious. I want freedom, but what's the point in it, if I'm just going to be free to go dancing? I

want to do something big, something important, like my mom did.”

“What’d your mom do?” he asks.

“She’s an actress.”

“Really?” he asks, looking impressed. “Who is she? Would I know her?”

I shake my head and sip my water. I realize it sounds stupid when I say it like that. Why am I even trying to explain it to this stranger, anyway? He’s not going to understand. He doesn’t know what it’s like to sign his whole life away, giving it into someone else’s hands with a signature on a contract.

I could just go back to the room and crash. We have an early flight. And it’s not admitting defeat. It’s doing what I want. That’s the definition of freedom, isn’t it?

Much to my irritation, I know that I can’t go back so soon, though. To King, it will look like I want to be there with him, like I don’t want this freedom I’ve fought so hard for. I want him to think I have a glamorous life, this indomitable spirit that he can’t touch, one worth fighting to maintain. But as I look around, it all feels empty.

“This scene really is tired,” the man says. “Want to go back to my room?”

“No,” I say, giving him a dirty look. “I’m married.”

He draws back and glances around. “Then why the fuck are you here?”

“Haven’t you been listening to anything I say?” I ask, straightening on my chair.

“Well, yeah, but that’s because I thought I’d be taking you home,” he says. “Why am I wasting my time with you if we’re not hooking up later?”

I shake my head and push my glass away in disgust. “What, so I’m not worth talking to if I won’t sleep with you? For all you know, I’m the most interesting person you’ve ever met.”

He snorts. “You’re not. And even if you were, it wouldn’t matter if you’re not giving it up. Trust me, there’s not a guy in this place who cares what you have to say. We just pretend to listen until we get to the good stuff.”

My mouth drops open in indignation. “You’re a pig,” I snap.

But... Maybe he has a point. This club is a meat market, and I'm off the market. Why am I here? I'm not even sure my own husband would care what I have to say, but I know none of the guys here do. Why would they? They don't know me. They're just here to make a connection, have a little fun while they're at the beach, and go home with a story about banging a chick in Bora Bora.

But if I can't assert my freedom this way anymore, what am I supposed to do? What's the point of freedom if it's not to follow a passion? What's the point of anything if I don't have a passion? Have I been fighting for an illusion all along? Holding onto the notion of freedom because it's the only one I can bear to look at, the only reason for my mother's leaving that I can stomach? At least she had something to run to, something worth leaving her family for. I have nothing.

The guy shoves away from the bar and storms off to find someone he has a shot with. I slide off the barstool and turn to the nearest guy, determination giving me strength. This isn't for nothing. It's not. If I keep acting, keep pretending, maybe it will eventually be true. Maybe I'll figure it out if I keep going. Meaning will emerge eventually, right?

A few songs later, the guy I'm dancing with is all over me, his hands groping my body until I have to push him off me. A minute later, he's back at it. I'm about to push him away again when someone grabs him from behind, wrenching him away from me.

“What the—” the guy yells, reaching for me as he stumbles backwards.

Through the haze of smoke and pulsing lights, I make out my husband standing still in the crowd of writhing bodies, wearing low-slung sweatpants and a white T-shirt like he just got out of bed. The guy tries to shove him off, but King pulls back a fist and decks the guy. Several girls around me scream when the guy goes down like a ton of bricks, crumpling to the floor in a heap. King towers over me, his eyes flashing with rage, his jaw set tight.

For one drunken moment, pride snaps through my brain. My husband can throw a fucking punch. I smile before my brain catches up with my body, but King's not having any of it. He grabs me by the arm and marches me off the dance floor like I'm a bad little girl who snuck in on a fake ID, and he's my daddy coming to give me a lecture and haul me out of the bar. Not that my dad ever did that. I was partying from the

time I turned thirteen, and he couldn't do shit about it. He didn't bother to, anyway. With his wife gone and his son dead and the families at war, he had enough on his plate. So he just let me do what I wanted.

“Eliza,” crows my waitress friend. “Where are you going?”

“My husband,” I say, gesturing wildly toward King with my free hand, since he still has my other arm in a death grip.

“Oh,” the waitress says, frowning from me to King. “Okay, then. Have fun!” She waves and disappears into the crowd of writhing bodies and pulsing music while King drags me out of the bar and back to our room, walking so fast I nearly lose my balance on my heels as I half-run to keep up with him.

He strides into our room and slams the door so hard the pictures of sunsets on the wall tremble. Only then does he release me, his eyes blazing with fury as he faces me.

“I told you at the wedding, you *will* come back to me,” he says, his voice low and deadly.

“I don’t think it counts when you fucking drag me,” I snap, rubbing my arm where he grabbed me. “You didn’t have to do that. I would have come back eventually.”

He just stares at me, breathing hard, his chiseled jaw clenched tight. He may not say much, but there’s plenty going on in there. Maybe it’s the alcohol making me brave, but suddenly I want to poke him until he explodes, until he shows his hand, lets me know what he’s really thinking.

“What’s your problem, anyway?” I ask.

“You have no sexual feelings, but you can rub your ass all over some strangers dick in a club?” he demands.

“So what?” I ask, raising my chin and glaring back at him. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“Except it does,” he says, his voice a dangerous growl. Suddenly, I realize how stupid it was for me to tempt fate, to push his limits when we’re in another country where I have no real protection. “The deal was that I would let you do your thing in private, but you would respect me as your husband in public. I take my word seriously. If you want to survive this marriage, you’d better learn to do the same.”

“That—that was for the families,” I say, swallowing the tremor in my voice.

“Bullshit,” King growls. “That was pretty fucking public, what you just did.”

“No one at home will ever know.”

“I’ll know,” he says flatly.

“So, what? I can never go out dancing again?” I ask, feeling an ache behind my eyes. I fucked it all up already. I should have been more cautious, not gone all-out. I should have reined it in and taken it slow, working up to this. But of course I didn’t do that. For me, it’s balls-to-the-wall or nothing.

“You can dance any time you want,” King says. “If you need to grind your ass on some guy’s dick...” He breaks off and shakes his head, then lowers his voice. “I’m right fucking here, Eliza.”

A snort escapes me before I can stop it. “What? I’m supposed to grind on you?”

We stare at each other for a long moment, neither of us speaking.

“Oh, you poor thing,” I say at last. “That’s what you meant, isn’t it?”

“No,” he says, scowling and turning away. Out of his usual suit and tie, he doesn’t look so stiff. Now that I’ve had a week with him, I know he’s not as dickish as he came off at first, but I still don’t know him well enough to predict his next move, and that scares me.

“It is,” I say, an incredulous laugh bubbling out as I bounce onto the bed on my ass. “You totally want me to rub up on you.”

“Why would I want to dance with a frigid brat like you?”

“I’m not frigid.”

King scoffs. “You literally told me your sexuality was frozen.”

I stare at him a minute. But there’s no way I’m going there with him, letting him know anything real about me. I’d rather just get it over with. He’s going to fuck me eventually, anyway. I might as well learn to grin and bear it. And I’d rather him hurt me than look at me the way he did on our wedding night, like I’m some fragile, broken thing.

Broken? Yeah, I'll admit it. Fragile? Like a fucking grenade is fragile.

I'll take his wrath over his pity, and I know exactly how to get it.

"Yeah, about that... I may have exaggerated," I say lightly.

"You what?" he asks, his voice going low and deadly.

I shouldn't have said it, oh god, his eyes are glittering with a malice that says I'm treading in very, very dangerous territory. But once you say something like that, you can't just take it back. I don't want to, either. It's a relief to know this is finally happening. I've spent the whole week tiptoeing around him, hardly daring to breathe lest it draw his attention. I lie in bed each night trembling and petrified, sure each one will be the night he'll be done waiting.

"Yeah, I lied," I admit. "I don't have a problem with sex. I have a problem with you."

King just stares at me, his eyes incredulous and turbulent as a storm. "You *lied*?" he asks at last.

"Yep," I say. "I'm good at that. But it says something about you, too, you know."

“What?” he asks, not moving a muscle, just staring at me. But I can see the fury inside him, can see the way he’s almost shaking with it. I know I should leave him alone, but some reckless part of me wants to just keep poking the beast. Like I said, I’ve never been one to stop at halfway. I push limits. I want to see how far I can go, what I can get away with, what he’ll do when he finally snaps. Maybe that’s partly why I keep going out every night, waiting for him to put his foot down the way no one ever has. To demand answers. But he let me have my way, just like everyone else has.

I’m the poor girl who lost her brother and her mother, after all. When I met him, I thought maybe he’d be the one to stand up to me, that he’d be a formidable opponent or even a match for me. But he’s too scared of my father, like everyone else in my life.

“You know,” I say. “It says a lot that a girl would lie about something like that just to keep from having to have sex with you.”

“You’re not a virgin, either, are you?” he asks.

I try to gauge his expression, his tone, to see how he feels about that. I don’t see disappointment in him, but there’s definitely an edge of jealousy in his voice. He does want me,

despite his best efforts to pretend otherwise. The thought sends a tremor of triumph through me. I want to be wanted just like anyone else, even if it's by a man I don't want. I could lie to him, but I think of how important my hymen is to men and decide it will only make him want me more.

"I'm a virgin," I say.

"Prove it."

We stare at each other for a long moment. I knew it was coming, but my heart still lurches into my throat. "Now you're going to throw me down and rape me?" I ask, a challenge in my voice. "That's how you prove it to yourself, right?"

"I heard you talking on the beach on our wedding night," King says, prowling forward. "Voices carry across water. You should know that, having a house on the beach."

I scurry off the far side of the bed and find myself backed into a corner. Damn it. I dart forward, trying to get around the bed, but he's too fast. He grabs my wrist and backs me against the window. My heart is racing like a scared rabbit in my chest as I look up into his deep, dark eyes.

“You wanted me to hear, didn’t you?” he asks. “You love testing me, but you don’t know who you’re fucking with, *piccola*.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just like you wanted me to know where to find you tonight.” A little smirk forms on his full lips, and my heart skips a beat altogether. “You said I didn’t *have to* wait up. You didn’t tell me not to. You wanted me to wait up, to sit here wondering and worrying, didn’t you? Admit it. You wanted me to come find you.”

“No,” I say, scowling. “Why would I want some asshole to come ruin my fun?”

“Because you get away with everything, but you don’t actually want to,” he says. “You want someone to stop you. You want someone to care enough to save you from yourself.”

“Don’t try to psychoanalyze me,” I snap. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I think I do,” he says. “Did you want me to hear you on our wedding night, too, Eliza?”

“Hear me doing what?” I ask, genuinely confused this time.

“I think you did,” he purrs, stroking my hair behind my ear with his free hand. “Is that why you said those things? Or was it because that’s what you like? You want me to rough you up and fuck you dry?”

I realize then what’s he’s talking about, that he mistakenly thought Lizzie’s words were mine. All this time, he’s thought I was avoiding sex because I didn’t want him to know I’m not a virgin.

“That wasn’t me,” I say, my voice coming out breathier than I want. It’s just that he’s so close to me, his body almost touching mine. And even though I was just all over some stranger in the club, this is different. This is King. He makes me feel things I’ve never felt about anyone. Vulnerable, and irresistible, and helpless, and terrified. I’ve never been so close to him before, and my body trembles at his nearness. I can feel the heat of his body crackling across my skin, can smell his scent, something spicy and salty at once that makes my mouth water. I feel electric, combustible, like I’m gasoline and he’s a match hovering just out of reach.

I want to know what happens when the match is dropped.

“That was my friend Lizzie,” I whisper, gripping the windowsill behind me.

He hasn’t spoken, hasn’t moved, but his eyes are drinking me in, caressing me until I ache for just a brush of his skin against mine. I don’t know if I’m more scared by how much he wants me, or by how much I want him.

“Prove it,” he says again, his gaze heated. His fingertips brush the bare skin of my thigh, and a tremor goes through me. I bite my lip to keep from gasping, and his hungry eyes follow the movement, locking on my mouth.

I can’t move. I feel like an animal, frozen with fear. My pulse races for a different reason when his fingers move up, slowly trailing across my skin and sending goosebumps blooming over my body. He hooks a finger into the hem of my little dress, and I shudder again, my own grip tightening on the windowsill. He adds a second finger, working it under the tight fabric. I take a shaky breath, my whole body tight with anticipation as he moves another finger into the hem. He tugs slightly at the stretchy fabric, and my eyes drop closed, my nails pressing into the paint on the sill.

King draws a labored breath and drags my dress up with one slow, sure move. His hands fall to my narrow hips,

and I suck in a breath, my eyes flying open at the sensation of his rough, hot hands on my skin. He thumbs the straps of my bikini underwear, swallowing hard enough that I can hear it in the silence between us. Nothing moves except his thumbs, toying with me as they move up and down over the thin straps.

“Show me,” he commands.

“No.”

After a pause, he steps in, his chest pushing me back, pinning me against the window. His knee pushes between my thighs, pushing me back so my thighs bite into the sill right below my ass. “Then admit you’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“Then what’s wrong with you?”

“I fucking hate you,” I snap. “That’s what’s wrong.”

“Get over it,” he growls, grabbing my knee and opening my legs. “No one said you had to love me. But our families want a baby, so you do have to fuck me.”

“No,” I gasp, shoving at his chest. “If you need it that bad, I’ll give you head.” I struggle out of his grasp and try to sink down onto my knees, but King grabs me under the arms and hauls me up.

“And have you bite my dick off? How stupid do you think I am?”

“I won’t, I swear,” I say, my voice desperate as I struggle to free myself. “Just don’t touch me. I’ll do it if you don’t touch me. It’s my job as your wife, right?”

I manage to slip out of his grasp and drop to my knees before he can protest. I’m relieved to be off my shaking legs. I pull down the skirt of my dress, discretely wiping my palms on the fabric before reaching for his pants.

“Eliza,” he says, his voice rough as I kneel up and reach for the drawstring on his sweats. “You don’t have to—”

He breaks off when I flatten my palm and run it along the ridge in his pants. I feel his cock throb through his sweats, and a tremor of something goes through me. I shift my position to press my knees together against the ache growing there. But I won’t pay attention to that. I’ll pay attention to servicing my husband. I know this won’t work for long. He’s right—our families want a baby from this union, and I’m well aware that this won’t get us one. But maybe it will buy me time, a few days at least. If I can satisfy him, he might not press the pregnancy issue.

I can do this. I might even like it. It feels... Good. Exciting and dangerous but not too scary. I've only seen a cock in a few porn clips Lizzie sent us once when we admitted we'd never seen one, and never in real life. I swallow hard at the size of it, my pulse fluttering in my throat. It's so much bigger than I expected, and so hot I can feel the heat through his pants. Suddenly, a thrill of anticipation goes through me at the thought of peeling down his sweats, seeing it bare.

I slide my hand back down it to the base, until I feel the lump of his balls. I stop, not sure if I'm supposed to touch them, too. Something about them feels embarrassing, like I went too far. Obviously I know guys have balls, but even when I saw porn, I don't remember them. I never paid any attention to them, and now I'm not sure what to do about them. They're so... *visceral*.

King clears his throat, running a hand over the back of my head and lifting my face. "You don't have to do that," he says, his voice low almost choked. If I couldn't tell by the hardness against my palm, his voice lets me know exactly how much he wants me to do it, even if he's giving me an out.

Our eyes meet, and I swallow hard. There's so much in those eyes, but I can't read what it all means. And for once, I

want to. I want to know what's mixed into that longing in his gaze. "It's okay," I whisper. "I want to."

He looks like he might protest, but I undo the drawstring on his sweats before he can. He pulls off his shirt and tosses it on the bed as I reach around him, tugging his pants free of his ass and lowering them. I sink back on my heels to admire the raw beauty of his naked body, all chiseled angles and lean muscle. I want to trace the V of his hips, run my fingers around the sculpted muscles of his abs. But most of all, I find myself staring at his cock, standing tall and proud against his lower belly, straight and deeper in color than the rest of his skin.

A hot thrill races through me, adding pressure to the ache between my thighs. His cock is so... Animal. It looks rough and brutish and wild, so unlike the calculating, reserved man it belongs to. It makes me tremble with fear as I lean forward and gingerly wrap my fingers around it.

He sucks in a breath, his hand circling the back of my head, stroking my hair. I tense, expecting him to shove his cock down my throat and fuck my mouth. But he doesn't pull me forward, instead letting me look at him, explore him with my fingers at my own pace. I wrap my fingers around his

shaft, sliding them down his thick, hot length. Part of me wants to pull away, to turn and flee. But another part is fascinated. I thumb the thick vein that runs the length of his stiff cock, then run my fingers over the ridge around the head. His skin is velvety smooth, softer than I'd imagined, but beneath it, I can feel the steely muscles straining for relief.

I almost wish he'd be a dick about it, just force me to do what he wants whether or not I want to so I could know that he's a monster through and through, that there's no going back from it. It's hard to deal with his kindness, especially when it's so undeserved. I've been a horrible wife. A horrible person. I hardly gave him the time of day all week, and he's been nothing but respectful of my need for space. And yeah, okay, he's kind of a prick sometimes, and he's cold and haughty, but compared to the other men my father could have given me to?

There is no comparison.

I've known a lot of made guys, and if I'm honest, King's probably one of the best ones I've met. Yeah, he's new and low ranking, but that means he hasn't had years to become a hardened, heartless brute like a lot of mafia men. I don't know of a single one who wouldn't have demanded I fulfill

my wifely duties on our wedding night, that's for damn sure. He could have made me service him every single night of our honeymoon, could have overpowered me physically, forced me into pleasing him, but he didn't. He had every right to demand that I become his wife in more than name, but he hasn't crossed the lines that he very well could have.

I recognize that, and if this is what he needs, I'm more than willing to thank him for his patience in this way. I lean in, angling my head to kiss along his shaft from the base to the tip. He's breathing hard by the time I reach the head, and I feel a swell of pride rise inside me. His cock throbs against my lips, demanding more, and I open my lips and lower my mouth over his salty tip. He lets out a soft groan, his fingers tightening in my hair. I'm not sure what to do next, so I begin to lick and suck gently.

I keep going until my cheeks start to ache from the work. When I slow, King begins to move his hips a little, keeping my rhythm going.

"Let me take over," he says after a few minutes. "Just relax your throat and keep your teeth off. I won't hurt you."

I nod, but when he grips my hair and starts to move my head, I tense up. I wanted to do this because I'm still in

control.

He pulls out, his hard cock slick with my saliva, bumping against my cheek as it stands up straight again. King takes my chin and lifts it, his dark eyes searching mine. “It’s okay,” he murmurs, stroking his thumb across my wet lower lip. A shiver goes through me, and I press my knees together. “If it gets to be too much, pinch me, and I’ll stop. No questions asked. Okay?”

I have to admit, I have no clue what I’m doing. Obviously, I was doing something wrong. If I let him fuck my mouth, I can see what he likes so I can do better next time. I nod, and he grips his cock and lowers it back to my mouth, pushing it between my lips and over my tongue.

“God, baby, I want to come down this pretty throat,” he purrs, his smooth voice so seductive I don’t care what he’s saying to me. I think he could say he wanted to murder me in that tone, and I’d agree. I wonder how many other girls he’s gotten to kneel for him by using that tone.

Stroking the side of my throat with his fingers, he begins to move my head in rhythm with his hips, rocking them forward and back, his cock sliding deeper with each shallow thrust. My pulse flutters against his fingertips, and a burst of

nerves shimmers through me, making me quake. I raise my eyes to his, holding his gaze while he slides his cock deep into my mouth. A tremor goes through me, clenching in my core.

I feel... Powerful. Somehow, even though I'm on my knees just allowing him to do as he pleases, I feel alive and excited and... Sexy. I can imagine myself through his eyes, on my knees at his feet, my mouth open for him to fuck while my eyes hold his, begging for him to have mercy on me as he takes charge. But that's the key. I'm *allowing* him to take control. I see the complete surrender in his eyes, that he's lost to his lust while I'm still in control of my senses, even as he uses my mouth for his pleasure.

After a minute, I adjust to the new sensations, spreading my knees on the floor and arching my back, taking hold of the base of his cock and adding a little suck with each thrust of his hips. He knows what he's doing, so I let him do it while I take note of what he likes. It also lets me pay attention to the things I was too absorbed to notice when I was worrying about what I was doing wrong. I cup his balls in my hand, moving them inside his soft skin. He groans quietly and thrusts harder, hitting the back of my mouth, his cock straining against my throat.

Tears spring to my eyes and I gag, pulling back. He slows, stroking the back of my head, but he doesn't pull out this time.

“Oh, baby, your mouth feels so good,” he says, gliding in and out slowly until I recover. I can taste salt and a musky flavor, and saliva fills my mouth as his soft skin slides against my tongue. I want more. I kneel up higher, wrapping my hands around his thighs and pulling him closer again. I suckle greedily at him, and he moans and pumps deep into my mouth again, his thick cock throbbing as salt spreads over my tongue.

“I'm gonna come,” he says, gripping my hair hard enough to make tears fill my eyes again. “Can you swallow for me, *piccola mia?*”

I bob my head in a nod, feeling naughty at his blunt words, but in a good way, one I didn't know I could feel. I inhale, filling myself with the scent of him, noticing the hardness of his muscular thighs as he thrusts deep into my throat. I force my throat not to constrict, fighting the urge to choke as he fucks my mouth hard for a minute, his cock battering my throat. Reaching between his thighs, I cup his balls again, now swollen and hardened, and give them a little squeeze.

He curses quietly, but before I know if that was a good or bad thing, his hips jerk forward and his big hand cups the back of my head. His vein throbs against my lower lip, and the next second, salty cream explodes into my mouth and down my throat. I choke, tears streaming from my eyes, liquid dripping from the corners of my mouth.

“Keep it open for me, baby,” he growls, stroking my hair as his cock pulses more into me, spasms wracking his body every few seconds. He doesn’t move, though, which gives me time to swallow what I can and relax my throat again.

“Did I hurt you?” he asks, wiping my tears with his thumb.

I shake my head, swallowing past the ache he left in my bruised throat. I don’t care if I’m a little sore. I feel... Triumphant. He wants me, *desires* me, so much, it makes me feel almost high. I may be kneeling at his feet with my mouth around his cock, but I don’t feel degraded. I also don’t feel like I’m trapped, the way I imagined I’d feel after sex. I feel... Free.

At last, he pulls back, gripping the base of his cock and slowly dragging it over my tongue until he reaches my lips.

“Suck out those last drops,” he croons, stroking my cheek with the back of his other hand.

A naughty thrill goes through me. I didn’t expect him to be so... Dirty. He’s a mess of contradictions—tender yet nasty-mouthed, considerate yet dominating, gentle but forceful.

My throat aches, but I obey, giving his cock a little suck. He draws a sharp breath, spasms going through his body every few seconds for another minute. I keep going until he draws away. He pulls up his pants and grabs me under the arms, lifting me to my feet on one swift motion.

“My turn,” he says.

“No no no,” I say quickly. “I did—”

I let out a little yelp as he scoops me up. I start to struggle, but he carries me to the bed in a few long strides, lying me down like a bride and sliding on top of me. He gives my mouth a quick kiss before moving to my jaw. Tingles shoot through me when he reaches my ear, but my body is shaking too hard to enjoy what he’s doing. All I can think about is what comes next. I grip his shoulders, my nails digging in.

“I want to kiss every inch of you,” he murmurs into my neck, his voice low and rough. “I want to taste your cunt.”

This wasn't supposed to happen. I keep thinking that over and over. Where did I go wrong? I gave him head. I even made him come. How is he still going? Why isn't he done?

He rests his weight on one elbow, leaving soft, warm kisses down my neck while his other hand strokes my arm, my side, my thigh. His breathing his coming hard, sending shivers through me as he kisses down the column of my neck, nudging my chin up.

It feels good. It does. I keep telling myself that.

I did fine with the blowjob. Great, in fact. He said only good things. Yes, he did most of the work, but I'll know a little more next time. And if I could do that, then why can't I do this?

I can. I can do it. I let him do his thing, moving down my body, pulling down my strapless dress and kissing my breasts. “You're so beautiful,” he says, and his hands are everywhere, his words, his desire. I'm drowning in it, and I can't find the surface, so I just lie there while he lets out a soft moan, pulling my nipple into his mouth.

I jerk back to myself, shocked back to the surface with the throb he sends straight to my core with each suck. He tugs the other nipple into his mouth, moaning around it, which makes it even worse. I can feel heat and wetness pooling between my thighs, the pressure from earlier returning full force.

And then he's pushing me back under the water, because it's too much, what he's doing and how much he wants this, how much he needs... I can't handle it, can't fight it, so I let myself sink down to the bottom, wishing it was so deep he couldn't touch me. I can hear the voice that haunts me, distorted like something out of a horror movie when really it was a kind voice with an edge of steel under it.

Don't be afraid of your own body, Eliza. Don't fear your own pleasure.

King's mouth is on my stomach, and I'm shaking so hard he has to feel it, but he must think it's just the fear of a virgin because he doesn't stop. He takes my dress down as he goes, dragging it over my hips. He sits up to pull it over my feet, then kneels there, looking down at me.

“You're so fucking perfect,” he breathes.

My legs are shaking. I just stare up at him. I can see the light above, blurry as if through water.

“Are you okay with this?” he asks, a stitch pulling between his eyebrows.

Of course I’m not fucking okay with it. How can I be okay? I’m drowning, screaming inside my head, but if I open my mouth, the water will rush in, so I only nod.

“Have you ever done this?” He pulls my legs onto his shoulders, running his hands from my ankles and along my calves, cupping my knees before he runs his hands down the front of my thighs.

I don’t have the strength to worry what he’ll say, if he’ll be mad. I nod again.

“Good,” he says, giving my legs a reassuring squeeze. “Then you know it doesn’t hurt. I’m not going to make you have sex with me, Eliza. Just relax and let me make you feel good.”

Don't be afraid of you own body, Eliza. Don't fear your own pleasure.

It’s like a taunt inside my head, the chants of a hundred cruel bullies on the playground. But there was only one bully,

one bully and a bathtub, and the water was too cold and I can't stop shivering.

I nod.

He slides down the bed, pressing his nose to my underwear and inhaling. "You smell amazing," he says, his voice husky.

It's not so bad, I tell myself. It feels good. But I'm not sure, because I'm not here, I'm somewhere else, and the feeling good part is not connected to my brain, only my body. King hooks his finger in my panties, pulling them aside and murmuring again how beautiful I am. Then his mouth touches me. And I shatter.

eleven

King

Eliza shoots out from under me like she's propelled by something inhuman. I don't even know how she gets out of my grip, only that one second I'm taking the first taste of my wife, and a split second later, she's tumbling off the bed. She spins on her heel to face me when she's halfway across the room, her stance defensive and ready, like she might bolt in either direction if I move a muscle. She stares at me with her bourbon eyes incomprehensible, wild and animal and filled with what can only be described as instinctual terror.

“Whoa,” I say, kneeling up on the bed and holding up both hands. “What's going on?”

My words seem to bring her a little closer to reason, and she crosses her arms over her tits. “I—don't—like that,” she says, grinding out her words between heaving breaths.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “Then we don't have to do it. Jesus, Eliza. I asked if you wanted to. You could have told me.”

“I’m telling you,” she says, her voice loud and strong.
“I don’t like it.”

I search around on the crumpled blankets and toss her dress back to her before finding my t-shirt and pulling it on above my sweats. Then I hop off the bed and pad into the kitchen area, leaving her to dress in the bedroom while I make coffee and try to clear my head. What the fuck is wrong with me? Yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve had sex, and I’m frustrated as hell that I can’t fuck my wife, but that’s no excuse. She was obviously not okay. She was shaking like a leaf. I told myself it was just first-time jitters, but is that really an excuse?

Even if that’s what it was, I should have stopped and made her comfortable. I’ve screwed up during sex before, but not like that. If I start to doubt it, all I have to do is replay her reaction. She couldn’t get away fast enough. I’ve sure as fuck never had a girl want to get away from me that badly, not even the drunken mistakes or married women who woke up and took one look at me and realized they’d ruined their marriage for a taste of youth.

Okay, so I’ve always been a complete dick, not just tonight.

I watch the coffee gurgle into the pot, the sound mingling with the rush of the shower in the other room. Great. Now she's showering to get the feel of me off her. Just when we'd started to have some kind of breakthrough, I managed to immediately fuck it up beyond repair.

I rake a hand through my hair before carrying two mugs of coffee back to the bedroom. Then I just sit on the edge of the bed, waiting for her. I don't want to drink the coffee, to wash away the only taste of her I'll probably ever get. It wasn't enough. If I'd known it was the only one, I would have taken more, like the greedy bastard I am. I wouldn't have started with a tiny lick. I would have driven my tongue so deep into her cunt that she couldn't call herself a virgin anymore.

She steps out of the bathroom a minute later, her hair wrapped up in a towel on top of her head, a thick robe concealing her entire body. She balks when she sees me, her expression guarded.

"I'm sorry," I say.

She blinks at me a few times, like she wasn't expecting that. And why would she? She already thinks I'm an even

bigger asshole than I am. “For what?” she asks, narrowing her eyes.

“For doing that even though I knew you didn’t want to.”

“I told you to.”

“It should have been obvious you weren’t into it. I went ahead because I wanted to make you feel good, like you did for me, but if I’d really been paying attention to what you wanted, I’d have known it wasn’t that. I’m sorry.”

She stares at me a minute, and then her shoulders slump. “No, I’m sorry,” she says. “You didn’t know.”

“So... You want to tell me what happened?” I ask, holding out a cup of coffee.

She shakes her head, but to my relief, she steps forward to get the coffee.

“Was it just too much?” I press. “You seemed into when you were going down on me. Or were you hating that, too?”

“No,” she says, slumping onto the edge of the bed a few feet from me. She sips her coffee, staring miserably into the cup. “I just... I’m messed up, King.”

I scoot down next to her and lay a tentative hand on her back. “What is it?” I ask. “I know you hate my family, but *we’re* a family now, too. I want you to trust me, Eliza. How am I going to survive in the Life if I can’t even come home and know my wife doesn’t want to kill me?”

“I don’t,” she says quietly. “I just... Don’t like to be touched.”

“Anywhere?” I ask, taking my hand off her back.

“Not if you think it’s going to lead there,” she says.

“Oh.” We sit there in silence for a minute. I don’t know what to say, what to think of that. I knew she was scared of sex, but this is different somehow. How can a girl not like her pussy touched by anyone? I mean, if she hates me, I get her not wanting *me* to touch her, but it’s not like I can deny that having my dick sucked feels good. It’s biology. I’ve fucked lots of girls I don’t care about—because it feels good.

“I’m sorry,” she says at last, standing from the bed.

“Wait,” I say, snagging her hand. “I want to talk to you about this.”

“Why?” she asks. “I’m not going to change my mind, King.”

Still, she sinks back onto the bed when I tug at her hand. “You said you’d done it before,” I say. “Is that how you know?”

She swallows, setting her cup in her lap and staring down at it.

“Because... You didn’t want to,” I guess, keeping my grip gentle on her fingers. “Someone forced you.”

She takes a long, shaky breath.

“Who was it?” I ask, my voice so quiet, so calm and still, she’d never guess the murderous rage gripping my heart. If Al wanted to know if I’m capable of murder, I could give him a real clear answer now.

Eliza shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter,” she whispers. “I don’t want you to do anything. That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“So you were going to just let me fuck you when you didn’t want to, just like some other asshole?” My hand fists at my side, but I keep the other one relaxed, gently holding Eliza’s, almost scared she’ll pull away. Her hand feels so small, so delicate, in mine. It makes me want to massacre anyone and everyone who ever hurt her.

“Not that,” she says quickly. “I wasn’t lying. I promise. I’m still a virgin.”

I measure my words carefully. “Do you really think I fucking care about that right now?”

She looks at me and then away. “I guess not. But just so you know. It wasn’t rape. We didn’t do that. They just did... Other stuff.”

“That’s still rape,” I say quietly, squeezing her hand. My head is spinning so hard I think I’ll be sick. “So you’d better tell me who did that to you, so I can take care of him.”

Them.

Fuck. She said ‘*they.*’

“You can’t,” she says, pulling her hand from mine. “I don’t want you to do anything. There’s nothing you can do. It was a long time ago, and it’s already been taken care of.”

“You told your dad?”

She doesn’t say anything.

Fuck. My heart freezes in my chest, and I remember my earlier suspicions. “It was your dad,” I say flatly.

“No,” she says quickly.

Too quickly. Too emphatically.

Who else would have access to her... *And* not be terrified of what Anthony Pomponio would do?

“Look, King,” she says, turning to face me at last. “I’m sorry that you got a wife who’s broken, who can’t give you the one thing you want, but I didn’t tell you that because I didn’t want you to know, or be mad, or get some vigilante scheme in your head. I wouldn’t have told you at all if I hadn’t freaked out like that and given it away. I would have just endured it like a good little wifey and kept my mouth shut. That’s how much I didn’t want you to know. So please, please respect my wishes and just drop it. I don’t want revenge. I don’t want to talk about it. I want to forget it happened and move on with my life. *Please.*”

I don’t know what to say to her. I can’t just forget it. I can’t drop it and let it go and pretend I don’t know. But it’s her body, her experience, and she’s right. I should respect her wishes, even if it feels wrong to the very core of my bones.

“Okay,” I say at last.

“Okay.”

I pick up my coffee. “You’re *never* going to want me to touch you?”

She shakes her head. “No, but I’ll do my duty to the family. I know we have to have a baby. I’ll get used to the idea, I promise. Or I’ll just get really drunk or something, so I don’t even feel it.”

“I’m not going to do that,” I say, taking a sip of the black coffee. I relish the sting on my tongue, the bitterness. I don’t want to remember what she tastes like if I never get to taste her again. It will only make it worse, knowing I had the smallest taste, a single small lick. It only makes me know what I didn’t have, what I can never have. What someone took from me, and the immensely more devastating thing they took from her.

I take her coffee and set it on the nightstand with mine. Then I take both her hands. “I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want, Eliza. Ever. No matter what. I don’t care what the families want, what they expect. You’re safe with me, and I’m going to prove that to you, no matter how long it takes. I want you to know that you can trust me.”

She looks up at me, her eyes all question and vulnerability. “Promise?”

“I promise.” I lean forward and kiss her forehead.

“What happens when they ask about a baby?” she whispers.

“We tell them we’re trying. And when that stops working, we can tell them you couldn’t get pregnant. As long as we’re married, the families are united. A baby would help solidify it, but even without one, they have us.” I squeeze her hands, and she nods, a tear sliding down her cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

I turn off the light and slide into bed next to her. Instead of turning my back and staying on the far side, though, I pull her close. She tenses, and I curl my body around hers, kissing the back of her neck. “Can I just hold you?” I ask. “I don’t want anything else.”

“Okay,” she whispers, and I feel her begin to relax. I hold her gently, like a fragile thing, though I know she doesn’t want that. No one wants to be thought of that way. But the burn of my anger has cooled into something warm and fiercely protective, and I keep my arms around her, as if I can protect her from something that is long gone, something that only lives in her memory now.

I don't know when I stopped thinking I would never care about this girl. Maybe it happened sometime during the week, when I was counting the freckles on her skin, watching with envy as she laughed at everyone's jokes but mine, admiring the fearless way she dove into the water from a cliff. Or maybe it was tonight, when I saw inside her, saw the cracks in her armor that look so much like mine, even if the cause of our brokenness is so very different. I only know that I've failed already.

I've broken the vow I made to myself. I promised I wouldn't let her love me, but I forgot to worry about my own stupid heart. My sister once told me that I'd make a good father because I want to protect people, to take care of them. I may never be a father, but the other part is true. I didn't ask for it, but I'm cursed with an instinct that makes the life I'm bound to even more dangerous.

I know what it's like to hurt, and when I see someone hurting, I want to take that hurt away. It binds me to them in some way, a way that has nothing to do with the vows I made to Eliza or the rings we put on each other's fingers. I can't help but care about what's mine, and I will go to the ends of the earth to protect it. And the instinct isn't just for family, for a

girl I vowed to protect. It's more than that. She found my weakness. When I know a girl is hurting, something primal inside me awakens, an instinct to protect her, to care for her, to heal her.

I know how dangerous that is not just because someone could take her from me, but because I won't be able to protect her from all the hurts that come with being a made guy's wife. I can't promise her I'll always be here. I wasn't there to protect her in the past when she was hurt, and I can't protect her from the effects of her past on her life now. The truth is, I can't even promise I'll protect her if I'm here. I've failed before. How could she trust me to take care of her when the last girl I was supposed to protect ended up dead?

twelve

Eliza

King is quiet on the way back, as usual. I haven't cared up until now. I haven't wanted to talk to him, either. I didn't want to risk getting close. But that's all gone now. There's no way to go back, to keep from freaking out when he touched me, to keep from spilling my dirty secrets to him. And there's no way to feel distant from someone after telling them something like that, something you've spent your life hiding, and compensating for, and ignoring. Something you've never told anyone. I bared my soul, my shame, my brokenness. I don't even know why I told him. Maybe some part of me recognized a brokenness inside him, and it called out to me that we are the same, that he could be trusted with this, that he could bear it.

I glance at him every few minutes on the plane. I'm quiet, too, but I'm brimming with questions, worries. I don't want him to go digging, to unearth the past. I don't want him thinking he can be some kind of hero, save me from myself. I want him to leave it alone, to pretend it never happened, just like I do. But for the first time, I wish I knew him better, that I

hadn't spent the last few months keeping as much distance from him as possible, locking him out, telling him I hated him, that I didn't want to know him.

Because now I don't know him, and I want to. I want to know what he's thinking, planning, feeling. I want to know what is down in the depths of those deep, brooding eyes, what pain was reflected back when I shared mine. And on a more selfish note, I want to know if he sees me differently, if he can't help but be repulsed by me and my fucked up trauma. Even more fucked up, now that I know he won't see me as his sexy little wife anymore, that's all I want. I want him to want me, to still think I'm desirable and fuckable instead of delicate and broken.

Which is ridiculous, since I didn't want him to see me as sexy or fuckable before he knew.

I want to go back to that, though, back to what we had before. That wasn't ideal, but it wasn't scary like this. I'm vulnerable now. I've let him see too much, know too much. I need to know his secrets, balance the scales.

But he doesn't talk. We're polite to each other on the flights. Things have definitely shifted, and not in a good way. I can tell he no longer thinks of me as just a bratty, spoiled

princess. I'd rather be that than damaged and sad, though. How do I undo what I did, unsay what I said? How do I do damage control when the damage is so deep and irreversible I don't even know where to start?

I can't.

When we reach New York, I'm relieved. All I want is to go back to the way things were. Instead, King gets my bags and we head for his car in the same heavy silence that's hung between us all day.

"I like your car," I try as he loads the suitcases into the Lotus.

"Thanks," he says, sliding around to open the door for me. "You drive?"

"I know how." I don't have a car—most people in the city don't—but I have a license and I've driven Dad's car. He wanted to make sure I was capable in case our house was ever ambushed, and I needed to make a getaway.

We leave the parking garage before I decide I've had enough of this weirdness. I'd rather just talk about it and clear the air instead of pretending last night never happened.

I turn to King as he pulls out into the stream of taxis and other traffic. “Listen,” I say. “About last night... I know it’s not fair to ask you to wait for me to be ready. Even I don’t know how long it’ll take, or if I’ll ever want to. So, I think you should find a *cumare*.”

He shoots me a scowl. “I don’t want a mistress, Eliza.”

“I know,” I say. “You want a wife who isn’t a frigid bitch, as you put it. But unfortunately, neither of us got to choose that.”

“I didn’t call you a bitch,” he says. “I called you a brat. And that was wrong of me. If I’d known...”

I close my eyes and thunk my head back against the headrest in frustration. “See, that’s why I didn’t want to tell you,” I say. “I want you to think of me just the way you did. As a frigid brat who’s not sleeping with you because I hate you and I want to hold out on you and drive you crazy.”

“Then why are you telling me to take a girl on the side?”

“Because I know you need that,” I say. “And maybe I don’t hate you anymore. So, if I can’t give you what you need, then I have to be okay with you finding it somewhere else.”

“I don’t want anyone else,” he says. “I want you, Eliza.”

His words hang between us, heavier than the silence. The honeymoon was only a week, but it seems all that time alone together made this happen faster than either of us wanted.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly, guilt burning a hole in my heart.

This time, he sighs, adjusting his grip on the wheel and reaching over to lay a hand on my knee. “No, I’m sorry,” he says. “I shouldn’t have said that. I said I wouldn’t put pressure on you. And I don’t want to. I just mean, I only want my wife. No one else. So if I have to wait a month, or a year, or ten years, until you’re comfortable with me, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“But... I don’t want you to have to do that,” I say. “I want you to have all your needs met. It’s just like... Like I don’t want to clean, so we’ll hire a maid. I don’t want to have sex, so you can hire someone for that. There’s nothing wrong with sex workers, King. Dad has a club where a bunch of them work. They’re really nice. I’m sure you can find one you like.”

He gives me an incredulous look. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

“Well... Yeah,” I say. “I know you think I’m setting you up or something, but I’m not. I may be inexperienced, but I know men. It’s in your biology. My father might have gotten me a human chastity belt, but he didn’t shield me from much. I’ve been sitting in on poker games since I was five. I’ve heard the talk. I’ve met the kinds of guys who do this job, and you need a way to relieve stress.”

“Stop telling me what I need,” he grits out.

“Sorry. I just mean, *if* you need sex... I’m fine with you getting it. Just don’t tell me all the details. I’ll look the other way.”

“How would you like it if I was over here lecturing you on how much you need sex because it’s natural and biological...”

I shudder, wrapping my arms around myself at how close those words come to the ones I’ve heard before. “You’re right,” I say. “I’m sorry. That was really shitty of me.”

We drive in silence for a while. At last, King moves his hand from my knee to shift, glancing at me from the corner of

his eye. “Maybe we can work through it.”

I snort. “I don’t think so.”

We’re quiet for another minute.

“Okay,” he says at last. “But if you want to work on it... I’m not going to be with anyone else. I want you to know that. Whenever you’re ready to try, I’ll be here. I’m here for you and only you, Eliza. I meant it when I said my vows, and I meant it when I said I’d wait.”

I want to argue, but I can see the man has his pride, and his word is part of that. Still, it seems a waste. He’s so fucking beautiful. When I remember kneeling in front of him, looking up at his body... It was like some kind of marble statue come to life. By the time I’m ready to be intimate, it could be years. He’s in his prime, and I’m holding him back, smothering him with my demons.

Shit. I’m *his* human chastity belt.

“Well, I don’t mind doing what we did last night,” I say. “You can teach me to be better at it. And maybe I can give you a picture to look at for when you need to do it alone.”

He clears his throat and glances at me. “I’d like that very much,” he says, his voice low as his long, warm fingers

cover my knee again.

I turn to the window, hiding the smile that's found its way onto my face. Maybe I can be a good wife after all. I don't have to be his maid or his sex slave. I can be... Something else. Something more than a friend but less than a wife should be. Something... More like a *cumare*, like I said I wanted. I know better than to think the feelings between a mistress and a married man aren't real or deep, so I don't have to pretend I won't feel that for King. And maybe it'll be okay.

Our families want us together. If Dad can forgive the Valentis, why shouldn't I? It's not like I'm forgiving the man who killed Jonathan. I'm forgiving my husband, a man who was only a child when that happened, who wasn't even part of the Valenti family at the time. I'm not betraying my family. I'm doing my duty to them, just like Dad wanted. And one day, surely I'll be ready to have a baby. If I can't have sex, maybe we can have a doctor help out as if I really were unable to conceive naturally. For all I know, I am.

I know it's not ideal, and maybe it's even selfish. I know what people would say. It was a long time ago, I should just get over it. I should go to a shrink. I'm being selfish.

But it's more than a memory, more than something that fucked with my head. I don't even think about it that much, but it's always there, as if it sank into my being, became part of me. It lurks inside me even when I don't feed it with attention or conscious thought. It feeds off me like a parasite, like a cancer, living in every cell that makes up my body. I can't just forget about it, can't get over it and move on, any more than someone with a disease can get over it by willing it away. All I can do is ignore it, not let it control my life, and live hard and outrageously, prove to myself that it doesn't define me.

It only defines one part of me, and that part is hidden and private, tucked away safely, never to be touched or awakened. That part made me a victim. If I don't have those feelings, don't acknowledge that part of me, it can't hurt me, can't make me a victim again. And I won't be a victim. I'm strong now, coated in armor, dipped in the river Styx like Achilles. I have a chink in my armor, but luckily, it's a lot harder to access than my heel. I'm stronger than Achilles, stronger than anyone knows. Strong enough that I don't need sex, even if it is biology. I control my body, not the other way around. And no one controls me.

thirteen

King

“You’re going back to work today, right?” Eliza asks, sitting at the vanity, her hair tumbling to one side as she tilts her head to watch herself put in a big, gold hoop earring.

“Yes,” I say, standing behind her and adjusting my tie in the mirror above her head.

We don’t meet each other’s eyes. Things have been a little different since returning from the honeymoon a few days ago. I can’t tell if they’re better or worse. There’s a wariness in both of us, as if we’re both watching the other from the corner of our eyes, waiting to see our partner’s next move. We tiptoe around the ugly topics, but we haven’t talked since the car ride. I don’t want to keep bringing it up, but how can I not think about it?

What does she mean, it was taken care of? Did her dad find out and kill the guys? Or was he one of the guys, and she doesn’t want me to get myself killed?

I want the bastard to pay. I want to rip out his intestines and shove them back down his throat until he chokes to death.

“Does that bother you?” I ask Eliza, my voice sounding so normal you’d never know I was considering murdering her father.

“Of course not,” she says. “I know how much you men love your work.”

I don’t know what she means by that. Hurting people is not exactly a job I’d say I loved, but I am dedicated to my work, it’s true. I have to be.

“What about you?” I ask, lingering to watch her even after I’ve checked my reflection. Looking the part is important. Appearances reflect on a person’s character, family, and everything else. Eliza is beautiful with or without makeup, but I like that she puts herself together to go out in public, that I’m the only one who sees her bare face.

“I’m not sure,” she says, lightly.

“No plans?”

“Look, I’ve always done whatever I wanted,” she says flatly. “My mom followed her dream, and I’m following mine.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

She stares at me, her lips pursing as she swallows. “For what?”

“That your mom’s not around,” I say. “That she didn’t come to the wedding.”

Eliza drops her gaze and messes with the makeup on her vanity for a few seconds before lifting her face and shaking her hair back, leaning in to powder her skin with a brush. “My mom’s my hero,” she says. “She risked her life to be free and follow her heart. Not many women have the balls to stand up to a mob boss.”

I want to say I’m sorry again, to insist it still sucks for Eliza, but then I hold it back. “She sounds brave,” I say after a second.

“She is,” Eliza says. “And I won’t have any man controlling me, either. I did as my family wanted and married you, and I’ll do what you want when I need to. But no one is going to tell me what to do. I’m going to keep doing what I have been, whatever the fuck I want, and you can’t stop me.”

“Okay...”

“I mean it,” she says. “If you mess with me, if you hurt me, you’ll see just what my father is capable of.”

My stomach turns at that threat. Is he capable of hurting a child the way I suspect, his own daughter no less?

“I’m not interested in being your surrogate father or telling you what to do,” I say. “You’re an adult. We’ve been over this. Act like a married woman when you leave the house, and you can do whatever the fuck you want the rest of the time.”

“Good,” she says. “I just wanted to make sure we’re still clear about that.”

It’s the closest we’ve come to talking about what happened, and I don’t want to push it. After what happened to her, she’s slow to trust, but I’m going to keep showing up for her, showing her that I’m not going to hurt her. Eventually, she’ll learn that I’m a man of my word, that she can let her guard down and let me help her heal. I may have failed the last girl I had to care for, but it won’t happen again. This time, I’ll save her.

I’ve held her the last few nights, but nothing more has happened. It’s funny how I’ve begun to notice other things now that sex is off the table. When I know it’s not coming

later, I can relax and feel physical pleasure apart from sexual pleasure. It's almost deeper, the pleasure I take in her soft, small body curled against mine; the heat and weight of her head when she rests on my arm as I fit my body around hers at night; the buttery smoothness of her skin under my calloused hands. Touching her feels fucking amazing no matter where it is or where it's leading.

But during the day, things are still uncomfortable between us. It's easy at night, when we can talk with our bodies, in the dark. During the day, she's guarded, watching like she's not sure what move I'll make next. I'm no better. I want to take care of her, but she won't let me, and I never know when I'm going to piss her off or what she'll do if that happens. Her father could end my life with the snap of his fingers.

"Well, enjoy your day," I say, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. It's one of those gestures that wasn't planned, but after I do it, it makes something behind my sternum tighten into an ache. That's something a man would do with a wife he's comfortable with, a wife who loves him, who cares whether he comes home that night.

I can't help but want to take care of her, but that doesn't mean the feeling is mutual. I need to remember that and be careful.

When I get to Al Valenti's, his guards check the car, including the trunk and underneath it, as if someone could be clinging to the bottom of the Evija. I almost laugh.

"Gotta check everyone," the guard says, giving me a friendly salute. "Can't be too careful."

"I know," I say, saluting back before heading around to park. Little Al's car is there, too, and after being stopped by two guards at the back door, I'm allowed to enter.

One more guard is stationed outside the dining room where I find Uncle Al, Little Al, and Al's consigliere having lunch.

"There he is," Little Al crows when he sees me, dropping his hoagie and holding out a hand for me to slap. "You been working on your tan?"

I shrug. "I've been at the beach for a week."

"How was Bora Bora?" Uncle Al asks, looking up from his food and fixing those watchful eyes on me. The guy doesn't miss anything.

“You better not have seen any of it,” Little Al says, winking at me and biting into his sandwich. “Why were you on the beach, bro? You should have spent every minute in your hotel room.”

I’ve had about enough of this conversation, so I steer it in a different direction, though I notice Al Valenti watching me like he knows something’s up.

“What’d I miss?” I ask, taking a seat and scooting in next to Little Al.

“Nothing important,” Uncle Al says. “I’m meeting with Anthony Pomponio tonight. If that wife of yours hasn’t checked in with him since the honeymoon, make sure she does that.”

My stomach clenches at the unspoken threat in those words. Make sure she gives him a glowing report of our marriage. Of me.

That’s not gonna happen.

Guilt flares inside me when I think of the last night of our honeymoon, when I all but forced her to suck my cock. She said she’d do it again, that she didn’t mind, but considering her aversion to sexual contact, god knows what

she'll tell her father about me. And if she tells him that I know about the abuse, and he really is the one who hurt her, I'm as good as dead.

Both Als are watching me, and I give my head a little shake to clear it and grab a sandwich off the tray in the middle of the table. "I'll see what I can do."

"Hey, why doesn't he go with you?" Little Al asks his grandfather. "He can give Anthony a first-hand account of the honeymoon."

I want to punch the guy when I see the glimmer of humor in his eyes, like he has some idea that things aren't too peachy between Eliza and me, and he thinks it would be just hilarious for Mr. Pomponio to grill me about my treatment of his daughter. He did seem to know an awful lot about her upbringing when I asked him about her, even the goings-on of her family. Does he know more than he let on? He told me there was no way she had trauma, that she was lying to me.

Was he lying? Maybe they have a history I don't know about. Or maybe he's just being a garden variety asshat and knows exactly how uncomfortable that situation would be. After all, he thinks she was fucking with me about having trauma.

“Not a bad idea,” Uncle Al says.

Is he fucking serious? I could strangle the shit out of Little Al for suggesting it.

But I’m not going to argue. I’m responsible for bringing peace between the families, and if I fail, I always knew what would happen. Might as well get it over with. The question is, will he chop off my head, or just my dick? One thing’s for damn sure. If he’s the one who abused my wife, I’m taking him down before I die. If he’s not, and he’s the one who took care of the guys, then I owe him a debt of gratitude. It’s pissing me off that I don’t know if I should want to murder the guy in the worst way imaginable or thank him. Which means Eliza’s going to have to fucking talk, whether she wants to or not.

Since Uncle Al decided I was a good person to report to Anthony about our honeymoon, and I have a bunch of jobs with Little Al that day, I don’t get a chance to talk to Eliza before meeting him. Which means I’m going in blind. Not only am I not sure if I should want this guy dead, I’m not sure if Eliza did talk to him, and if he wants *me* dead. I’m jumpy as fuck by the time we arrive at *Jean-Jean* in the early afternoon as arranged.

No one else is in the place, as it's a sweet spot between lunch and dinner. A bored-looking college student stands behind the counter, waiting for customers. Uncle Al and I order and take our seats near the windows while two of his men take theirs outside at the table directly on the other side of the glass. They'll see anyone coming in, but we'll have privacy to talk to Anthony Pomponio, who chose the meeting point.

We're halfway through our paninis before Uncle Al speaks. "I'm glad we got here before them," he says. "Gives us a minute to talk."

I nod, my throat tightening. "Oh yeah?"

"How you liking things?" he asks. "You doin' okay?"

"Yes, sir," I say. "Job's good."

"How you liking your partnership with my grandson?"

"Good." Little Al is not my favorite person, but I'm not going to complain to his grandfather, that's for damn sure.

Uncle Al nods, taking a bite before speaking again. "I know he's somethin' else. You kids... This generation." He breaks off and shakes his head, smiling ironically. "I sound like an old man now, don't I?"

“Nah, he is something else,” I agree, and we both laugh.

I’m just starting to relax when he asks, “How’s things with the wife?”

“Fine.”

“Marriage is hard even for people already in love when they start out,” he says, his watchful gaze on my face. “It can take a while to figure out your places, your roles, how you fit together.”

I nod. I’m not used to talking about this kind of thing. The only time Dad talked to me about women was when he needed me to seduce one. But Uncle Al is the closest thing to a confidant I have now, and he’s asking me to open up. Truth is, I’m not exactly equipped to handle all that Eliza told me. I could use some advice.

“It’s been tough,” I admit. “Eliza’s had some hard times. She’s still working through it.”

He shakes his head. “Her brother dying, her mother running off. Can’t be easy.”

I nod, but I’m frustrated as hell. I can’t tell him what happened to her. That’s not my place. But she’s suffered more

than anyone knows. What he's saying, that would be hard on anyone. Abuse on top of that is too much.

"Yeah," I say. "Death's a bitch."

"That's right," Al agrees. "You got some sad history in common."

"I guess so," I say, though mine seems trivial in comparison to hers. My mother didn't leave us, at least not in the physical sense. My sister wasn't murdered.

"How you doing with that?" Al asks, his eyes serious. "Your ma says you took Crystal's disappearance pretty hard. It's only been a few months. You okay?"

I shrug, avoiding his eyes. "Like you said, it's never easy."

"You talk to Eliza about that?"

"No." The last thing she needs is to deal with my shit on top of her own. It's not something I want to dwell on, and she has enough reasons to distrust me and all men. The last thing I need is for her to know that I got my own sister killed. That Dad entrusted me to watch out for her, and I didn't. I left her with her boyfriend. I didn't want to, but I told myself he'd

look after her. But it wasn't his job to watch out for her. It was my job.

I failed. And she died.

It's as simple as that.

Al seems to get that I don't want to talk about that anymore. He wads up his napkin and drops it on the plate before reaching for his coffee. "You settling in since you got home?" he asks. "How's she like the new place?"

I shrug. "To be honest, we haven't spent much time together. Eliza stays up half the night and sleeps half the day, and I'm working all day. When I come home, she's getting ready to go meet her friends. Once we get used to each other's schedule, it'll be easier."

Al cocks a brow and takes a drink of his coffee. "You know, she's not a child or a free woman anymore," he says. "It's not outta line to expect her to act like your wife."

Before I can answer, I see one of Al's guys slump over the table outside.

I don't think. I just act.

I dive across the table, tackling Al and crashing to the floor with him. At the same moment, the sheet of glass

fractures into a million pieces, raining down over the table and the floor around us. Al curses and rolls away, leaping to his feet with his gun already in his hand before I can even scramble up. The dude may be pushing sixty, but he's still fit as fuck and quick on the draw.

He fires as a figure dressed in all black jumps through the window onto our table, a ski mask pulled over his face and a gun with a silencer aimed at us. Outside, I can see two figures on the ground, and the remaining Valenti man aiming to fire again. The masked guy on the table crashes to the floor, and I yank my gun from my belt and release the safety, aiming at the window as two more men duck into view, both of them with guns raised. I pull the trigger without thought, without hesitation, and one of the men falls. A bullet ricochets off a nearby table and buries itself in my thigh, but I hardly feel it. Steadying the gun with one hand, I turn it on the other guy, but he falls before I can squeeze the trigger.

Al pivots toward the edge of the building, where the guys appeared from. We wait, our guns cocked and ready. The only sound is the gurgle from one of the bodies on the floor as he tries to speak. I swing my gun in his direction and squeeze the trigger, putting a bullet in his head before turning back to

the corner. This time, we see the guy edging around the side of the building. I fire, but he ducks back, and I can't tell if I hit him.

Al leaps up onto his chair, takes one step on the table, and is out the window in another. I glance back toward the counter. There's no trace of the guy working there, which means he's smart enough to have ducked behind the counter or gotten the fuck out through a back door when shit started going down. That, or he knew ahead of time.

I don't have time for maybes, though. Leaping onto the table, I propel myself through the window and land in a crouch. Outside, I follow Al around the corner. I scan the area, on full alert.

Al jerks his head in the direction of a black SUV parked on a side street. He creeps toward it, gun at the ready. I follow, a few steps behind him. We're almost to the vehicle when I hear the scuff of a shoe on pavement. I turn and see a man with his hands up, wearing plain clothes instead of the black disguises the others wore.

"Don't shoot," he says. "I ain't involved. I—I got a family. I'm just going to my car."

I almost drop my weapon, but then I see the pile of black clothes discarded behind him in the little nook he stepped out of. In the instant it takes me to glance there and back again, he snatches a gun from his belt. I squeeze the trigger instinctively, without taking the time to aim correctly. The man grunts as the bullet buries itself in his belly. Two gunshots ring out at the same moment. A bullet grazes my shoulder, and one makes a hole right in the center of his forehead, so clean and crisp it almost looks fake. He crumples to the ground, and I turn to see Al behind me.

He grabs my arm and hustles me down the street and into his car. We sit there for a minute, both of us breathing hard and cursing plenty.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask after a minute.

Al claps a hand on my shoulder. “That was your first shootout, son.”

I start laughing like a fucking idiot, and I know Al’s going to think I’m unfit for the Life and put a bullet between my eyes like I’ve got a fucking bull’s eye painted on my forehead, but I can’t stop even when I try. Al looks at me for a second, and then he throws his head back and starts laughing, too. We

just sit in his SUV letting out big guffawing belly laughs that make us look like we're crying like a couple of pussies.

Finally, Al wipes his eyes and shakes his head. "You know, I fucking needed that right now, King," he says, turning on the car and lowering the visor against the afternoon sun. "You're a good kid."

"You get hit?" I ask.

"Not a scratch."

I wipe my face, then pull off my shirt to wrap my arm where I got hit. My thigh hurts like the devil, but it doesn't seem to be losing much blood. I use my tie to secure my shirt in place around my shoulder, then press my palm down on my thigh, gritting out curses until I get used to the pressure.

He's got blood splattered all over him, but he shakes his head. "How bad's that one?"

"Didn't even feel it," I admit. The adrenaline was too much. The pain's only now setting in.

We drive in silence for a minute, back toward home. My stomach knots up, and I glance at Al from the corner of my eye. "Was that a set-up?"

“Had to be,” he says. “It isn’t like Anthony to be so sloppy, sending guys in broad daylight. He’s making a statement.”

“Fuck,” I say, clenching my hand around the door handle. This must be my fault. Eliza told him that she’d told me, and he didn’t want anyone knowing what kind of sick pervert he is, so he came after us.

I shouldn’t say anything, it will spell my doom, but Al should know why. I have to know for sure before I tell him, though. “How fast can you get me home?”

Al grimaces. “Not fast enough, kid. If he went after us, the deal is off. He won’t have made a move without getting his daughter out first. If he did, she’d be left to answer for it.”

“She told me some things he probably doesn’t want me to know,” I admit quietly. “That must be why they attacked.”

Uncle Al doesn’t say anything for a long minute. He’s probably deciding whether to dump me in the river while we’re out.

“Did you tell her about this meeting?” he asks at last. “Or anyone else?”

“I told her to call her father.”

The Life is my life now. I don't have friends here, or a girlfriend, or anyone I would tell besides Eliza. I probably would have given her more detail if it had been scheduled for a few days from now, but I only sent her a text after Al told me she should put in a good word for me.

"You weren't even supposed to come along on this," Al says. "They might not have known you were coming. Or they could have been planning it before we decided to involve you. They're not going to pass up a chance to knock down one of the families if they can get me alone."

"Maybe." He's definitely a more desirable target than me. As Eliza likes to remind me, I'm no one. But I did tell her we were meeting today. It was vague, but she could have found out from her father.

Fuck. A funny little knot forms in my belly. Does she hate me enough to have set this up herself? I thought we were past that, but maybe she was faking it. I've seen how good an actor she is. And she loves to talk about her obsession with freedom. What better way to attain it than to get rid of the one person she perceives as an obstacle?

"So, Eliza knew we were meeting," I say. "She could have found out the time and place when she talked to her

father. Some of the Pomponios obviously knew. On our side, there's the two of us, your consigliere, and Little Al."

My mind circles back to my "innocent" little wife, who I put on the Pomponio's side without even thinking. Did she try to fucking kill me?

Rage swells inside my chest, closing off everything else, even the pain throbbing in my shoulder. If she did this...

This week, the house was a fucking disaster of dirty dishes and takeout boxes and wine bottles from her friends coming over and hanging out all day. When I told her to clean up after herself, she said she wasn't a fucking maid. And when I told her to hire one, she looked at me with these big, dumb eyes and said, "I don't know how to hire a maid."

I let it go, even though I wanted to tell her to figure it out. After what she's been through, she probably insists on having her own way in everything because in that one thing, she had no choice. Or maybe I'm a fucking gullible idiot.

I know she's not dumb. She may not know how to hire a maid, but I'd bet she knows how to hire hitmen.

"Look, kid," Al says as we approach my place. "I know you're blaming yourself, but Anthony wouldn't do

something like this just because his daughter complained. He might come talk to you, and if you were hurting her, he'd hurt you. But he wouldn't come after both of us like that—not for a personal matter. This has business written all over it.”

“I'll call Eliza,” I say. After confirming that she's home with her friends like usual and not off with the Pomponio's waiting to hear if their assassination plot worked, I hang up and text her bodyguard, who says everything's been quiet at home. Eliza hasn't gone out since this morning when she visited the salon. That puts my mind at ease a bit, and I relay the news to Uncle Al.

“It don't look good,” he says. “The Pomponios don't show up, and we get ambushed? It's got all the makings of a setup. I just don't know yet, kid. Why come after us, knowing the war would be back on? And why leave Eliza with you?”

“To throw us off,” I say. “To make us think it wasn't them.”

“I don't see the benefit,” Al says, frowning at the road ahead.

“Who benefits from our families going back to war?” I ask, turning to him.

He nods slowly, his eyes narrowing as he thinks through the possibilities. “One of the other families. Luciani’s messy like this.”

I nod, hoping it’s that and not Anthony, even though I don’t believe it. Anthony set the meeting up, and then he tried to kill us. Is he so confident that I’d be dead after the attack that he didn’t bother getting his daughter out?

Of course he is. I’m the new kid, green as fuck, with no experience. What chance do I have of making it out alive when a half dozen seasoned killers ambush us?

Uncle Al pulls up to my building and scans the area before stopping. “Let me worry about this,” he says. “You take care of that shoulder and leg. Have your wife take a look at them. I know a man has his pride, but don’t be too proud to let her take care of you when you need it. It might help things between you.”

I don’t think looking weak in front of Eliza, being at her mercy, is going to make things better, but I nod and thank him before reaching for the door handle.

“Oh, and King?” Al says, putting a hand on my good shoulder.

I turn back.

“Thanks,” he said. “You saved my life back there. I won’t forget that.”

“I just did what anyone would do,” I say before climbing out of the car.

As much as I’d like to take the credit, I’m no hero. I acted on instinct alone. And in the end, when there was one guy left, I shot too soon. I was sloppy the whole time. But it’s nice of Al not to mention that, to focus on the one thing I did right, even if it’s not entirely true. I pushed him to the floor when the first shot came, but that doesn’t mean it would have killed him. Hell, if it was Eliza’s doing, the shooter wasn’t even aiming for him.

I ask the doorman for a report, since he’s Al’s man, and thinking my wife is trying to kill me has me a little paranoid. Her bodyguard came with her. He’s on my payroll now, but he might retain ties and loyalties to the Pomponio’s. After hearing the doorman confirm the details Eliza’s bodyguard already gave, I head upstairs.

fourteen

Eliza

The door of our penthouse swings open, and King stands there with a shirt tied around his shoulder and a limp when he takes a step inside. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what happened. Someone shot him, and I should be used to that, living the life I do. I *am* used to it. But I'm suddenly, horribly ashamed. This is my husband. He could have died. And he was never anything to me but someone to fuck with, to push his buttons and see if he'd snap. I don't know the first thing about him. I never tried. Our marriage has been nothing but a game to me.

“King,” I say, going to him and pushing the door closed behind him. “Let me look at that.”

To my surprise, he jerks away when I try to touch him. “What did you do?” he asks, his voice harsh and cold.

“Me?” I recoil, my mind racing through possibilities.

“I asked you to talk to your father,” he grits out. “What did you tell him, Eliza?”

“What are you talking about?” I ask. “I did call him. We talked about the honeymoon and the apartment, and he said you were meeting at *Jean-Jean*...”

King stares into my eyes with so much hatred it makes me shrink inside. “And then his men fucking shot me,” he says. “I had to fucking kill someone today, Eliza. Do you know what that feels like? Do you think I like doing this shit? No, but I do it because I’m your fucking husband, and that’s what’s expected of me. It’s my fucking job. And it’s your job to be my wife, not get me fucking killed.”

I nod mutely, not daring to speak. His fury makes me tremble all the way to my core. He vibrates with it, with rage and danger, a force I can’t begin to fight. I know he’s in pain, and the sooner he’s out of it, the sooner he’ll be thinking clearly.

Before I have a chance to figure out a response, he pushes past me and limps into the bedroom. I hear him cursing, and maybe I should be afraid, but I’ve done this shit too many times. I sigh and head into the room after him.

“Let me look at your injuries,” I say.

“Oh, now you fucking care?” he snaps, kicking his shoes off and pushing them under the edge of the bed.

“I know you’re in pain,” I say. “So just let me look.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he grits out. With that, he goes into the bathroom and closes the door in my face.

Yeah, well, fuck him, too.

I wish I could walk away, but some part of me knows I can’t. I’m bound to this stubborn asshole forever. I try the door, but it’s locked.

“Come on, King. I didn’t tell my dad to put a hit on you,” I say. “I told him you were fine on the honeymoon, and that everything was good with us.”

He’s quiet for a minute, though I can hear him rummaging in the drawers. “Why would you say that?” he asks at last.

“Because that’s what we said we were going to tell people,” I remind him. “I know there’s no way out of this, King. I know we have to be married and have a baby. So, tell me what happened, and I can help you.”

“I don’t need help,” he says. “It’s just a scratch.”

I roll my eyes. Men and their pride.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll make coffee.”

I turn and walk away, knowing he'll have to give in sooner or later. That, or his pride will kill him when he bleeds to death.

Then would I be free?

I'm ashamed at the thought, but I follow it, anyway. It hasn't been long enough for me to play grieving widow. Dad would just marry me off to someone else, and that someone might not be as understanding as King. I got lucky with him. I should have shown him that this week instead of clinging to this stupid idea of my independence when he's not even trying to stop me from having that. Old habits die hard, I guess. I spent my whole life thinking marriage was a trap. That doesn't go away overnight.

That, or what happened in Bora Bora seems too good to be true, so good it can't be real. I was sure he'd change his mind once we got home, and I had to make sure he didn't. And now all I've made sure of is that he thinks I hate him enough to get him killed.

Good one, Eliza.

When I finish making coffee, I go back into the bedroom. King is sitting on the edge of the bed in a pair of boxer shorts. He's taped a bandage on his shoulder, but blood

is already soaking through. He's looking down at his thigh, where a nasty hole is leaking blood.

"Decaf," I tell him, handing over the cup of coffee with just a dash of cream.

"What's the point of decaf coffee?" he grumbles, but he takes the cup. He sets it aside without taking a drink, so I sip mine to reassure him. I feel like shit that he honestly thinks I'd poison him.

"The point is, I don't want to give you anything that's going to make you bleed more," I say, setting my cup down and sitting beside him. I touch his bicep below the wound in his shoulder. "You know that's not going to stop bleeding until you stitch it up."

He shrugs. "It might take longer, but eventually it'll heal."

"You don't know how to sew it up, do you?"

"I'm righthanded," he says, flexing the hand on the side of his wounded shoulder.

I roll my eyes. "So stop being a stubborn ass and let me help you."

King studies me for a minute, until I'm squirming with discomfort and wishing I hadn't said anything about his arm at all.

"Why would you do that?" he asks after what feels like an eternity.

I sigh. "Because you're hurt, and I'm a very nice person."

King looks at me for another long moment, like he's trying to figure me out. "You're going to drop some poison into my blood while you stitch me up, aren't you?"

"Don't give me ideas," I say lightly.

I pick up his cup, though, taking a drink from that one in case he thinks I only poisoned his. Then I wash up and grab my surgical kit. I want to tell him the truth, but he's so angry. And I don't know what he does when he's angry. There's ammunition in the truth—that I can't stand to see anyone hurting, that I'm softer than anyone in this business should be, that I respect him and all the men who do the jobs that have to be done every day.

King watches dubiously while I open my bag and spread out my instruments. "Why do you have that?"

“Oh, I used to stitch up my dad and his guys all the time,” I say with a shrug. “I mean, we have a doctor on the payroll. I’m not that good. But I can do little stuff.” While I talk, I set a towel on the bed and settle onto my knees beside him. When I pull off the bandage on his shoulder, he doesn’t react outwardly. But when I start to clean the wound with alcohol, I see the muscle in his jaw tense as he clenches his teeth. He’s human, after all.

“That’s why you offered, isn’t it?” he asks, staring straight ahead with a stone face. “You know it hurts like a son of a bitch.”

“I don’t hate you,” I say. “I thought you knew that.”

“Since when?” he asks through gritted teeth.

“Since our honeymoon,” I say. “I know it wasn’t the honeymoon most people have, but it wasn’t all bad, was it?”

He lets out a little snort of breath.

“Okay, maybe it was all bad for you,” I say. “But I thought you knew that I didn’t hate you after that. You were really cool about the whole thing.”

This time, I get a whole grunt in response.

“Maybe cool is the wrong word,” I concede. “My point is, even though you weren’t happy about it, you helped me when I needed it. So let me help you now.”

He looks away. “I didn’t help you,” he mutters.

“You’re wrong,” I say. “You might not know it, but I do. And I’m sorry I haven’t shown it this week. I just... I was sure you’d try to make me into something I’m not. I know what mafia wives have to put up with. So I was making sure you knew I wasn’t giving up my friends or my life. But I’ll do more around here. I live here, too.”

“I don’t expect you to be the maid,” he says, watching me run the thread through his skin.

“I know,” I say. “But I can hire one.”

“I thought you didn’t know how.”

“I’m sure I can figure it out,” I say, tying off the ends of the thread and sitting back. “All fixed up.”

“Yeah,” he says, still glowering at the window. “Thanks.”

So, I may be able to bandage a wound, but I can’t fix what’s wrong with his head. And that’s okay. I don’t expect

him to fix me, either. I smile at that thought. There's way too fucking much wrong with me to fix.

"What are you smiling at?" he asks after a second.

I dart a quick glance at him. I didn't know he was looking.

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head as I reach for the bandages to cover the gnarly stitching. "I was just thinking I could fix you, but I don't think anyone could do that."

"You're probably right about that," he says after a pause.

"And that's okay," I say. "I won't try to fix you if you don't try to fix me. Deal?"

He hesitates again, grinding his teeth back and forth. Finally he nods. "Deal," he says, but he doesn't sound very happy about it.

"This one's going to hurt more for a minute, but it won't last as long," I say, reaching for the needle-nosed pliers. "Lay down."

He swings his legs up onto the bed and crosses his arms over his chest. I straddle his shins and lean down over the bullet that's still lodged in his quad.

“Maybe we don’t need to fix each other,” I say as I work. “We can just learn to live with the broken pieces.”

He sucks in a breath when I hit the end of the bullet. We share a minute of silence as I carefully dig to get a grip on it. “I remember the first time I did this,” I say with a little laugh. “I must have been, like, eight. I woke up in the middle of the night, and I heard all this screaming and yelling, so I went to see what it was all about. Daddy was hauling my uncle in, and he was cussing like... Like no eight-year-old should hear.” I break off, shaking my head.

King doesn’t speak, so I go on.

“He was shot in the back of his leg, below the knee. A few other guys were there, too, but they couldn’t get the bullet out because Uncle Bert kept kicking every time they started digging for it. But then Daddy saw I was up, and that I’d seen all the blood already, and heard all the cussing, and I hadn’t run screaming. And I had tiny fingers that could get in the bullet hole and get the bullet when no one else could.” I laugh softly and deposit the bullet onto my tray. “My mom was so pissed when she found out.”

It’s been so long since I thought about that night. Sewing up injuries just became part of my life at some point

soon after that, when Mom split.

King doesn't say anything, but I know he's listening. He's watching me with... Something new in his eyes. Respect, maybe. I realize that's like the longest conversation I've had with my husband about the way I was raised. I don't really know anything about his life, either. Suddenly, I feel weird about having shared that memory, as impersonal as it is.

I get the needle ready to sew up the tiny opening from the bullet. "Just a few more stitches," I say. "You can keep that bullet as a souvenir. I hear it's memorable—the first time being shot."

I glance up at him, and see his eyes are glassy with pain. He's been amazingly still considering the pain he's in. The injuries are pretty minor, but they've gotta hurt like hell itself. I respect him for his stoic response. Once, I told him that he had to earn my respect, but I didn't think much about him respecting me. I assumed no mafia man really respects his wife, but King's not like most of the men I know. I'm proud to have earned his respect tonight, and more than happy to give him mine. It's hard not to respect a guy who barely winces after being shot.

He jerks when I poke the needle into him, but he doesn't say anything. When I dart a glance at him, he's laid his head back on the pillow, eyes closed, nostrils flared.

"Want me to shut up?" I ask, putting in another stitch.

"No," he grits out. "Keep talking."

I want to ask him about his life, but he probably doesn't want to talk right now, so I try to think of something else to say. "My friend Bianca thinks you're hot," I say, remembering her teasing this morning at the salon.

That thought brings me to the conversation I had with Dad on the phone while I was there, which leads me back to King's accusation.

"I know you think this was a setup, but that's because someone wanted you to think that," I say. "Someone who wants us to stay at war. If it was my dad, he would have gotten me out before anything went down. Trust me, King. He would think of me."

I have no doubt about that. He's always thinking of me, even in this marriage that seemed like a curse. I may not have seen it at first, but now I do. Now I know he gave me what I needed, that he was thinking of not just an alliance with the

Valentis, but of my happiness. He didn't want me to be left a widow at twenty-five, so he gave me someone young. He didn't want me to be in the heart of danger at all times, didn't want my husband to be in the most dangerous positions, so he gave me a soldier. He didn't want me to marry someone callous and unfeeling, so he gave me someone new to the Life.

So, who would want to shoot at the Valentis besides my father?

Well, that answer is too easy. Everyone.

“Our families made an alliance, but that doesn't mean the other families are all going to be peaceful forever,” I say. “And for all we know, someone thought both Anthony and Al were in there. They could have meant those bullets for both our families.”

King nods, his brow knitting into a frown.

“It could have been random, someone who just saw Al going in and took the opportunity.”

“It wasn't random,” King says. “They were wearing ski masks. They had silencers. It was premeditated.”

I nod and carefully place a bandage over his wound. “Does anyone want you dead? If we can rule that out, we'll

know they came for Al.”

King pauses, his eyes searching mine. “Did you tell your dad that I know about the abuse?”

“No,” I say, scowling at him. “Why would I tell him that?”

He looks at the window again. “I thought... Maybe he’d come after me if I knew.”

I sit back on my heels. “What? Why?”

He gives me a long look, until the realization sets in.

“I told you it wasn’t him,” I snap. “My father would never do that to me. He loves me. I know what people say about him, and when it comes to women, maybe it’s true. But what’s he supposed to do, be celibate for the rest of his life because his wife won’t talk to him? And maybe he had his little things on the side before that, but it’s not like they were happy, anyway. It was arranged, just like this. My mom never loved him, never wanted him.”

We stare at each other for a long minute, and I realize I’ve said way too much. He doesn’t need to know all that about my family.

“Like you,” he says quietly. “That’s why you think I’m going to fuck around. Because you don’t want me, the same way your mom didn’t want your dad. And that’s what he did.”

I raise my chin and glare at him. “He’s a good dad, King. As good as he could be, under the circumstances. He had plenty of girlfriends, yeah, but he’d never, ever lay a finger on me.”

“Okay,” he says.

For a minute, we sit there in silence, our wills battling each other. I need him to know that I’d never lie about that, that my father is a good man, even if he’s also a violent monster with a temper when it comes to his job. But never to me. To me, he was the stressed out, overworked dad who had so many obligations that he had to choose between leaving me with more nannies in the evenings or taking me along. I wanted to be with him, and he loved me, so he made the choice that maybe wasn’t ideal, but it’s the one that made me happy.

He chose to take me along, hence the poker games and emergency meetings to talk strategy, the bullet removals at two in the morning, and the certainty that he would never, ever leave me behind if our families were going to war. He

wouldn't send guys to do a job in broad daylight. He'd never have his men cover their faces with masks, either. King may not be convinced, but I can say with complete confidence that this was not my father's doing.

"You can get cleaned up now," I say. "But try not to get it wet for a few days."

"I guess it's good you fixed me up," King says, swinging his legs off the bed. "I'd probably have gotten blood on the sheets."

The image catches in my mind, the comments people made about our wedding night. I'm the one who's supposed to bleed on the sheets. Maybe he's thinking the same thing, because he quickly stands and heads for the bathroom to clean up while I put my things away.

He stops in the doorway of the bathroom, turning back. "Eliza?" he says.

"Hmm," I say, not looking at him as I set aside the bloody instruments that need disinfecting.

"Thank you."

I shrug. "It's nothing."

Our eyes meet, and his dark gaze is so intense it makes me squirm. “It’s something.”

This time, I’m the one who looks away. Sometimes it feels like those espresso eyes pierce straight into my soul.

He hesitates a moment, then steps into the bathroom and closes the door. I’m glad he’s gone, that he doesn’t see me close my eyes to collect myself, doesn’t guess at the shivery, fluttery feeling turning my insides all around.

It’s been a long day, and an even longer evening, and I decide to just go to bed and be done with it. A while later, King comes out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. I close my eyes and pretend to sleep, but tonight I peek through my lashes. King’s not especially modest, but he doesn’t parade around naked in front of me, either. I’ve only ever seen him naked once, and I’m ready for more.

His hair is wet and his body clean, little droplets of water clinging to his skin where he washed, lit up by the golden light filtering into the bedroom from the open bathroom door. He glances at me as if to check if I’m sleeping before he drops the towel and turns to the dresser. He has a scar on his side, above his hip, and if I had to guess, I’d say

it's less than a year old. It looks like another bullet wound, though he didn't correct me when I said today was his first. It makes me wonder because I thought he was new to the Life. I watch the curve of his ass, how nicely muscled his butt is, the strong, lean muscles of his thighs. When he turns away from the dresser, I can just see the shape of his cock hanging down, and it makes butterflies explode inside my belly.

I had that inside my mouth. Warmth shimmers through my lower belly, and my mouth puckers with saliva just looking at the shape of it. Even when it's not hard, I can see he's big. And not just big, but nice looking, all smooth and straight and well-groomed. I wish the light was on, that I could see more. I know I shouldn't, that I'm spying, but it makes my heart race in a familiar, exciting way. It's all I can do not to let out a sigh of disappointment when he pulls on a pair of sweats, wincing when he drags them up over his injured thigh.

A minute later, he sinks onto the edge of the bed and strokes my hair back with his good hand. "Eliza?" he whispers. "You awake?"

I don't move, don't answer. I let my lids relax closed so he won't see a glint between my lashes. My heart is beating so loud in my ears I think he'll hear it, that he'll know I'm

awake, that I was watching, that butterflies are swarming in my belly and warmth coiling beneath it.

He leans down and presses his lips gently to my forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm so fucking sorry about everything."

Without waiting for an answer, he gets up and walks out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

fifteen

King

I'm standing in the kitchen looking out over the neighborhood when I hear footsteps behind me. The August sun is murky in the east, the heat visible over the buildings even at eight in the morning, but I turn away, spinning around fast enough that my coffee sloshes out of the mug.

“You're jumpy this morning,” Eliza says, giving me a little smirk. She picks up the coffee pot and pours some into one of the tiny teacups we got for our wedding.

“Someone tried to kill me yesterday,” I say, grabbing a hand towel to wipe up the drops I spilled on the floor.

“I'll get a maid today,” Eliza says, gesturing around the kitchen, which I cleaned up last night after she went to bed.

“Is that why you're up so early?”

“You're working today?” she asks, watching me adjust my tie. It's too hot for this shit even with the air on. There's not enough AC in the Bronx to cool a penthouse apartment on a day like today.

“Do you need me for something?” I ask.

“No,” she says, her voice light. “It’s just... You’re shot.”

“I work every day,” I point out. “Did you want me to help you interview for the maid position?”

“I’ll figure it out,” she says. “I’m meeting Bianca for lunch, anyway. I need to ask her about something.”

I watch her swallow a mouthful of coffee, her cognac eyes meeting mine over the rim of the cup. She smiles shyly, and a twist of guilt tugs inside me. After she stitched me up last night, I cleaned up and then turned in, staying on my side of the king bed, with an ocean of space between us. I wanted to hold her, but I didn’t know how she’d react to that after I basically accused her of trying to kill me.

So instead of holding her like I have for the past week, I lay there alone, thinking about what she said about me finding a woman on the side. I know my frustration with not getting laid is getting to me, but I’m not about to hire a prostitute like it’s the same as hiring a maid. Not when my wife sleeps next to me. But I can’t push her to do something she doesn’t want, either. I shouldn’t want her for more than

what a whore could give me, for more than fulfilling a basic need. I shouldn't need more. But I do.

And the fucked up part is, I'm never going to get it. Not from her. But I can't even conceive of taking a mistress because my wife has been abused. If I was a better man, I'd wait forever with nothing but patience and understanding. I'm trying. I want to be that man. But in truth, I'm frustrated as hell. I want to fuck my wife. And not the way it would be now, with her lying there stiff as a board and shaking, letting me get off on her like she's a blowup doll. I want her to want me. I want her to grab me when I walk in the door and start ripping my clothes off. I want to throw her down and ravish her, make her cum with my name on her lips and my cock so deep inside her she can't remember her own.

And then I feel like a piece of shit for wanting those things from a girl who's had those things stolen from her. I'm a selfish bastard for thinking it, but those things have been taken from me now, too. I can't even make my wife feel good. I can't kill the sick bastards who took those experiences from us, either, because she's protecting them. If it's not her dad, then who? And why is she protecting them?

“What?” she asks, jerking me back to reality. I realize I’ve been staring right through her for two minutes straight.

“Have fun today,” I say. I set my cup in the sink and turn away, but her arms snake around me before I can take a step.

She drops her cup in the sink, the coffee splattering against the stainless steel as she squeezes me hard, like she thinks she could crush me with her tiny arms. She presses her cheek to my back. “Be careful,” she says quietly.

I pry her arms loose and turn to face her, wrapping my arms around her gently. “I will.”

She stands on tiptoes, lifting her face to mine and looping an arm behind my neck. She pulls me down for a kiss, and I’m so surprised I don’t even react for a second. She’s about to drop back onto her heels when I grip her tighter against me, cradling her head in my palm and kissing her harder. I want her so much I think I’ll explode from a single kiss, and I have to rein myself in to keep from backing her against the table, spreading her legs, and devouring her.

I kiss her gently instead, my lips pressing against her soft ones, and fuck, she’s so soft, so delicate, it makes me ache. I want to hold her like a fragile flower, never bruise her

petals. When she opens her lips, I almost don't want to taste her deeper. It will only make it worse.

But I'm weak, and I slide my tongue between her lips, taking everything she'll give me. She shivers against me, and I pull her closer even though she's already flush against me. I can feel her soft tits pressing into my abs with each breath she takes, can feel her pulse fluttering like a moth trapped against a windowpane when my thumb caresses the side of her throat. She makes a soft sound of pleasure into my mouth, halfway between a moan and a whimper, and I come undone. Before my brain catches up, I've slid my hand down over her curves, cupping her ass and grinding my hips against hers.

She breaks off, her eyes flying wide. "You're hard," she whispers.

I curse and jerk away from her so fast she stumbles back, catching herself on the wall that separates the kitchen and dining area. She's staring at me like... Well, like I'm the asshole who just ground my cock up against her after she told me she didn't like to be touched, that she'd been molested, that she didn't want me that way.

I sink back against the counter and rake both hands through my hair and grip handfuls of it, squeezing my eyes

shut and trying to get my raging hard-on under control. I should never have let myself kiss her back. I should have known she makes me lose my fucking mind when she touches me. She deserves someone else, someone better, someone who can control himself and doesn't act like the horny teenager he is.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I wasn't expecting that. It wasn't a *bad* thing. I was just surprised. Don't be embarrassed."

"I'm not fucking embarrassed," I say, lifting my head. Ashamed, yes. Not embarrassed.

"You're not?"

"And why would you be surprised?" I go on, too pissed at myself to hold back. "I haven't had sex in months, and I sleep next to you every night, and you're about the most beautiful, desirable, irresistible woman I've ever seen, and I can't have you. So yeah, kissing you makes me hard, and if that makes me a fucking monster, then that's what I am."

She stares at me another minute, the air so still between us that I can hear the honk of a car on the street below, a dog barking, someone yelling. "You still want me?" she asks at last. "In that way? How?"

“Did you not hear the part about how you married a monster?” I ask, pushing away from the counter.

“It’s just... After what I told you, I didn’t think you’d see me like that. You were looking at me like I was damaged goods. Something to be pitied. Not...”

“Not fucked?” I ask.

She swallows, dropping her gaze.

“That *happened* to you, but it’s not you,” I say. “It doesn’t change how much I want you. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t see you like that, as sexy, and I know that. You don’t want to be anyone’s sex object. I know seeing you that way makes me no better than the people who did that to you, so I guess I’m not.”

She just stares at me with those clear, whiskey eyes all wide and shocked, like she’s just realizing what she’s stuck with for the rest of her life. I can’t stand it any longer, so I turn away and go to our bedroom. I grab my gun, check the chamber and the safety, and shove it into my belt. When I turn, Eliza is lingering in the doorway.

I don’t want to push her aside, but I can’t be here with her. I thought I could be a better man, that I could do this job

and still be a good man, but now I know that being a good man has nothing to do with this job. I thought the sum total of a man's worth was whether he chooses right or wrong more often, but maybe it's not. Maybe it's a single moment, a single choice. The choice to hurt a little girl. The choice to stay even knowing you can't be anything other than what you are, or to walk away before you hurt someone who's already been hurt more than anyone should.

We stand there staring at each other for a long minute. My chest tightens, my throat, my hold on myself. I lost myself for a minute, lost sight of what I had to do.

"Say something," she says softly, an edge of pleading in her voice.

"I'm going to work," I say. "When I get home, you should be gone."

"What?" she asks, her eyes widening with shock and... Hurt.

I swallow before forcing the words out. No one ever said doing the right thing was easy. Usually, it's the opposite.

"You should go home," I say.

"I am home."

“Back to your father. If he’s not the one who hurt you, that’s where you’ll be safest. You shouldn’t be here. I’m not safe.”

“You’re wrong,” she says, stepping into the room.

I move away, edging toward the door. But then I stop. I won’t run like a coward. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I thought I could be the man you deserve. You deserve someone who thinks only of you, not himself. But I’m not that man.”

“I never asked for a saint,” she says. “And don’t tell me what I deserve.”

“You deserve love,” I say simply.

“And you can’t do that?” she asks. It’s the hope in her voice, her eyes, that destroys me. I promised I’d never hurt her by letting her love me. I let this go way too far. It’s time to stop it before I hurt her more. Because I will. I press my lips together, my sternum aching like I just took a punch to it, and I shake my head.

It’s not what I want. What I want to do is close the distance between us, sweep her into my arms, and kiss her. But then what? Then I’ll want more, and she’ll feel bad that she can’t give it, and I’ll resent her and hate myself more. I’ve

fucked up so many times, but I don't want to be the same man I was six months ago. I want to learn from my mistakes, to see more clearly. I couldn't save my sister. I couldn't save Eliza from what happened to her before we met. But I can save her now. I can save her from myself.

“Tell your father you want an annulment,” I say. “We never consummated the marriage, so it should be easy enough. Tell him I can't get it up or whatever you have to say to get out of it. Al owes me, so he'll be okay with it. He'll find someone else, someone better for you, so the families will still be united. And it'll be like this never happened.”

She opens her mouth like she's going to argue, but then she closes it. She blinks a few times, swallows, then nods. “Okay. If that's what you want.”

It's the last thing in the world I want, but it's what she needs.

I stand there for a minute, not knowing what to do, how to say goodbye. Or maybe the truth is that I don't want to say goodbye at all. I've never cared about a girl the way I care about her.

At last, I hold out a hand. “It's been an honor being your husband.”

She stares at my hand, then turns her face up to mine, her eyes flashing. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? You want me to shake your hand?”

I drop my hand, not sure what else to do.

“You know what?” she says. “Fuck you, King. This isn’t about what I deserve. This is about the fact that you can’t handle what I told you, and you’re weak like all men, and you can’t survive without having someone to stick your dick in. I told you to get a mistress. It’s not my fault you’re too proud.”

My own temper starts to rise, but I hold it down. This is my fucking fault for falling for her. I wasn’t supposed to care. But I got so caught up in how I could protect her that I didn’t protect my own heart, and now I’m fucking paying for it. My one consolation is that she shows very few signs of returning those feelings. I can handle the pain if I know I did right by her.

“You’re right,” I say. “You’re right about everything.”

“Ugh,” she says. “You’re impossible.”

“Goodbye, Eliza.” I twist off my wedding ring and set it gently on her vanity.

Then I turn and walk out of the bedroom. I hear a shoe hit the wall, and she yells after me, “Don’t worry, I’ll be gone when you get home, and you won’t have to deal with my shit ever again!”

I wince, every instinct telling me to turn around, to go back and tell her it’s going to be okay, that it isn’t her fault, that it’s not about her at all. It’s about the fact that I fail, and it’s better to just get it over with now than wait until she cares. I close my eyes and take a breath. “That would probably be best,” I mutter before opening the apartment door and walking out.

sixteen

Eliza

After King leaves, I flop down on the bed and stare at the ceiling. Things were just starting to get better between us. I thought we really had a moment last night, when he let me take care of him. But apparently, that just made him feel weak, and now he's run off to probably find some slut who will want to fuck him all the time and make him feel like a man again.

I roll over and shove my face in a pillow and scream in frustration. Because I know that's totally unfair. A girl who wants to fuck him isn't a slut, she's normal. I mean, look at the guy. What girl wouldn't want to fuck him all day, every day? Even I halfway want to fuck him, and I've never wanted to fuck anyone. I mean, I've never even gotten wet for a guy before him.

Sure, I made out with a bunch of guys in high school, but it wasn't about getting turned on. It was sort of for the rush of saying no, of knowing I was the one in control this time. Kissing boys let me explore that while knowing I was safe,

that if anyone ever didn't want to stop, I had a safety net in the form of a two-hundred-pound bodyguard with a gun.

But King... God, what is wrong with me? I had someone good, someone who was trying to help me, and I fucked it all up. No wonder he wants out of this. He deserves someone who wants to fuck him, someone who lets him fuck her, not a frigid mental case like me. I know that. That's why I let him walk out like that.

And maybe I knew he would. Some part of me has been waiting for it all along. Not so I could be free—in truth, what do I need with freedom? To party and get drunk?—but because I knew that he wouldn't stay. If my own mother wouldn't stay, why would anyone else?

I roll off the bed and storm around the apartment throwing shit until I feel better. If King wants me gone, fine. I'll leave his fucking ass just like he wants. Of course that's what he wants. He wants someone like Lizzie, who knows what she's doing, who owns her body and her sexuality and drowns him in it. So let him go find her. I'm fucking done.

I pack my bags, throwing everything in without folding it. I leave my wedding dress in the closet. Let him look at it for the rest of his life the way I had to look at his ring today.

I'm startled by a knock, and when I look at the time, I realize it's already time for my lunch date with Bianca. I sigh and open the door.

She comes strutting in with her bag swinging on her wrist and her heels clicking on the floor, only to pull up short. "Damn," she says. "Did a hurricane come through here last night or were you and that delicious man of yours fucking on every surface of the apartment?"

I snort. "Hardly. We got in a fight."

"Makeup sex, then?" she asks, wiggling her brows. "How is he, anyway?"

"Ask me tomorrow, and I might have a better answer for you."

"That bad?" she asks, looking delighted. "Oooh, let's burn his clothes."

"Tempting," I say. "But I can't do that."

"Why not?" she asks. "What happened? Did *you* fuck up?"

I look at her eager face, just waiting for the juicy gossip, and I know I can't tell her. Bianca isn't the kind of friend you tell your darkest secrets. And even though I didn't

mean to tell King, I did. And somehow, that made us better friends. Or so I thought. In truth, it just scared him away. I expected him to think I was tainted, even to pity me so much he couldn't think of me in a sexy way because every time he tried, he just thought about me being molested and lost his desire. I didn't think he'd still want me. And stupid me, I had to open my big mouth and bring it up.

God, I'm a fucking idiot.

But there's no way I can tell Bianca any of that.

I can't tell her that I've changed my mind, that being on my own isn't the best thing in the world. I've had a tiny taste of it today, and all it tastes like is loneliness and regret. I told myself that's what I wanted, to be a young widow, free of all obligations, but it was just an excuse to keep people at bay, to keep anyone from getting close enough to know the truth. Now that someone knows it... In a way, I was relieved. For a moment, I didn't have to carry the burden on my own. For a moment, someone knew even the worst parts of me, and he helped me hold up the sky.

Until he fucking left, that is, leaving me to hold it all on my own. Only now do I realize how heavy it was all those

years, that I was weakening, slowly crumbling under the weight of it.

And now... Now I have everything I've ever wanted. He gave me a way out. I'm standing on the edge of freedom, but it no longer looks like the end goal. It looks terrifying and isolating. That isn't what I want anymore.

Love is.

“Yeah, I fucked up,” I say to Bianca. I don't add the rest of it, that I should never have told King, that I should have just sucked it up and lain there and let him fuck me. Not that he would have let that pass. He's the kind of guy who would notice if something was wrong, if I wasn't into it, and he'd stop and ask why, and then we'd end up right back where we are. If I'd never told, never let him take part of that weight off me, I'd never have realized it was crushing me. I'd have gone on forever without thinking about any of it too closely.

But then what?

“What'd you do?” Bianca asks. She looks different, though, not as eager and more... Guarded. And this is why I can't trust her with anything. I never know when she's a friend and when she's going to use something against me.

“I said something stupid and hurt his pride,” I say.
“We’re just so different. We don’t really get along.”

“You might have more in common than you know,”
Bianca says, plopping down on the couch.

That makes me snort. “Like what?”

“For starters, you both have a dead sibling,” she says.
Some people might call a comment like that insensitive, but
when you’ve grown up the way we have, it’s just the way
things are. There’s no point tiptoeing around the truth. We’ve
all lost people we cared about, and plenty of us have lost
family. Which means it’s hardly something to bond with my
new husband over.

Still, jealousy lifts its ugly head when I think about him
telling her something painful from his past. When did they talk
about this? And why didn’t he talk to me about it?

“Did he tell you that?” I ask.

Bianca shrugs. “You’d be surprised what you can learn
by reading the news.”

I don’t want to be interested, but I’m way past that. I
want to know everything about my infuriatingly proud,
stubborn husband. I just wish he’d tell me. Not that I’ve made

it super easy for him to talk to me. I spent our whole honeymoon avoiding him like the messed up coward I am.

“How’d she die?” I ask Bianca, because it’s easier than asking him.

“I guess she drowned in a flood,” Bianca says, popping open her compact and examining her lipstick. “They never found her body.”

“When was that?”

“Like, this year,” she says. “I don’t remember when. I can’t believe he hasn’t told you.”

She snaps her mirror closed, looking smug, as if he’s the one who told her and she wasn’t internet stalking *my* husband. I want to smack the sloppy lip gloss right off her face, but I’m too preoccupied with thoughts of King. I remember how I felt after my brother died. How numb I was, like I was in shock for months. Which means King is still probably in the grieving period, and instead of being there for him, I’ve been a total brat. And not just a brat, but so hateful that he actually thinks I’m capable of arranging a hit on him.

“Listen, I think I’d better skip lunch,” I say. “I need to get this shit picked up before King comes back, and I need to

interview for a maid...”

“Can’t she pick this up?” Bianca asks, making a face and gesturing around.

“I don’t think I want her first impression to be a bunch of broken dishes.”

She sighs. “Seriously? I came all the way to the Bronx to see you.”

“Sorry,” I say, though I’m not. I was getting tired of the parties and gossip anyway, but now it’s lost all appeal. I’m too worried about my husband leaving me to think about the most exclusive new lunch spot we need to hit to stay relevant. I don’t give two shits about being relevant. I want my husband back. The realization shakes me a bit. Am I turning into one of those pathetic women we hate? The ones who serve their husbands like slaves?

The truth is, I don’t even care. I love King. I’d rather spend an evening doing nothing with him than an evening clubbing with anyone else. Hell, I’d rather stay home stitching up his wounds than doing anything else, no matter who it was with. Instead of showing him that, I let him walk out the door thinking he was somehow undeserving of my love. He’s more than deserving of my love, respect, and my time.

“We’ll do it another day, okay?” I say.

“Fine,” Bianca says with a huff. “I need to pick up something for my dad, anyway. But if you turn into one of those boring old housewives who never goes out, I’m telling everyone you’re hiding because you got fat and have stretchmarks all over your ass.”

Best frenemies to the end.

When she’s gone, I clean up, call Sylvia to get some recommendations for discrete maids. Then I just sit there for a few minutes, working on not going to pieces. I want to go in the bedroom to get my bags, but I can’t stop seeing King taking off his ring, laying it so carefully on the dresser, and walking out.

Finally, I give in to the tears. There’s no one to hold me this time. No one but me, and the little monster inside me who says we knew this was coming, I can’t count on anyone to stay. It’s just us, just me and the demons inside.

At last, I get up and wash my face, grab my bags, and walk out. I don’t look over at the dresser the whole time. Maybe King was right. Maybe this is for the best. Not for me—I’m well beyond the point of no return in my feelings for

King. But for him it's best. He deserves more than a broken wife who wastes his youth, his prime, his beauty. His heart.

I call the driver and take the elevator to the lobby. There are no more tears inside me. I'm empty. I think about King coming home, walking into the empty apartment. Will he think for a fraction of a second, before it sinks in, that I'm just out with my friends like usual? I've been purposely selfish. I don't blame him for wanting me gone. But I know how it feels to open a drawer that used to be filled with the clothes of someone who said they loved you, only to find it empty. To stare into it, even knowing they're gone, and not quite believe it.

I've never said I loved King, but maybe I do. He's made it clear he can't love me, that he won't, but that doesn't mean I can't. I don't know how I'd even go about finding out. What do I know about love?

"Ready, Miss?" the driver asks, climbing out of the car. He puts my bags in the trunk. I watch, numb. I wonder if this is how my mother felt when she left us.

I'm in the car, but I don't remember climbing in. I told the driver to just drive. I have nowhere to go, no direction, just like I have no idea what to do with my freedom now that I've

gotten it. The last thing on earth I feel like doing is partying. I just want to be home, curled up with King on the couch. I always imagined Mom was happy, full of hopes and dreams, a lifetime of promise ahead as she drove away, waving and smiling, to her new shiny life of fame and excitement. How could she do it? And not just to her husband, but her daughter?

“Where to, Miss?” the driver asks. His eyes in the mirror are sympathetic. We’ve been driving around for a while, I don’t know how long. I only know that I’m never going to do what my mother did. Not to anyone.

This is what I choose to do with my freedom.

I meet the driver’s eyes in the mirror. “Take me home.”

*

When I hear the jangling of keys in the door, I don’t know what to do with myself. I have the ridiculous notion to pose somewhere, like he’s going to walk in and forget everything if the house looks good. I shove the thought away just as the door opens and my husband walks in. He stops short, blinking at me like I must be a mirage.

“I thought I told you to leave,” he says, turning to push the door closed behind him.

Suddenly I wish I had posed somewhere. Better than standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, clasping my hands in front of me like I’m waiting for his fucking approval.

“I did,” I say. “But I guess you were right. I always come back to you.”

He sighs and sets down his leather bag, the one that looks professional, but if I had to guess, probably contains a Glock, a few extra magazines, some rope for tying up uncooperative suspects, and maybe a handful of instruments of torture thrown in for good measure.

“I’m going to clean up,” he says, snagging his bag and heading to the bedroom. A minute later, I hear the shower running. He always showers when he gets home, even when I can’t see blood on him. It must suck for a guy like him to have to hurt people all day. He’s not like Dad’s men, who joke about it over dinner. He’ll get there, but he’s not desensitized to violence yet. I’m probably more callous than he is, for fuck’s sake.

Dinner’s not supposed to arrive for an hour, so I go into the bedroom and sit on my side of the bed and lean back

on the pillows, waiting for him to come out. A few minutes later, he emerges trailing wisps of steam, wearing nothing but the water droplets clinging to his skin and a towel wrapped around his hips, hanging low enough that I can see the V of muscle leading downward.

I swallow hard, trying not to ogle him. But god, he's so beautiful. I'm not even an artist, and he makes me want to draw him. All those angles and long lines. Was Michelangelo gay? Because it would be a damn shame to look at something like that and not see how sexy it is. Or maybe that would be a good thing. I don't know how long it took him to carve David, but it would probably be the longest hard-on in history.

King goes to the dresser and opens the drawer to get his boxers. He pauses, staring down at the ring he left there this morning.

"I know what it's like to be left," I say. "I know what it does to a person. If you want out of this, you're going to have to be the one who leaves. I'm not going to do that to you."

He turns back, his hand on the knot in his towel. I watch a drop of water slowly rolling down his abs, down the chiseled muscles that make up the V between his hips, toward the edge of the towel. I gulp and drag my eyes up to his. "I

wasn't leaving you," he says quietly, a frown knitting his brow. "I was protecting you."

"I know all about people leaving to protect me, too," I say. "That doesn't make it easier."

He just watches me a second, his expression inscrutable. "I didn't think of it that way," he says at last. "I wasn't trying to be just another person who left you. I just thought it was better for you to have someone more... Self-disciplined."

I snort. "More than you?"

"I've been a terrible husband to you."

"I probably deserved it," I say. "I was a total bitch to you. Maybe I do that because people don't stick around, y'know? Like, I push them away, testing them, because I know eventually they'll leave. No one stays."

King's expression turns pained, and he picks up the ring and comes over to sink onto the other side of the bed. "Eliza... Fuck. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

He reaches for me, pulling me to him. I curl against him, relieved for the contact. That surprises me. I've gotten

used to his touch in such a short time. But last night, when he didn't hold me, I missed him all night.

“It's not okay,” he says quietly. “If this is what you really want, I'll stay. But I want you to make sure it is. Am I really good enough, or is this just another one of your self-destructive tendencies, like the drinking?”

“No,” I say, opening his hand and taking out the ring. I slide it back onto his finger, where it belongs. He pulls me into his arms again, and I hold onto him, feeling the damp cool of his skin above the delicious heat of his body underneath. “I think it's the exact opposite of that.”

He's wrong about not being good for me. This is exactly what I need. Someone who makes me want to be better, to get better. Someone who makes me feel scary things and still want to go on, for him and for me, too. I deserve to feel good. I deserve to enjoy my own body. I deserve the same pleasure other people feel when touched.

I've tried for so long to push those feelings down, to shut off the sensations of my body. But now I'm mad. I'm mad that the chance to feel uncomplicated pleasure was taken from me. Yes, I want to give myself to King, but more than that, I

want it for myself. It's not fair that the most basic, simple pleasures fill me with terror. I'm ready to change that.

I twist around in King's arms, throwing my leg over him and straddling his hips so he has to brace himself to stay sitting, his palms flat on the mattress and his legs extended along the side of the bed where he sleeps. He looks up at me, his expression guarded, but I don't hesitate. I take his face between my hands and kiss him hard. He reacts, but his kiss is tentative, careful. He keeps his hands on the bed instead of touching me. But I touch him. I run my hands over the hard, knotted muscles of his shoulders, careful to avoid the bandaged area, and down the lean, taut muscles of his biceps, his forearms, and onto his sides. His skin is hot and damp, and his body shivers against my cool hands as they run over his skin.

I delight in the sensation of his body responding to my inexperienced touch, the little shiver that goes through him, the hardness growing in his lap as I press against him. A shiver goes through me, too, half fear and half arousal. He's pressed up against me, but through a towel and my jeans, it's not too much.

It's not enough.

I slide my hand down over his abs, still running with a few little drops from the shower. When I reach the knot in his towel, King grabs my hand, breaking the kiss.

“I can’t,” he says, gripping my thighs and scooting me back on his lap. He’s breathing hard, but he looks miserable. “I want to be respectful, but I can’t help myself. You turn me on so fucking much, Eliza.”

“I know,” I say, linking my fingers through his and leaning forward to kiss him through the smile on my lips. “I love it.”

“You do?”

“I’m not scared of your dick, King,” I say. “I wasn’t upset about it this morning. I just didn’t think you found me... Desirable anymore. I told you, I was just surprised.”

“You shouldn’t be,” he says. “You drive me out of my fucking mind.”

He turns sideways, cradling my body and sliding me off him, then adjusting the pillows so we’re lying face to face. He runs a hand up the side of my thigh from my knee to my hip, his thumb pressing into the crease in my jeans at the top of my thigh. Nervous excitement vibrates through my body.

I reach for the knot on the towel again. “Can I touch you?”

He nods slowly. “How does this work? You can please me, but I can’t even touch you?”

“You can try,” I say, my voice sounding so stupid and scared I want to bite my tongue and take it back.

“What if... ?” He breaks off, his brow furrowed with concern.

“I freak out again?” I ask. “I might. I’m sorry. But I want to try. That’s something, right? And hey, maybe it’s a good thing. You won’t have to wonder if I want to or not.”

He scoffs quietly and adjusts his head, folding his arm under it. “You can say that again.”

Suddenly, I’m so nervous my fingers are shaking again, and I want to call the whole thing off. “Is that okay?” I whisper. “You said you wanted to try, but if you don’t anymore...”

He tips my chin up gently, his troubled gaze meeting mine. “I want to help you if I can. Anything you need.”

I nod, dropping my gaze. “You said we could work through it together,” I whisper, laying a hand on his hip, on the

damp towel still wrapped around him.

“And you said you didn’t want to,” he reminds me.

“Now I do,” I admit, searching his eyes, begging him for understanding.

“What changed your mind?”

“You did,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “What you said this morning, that I don’t deserve you. You’re right, but not in the way you meant. You’re so good to me, and I want to be good for you, too. It takes a lot for me to trust, but I want to trust you, and I want you to trust me. I want to know you, King. And I want you to know me—all of me.”

“I want that, too,” he says quietly. “So much.”

“And... Maybe because you said it was okay if I didn’t want to. I thought about that a lot today. About going on like this for the rest of my life, being too scared to move past it. I don’t want to live my whole life controlled by something that happened to me when I had no choice. Moving past it is my choice.”

“That’s... Really fucking brave,” he says quietly, sliding a hand over the side of my neck, cradling the back of my head in his big hand.

“Will you help me?” I ask. “Please?”

He swallows, his eyes so deep I could drown in their darkness. “Yes,” he answers. “Whatever you need. Just say the word when you’ve had enough.”

“I will.” I take a deep breath. “And King?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not like them. I’m not a child and you’re not forcing me. I want this. I want you. I just didn’t think you wanted me.”

“How could I not want you?” he asks, his voice almost choked. “You’re so fucking beautiful I’m scared to touch you. I don’t want to break you.”

“You won’t,” I whisper. “I’m not fragile. You won’t hurt me. You can only heal me.”

seventeen

King

“I’ve been researching the attack at *Jean-Jean*,” Eliza says to me over dinner a week after the shooting. “I think I found something.”

“I talked to Little Al about it already,” I say, not liking her getting involved in the business side of things. “He’s looking into it, asking around.”

“Well, I have connections, too,” Eliza says, setting down her fork and lifting her chin to give me that stubborn look of hers that makes me want to fuck her into submission. Of course, pretty much everything makes me want to fuck her. She’s trying, but we haven’t progressed past making out yet.

“If people find out you’re sniffing around...” I start.

“Whoa,” she says, holding up a hand. “What do you take me for? I’ve been in the Life longer than you have. I’m not stupid.”

“I know,” I say. “But there’s no reason for you to get involved.”

“You think it was my family,” she says. “It’s too late not to get involved. If I can’t prove it’s not them, your uncle is going to kill my father. You expect me to sit back and let that happen?”

“No,” I say grudgingly. Truth is, she’s already involved. In this line of work, there’s no real way to keep her out of it. Sometimes the mafia will kill a man’s whole family just to make an example of him to others, to show them what could happen if they cross us. Still, the less she knows, the better.

“I know you want to protect me,” she says, laying a hand on mine. “But it’s too late for that. I’m not sheltered, King. I grew up around all this. You didn’t. Did you ever think maybe that’s why Al picked you?”

“What?” I ask, drawing back.

“I can help,” she says, her face earnest. “I’m part of this. I know you think you’re protecting me, but you’re just pushing me out. I’m an asset. Treat me like one.”

I just stare at her. I’m not trying to push her out. I just don’t want her killed. Al keeps telling me to use her knowledge, and I know she has plenty, but I can’t. I’ve already

lost one person I love because I didn't keep her out of this side of things. I won't do it again.

"No," I say. "No fucking way."

Eliza threads her fingers through mine. "King. I know that you feel lost sometimes, that you're frustrated about knowing less than everyone. Let me be your eyes. I grew up doing this shit. I know the families inside out. Don't shut me out. I can help. Please let me."

It's true. I'm at a disadvantage in every fucking thing because I didn't grow up here. I don't know anyone outside Manhattan unless they're related to me. Even my wife knows more about this than I do.

"I'm not going to put you in danger," I say, picking up my fork and turning it in the overcooked spaghetti Eliza made in her first attempt at cooking dinner.

"Fine," she says, going back to her food, too. "But reading the news is allowed, right?"

"Yes..."

"Well, dead men don't talk, and you killed all the ones who attacked," she says. "They haven't released a couple names because the cops haven't been able to get hold of their

families. But the rest of them were on the news or in the obituaries.”

“Anyone on your dad’s payroll?”

“No,” she says. “They’re from the Bronx, though. Which means they should be either my dad’s men or Al’s. But they weren’t.”

I frown and push my plate away. “They’re not mafia?”

“Nope,” she says. “But it’s almost like they were chosen because they were from this area. Except if you look close enough, you can see that they were only born here. They’d all moved away.”

“Someone wants us to think they were Pomponio men?”

“Exactly,” she says, taking a sip of chianti. “It was a set-up. But not by my dad.”

“Then who were they?”

“Well, a couple of them look like they were just hired goons, hence the masks. But a couple of them were living in Brooklyn at the time.”

“Fuck,” I say, remembering Al saying something about that family being sloppy. “Luciani?”

She nods. "I think you guys should check it out."

"Did you feel out Bianca about it?"

"Fuck no," she says. "I'm not stupid."

"She's your best friend."

"Yeah, we're not that kind of friends."

"What kind?"

"You know," she says. "The kind that trusts each other."

This goes a little beyond that, but I don't want to criticize her friends. I know from my sister that female friendships are complicated. If I didn't trust a guy with my life, I wouldn't call him a friend, but obviously she sees things differently.

"And you think it might be one of Luciani's men? Why would they want to start shit between our families?"

"They probably benefit. They can keep the prices up to both our families if we won't deal with each other. They could have spies feeding both sides info. All that money disappears if we're not at war anymore. This union is great for our families, but for the other families? I'd be surprised if there *wasn't* a few attempts to start shit again."

“I’m sure Al’s already found that if it was on the news,” I say, turning my wine glass on the table. “If we’re not moving on it, that means they have reasons to believe it wasn’t the Lucianis.”

“There’s... One more thing,” Eliza says, biting at the corner of her lip. “And this one could get me killed, so don’t be too mad.”

I stiffen, my voice coming sharper than I meant. “What?” I demand.

“The day of the ambush, I went to the salon with Bianca,” she says.

“And?” I grit out. “You told her where we were meeting?”

“No,” she says quickly. “I wouldn’t. I didn’t know, anyway. You hadn’t told me where you were meeting, but you told me to call my dad. I called while we were there. He told me. It was loud with all the dryers going, and I didn’t repeat it, but you know how voices carry through the phone sometimes. I really don’t think she could have overheard, but I want you to know in case...”

“In case you’re accused of breaking the code of silence,” I finish, my blood running cold.

“I didn’t tell,” she says. “And Dad didn’t say the time. I’m sure she couldn’t have overheard. But we can’t completely rule it out.”

“You know this could get your friend killed.”

“I know,” she says, staring straight at me. It strikes me how fucking tough this girl is. No wonder I considered her as a suspect for setting it up. She’s ruthless enough to sentence her best friend to death for betraying her.

“Do you want me to talk to Al?” I ask carefully.

She swallows. “They might see it as talking.”

I shake my head. “Like I said, Al owes me one. And you didn’t talk. You were sloppy to ask about it there, but Anthony shouldn’t have told you on the phone. If anyone is to blame, it’s him.”

Eliza nods, looking nervous. “Okay.”

Now it’s my turn to hold her hand, turning it over in mine and squeezing. “I won’t let this come back on you,” I say. “You did the right thing telling me. If it really was Luciani’s men, you deserve a fucking medal.”

She smiles, and I can tell she's pleased.

"Want me to clean up the dishes?" she asks.

"We'll get them in the morning," I say. "Let's go to bed."

Eliza pushes back from the table, a little grin on her face. It's nice to see her excited about going to bed with me instead of nervous. She's learning to trust me with her body, even if she's still moving slow. I'm okay with that. She's worth the wait.

"Come here, my bride," I say, scooping her up in my arms with a growl.

She gives a little shriek and kicks her legs, but she's laughing as she links her arms around my neck and leans up to kiss me. I carry her to the bedroom and lay her down on the bed.

I've never been selfish enough to get off without making sure I got the woman off, too. I thought that meant I wasn't a selfish lover, but with Eliza, I realize that's not true. Making a girl come has always been a point of pride to me. I was doing it for my ego, to prove that I was a good lover. Or because I knew she would tell her friends, or I wanted her to

tell her friends, that I was good in bed. But I was still doing it for myself.

With Eliza, I don't think about myself. She makes me take things slow, think about only her—what she wants, what she needs, what feels good to her and what is triggering.

For the past week, we've gone slow, and it's hard to see progress, but we're intimate in the ways she's comfortable with. We kiss, and I let her explore my body, which she likes so much it kinda goes to my head. I've never been with a girl who was so painfully innocent, so curious, so fascinated by my body, not just my dick. Maybe the girls I've been with were as selfish as me. We were always both just thinking about getting off.

But Eliza isn't thinking about that. Whenever she gets close, she freezes up and backs off. She seems more interested in me, which I have to admit is hot as hell. She's fascinated by things no one else has ever paid attention to, like the fact that guys like their nipples played with, too, or how to touch my balls. She likes to lie her head on my belly and breath on my cock and watch it get hard. And she seems pretty intent on learning to excel at blowjobs and hand jobs both.

Still, it's frustrating. As much as I love seeing her pretty mouth open for me or her lips all swollen and shiny with my cum after sucking me off, I want to offer the same pleasures to her. I want to touch her the way she touches me, with freedom and wonder. I want to spread her open and sink my fingers into her little pink cunt and make her moan for more. I want to taste her, to fuck her with my tongue until I push her over the edge, and I want to feel her lose control and cum in my mouth. And I want to fuck her hard and deep, to cum inside her while she screams my name.

But we're a long way from there. Instead, I spend a lot of time with the nudes she texts me.

I set her down on the bed, and she squiggles out of her loose tank, tossing it onto the nearby chair and pulling off her bra. Her tits are mine for the taking, so I push her back and suck on one and then the other, running my hands over the incredible smoothness of her skin until she's panting and squirming against me. I move up to her lips, sliding my tongue into her willing mouth as she pulls up my shirt to run her hands over my abs.

"Take this off," she says, breaking the kiss to tug at my buttoned shirt. I undo the top few buttons and pull it off,

followed by my undershirt, so I can press my bare skin to hers. When we're back on the bed, lying face to face, I slide a leg between hers as our mouths meet again. After a while, she rolls over onto me, pulling her knees up to straddle my hips as she runs her nails over my skin, making goosebumps rise and my nipples harden. She smiles down at me, and my cock throbs against her.

Leaning down to kiss me, she covers my pecs with her palms, and I reach for her tits again. I roll her nipples between my fingers until she's squirming against me, her hips rocking on mine. I sit up, holding her body against mine with one arm while I keep squeezing her nipple with my other hand. She throws her head back, riding me in a way that makes me imagine the clothes between us gone.

The sensation of the softness between her thighs against the hardness of my erection makes me want to come in my pants like a fucking virgin. But this is for her, so I ignore the ache in my stiff cock and let my lips play over her throat in that way that always makes her sigh with pleasure. I help her keep rhythm, gripping her hip as she moves faster, her hips rolling against my cock.

I massage her tit, pinching her nipple a little harder. She gasps, tensing like she's going to jump off me the way she always does.

I release my grip on her nipple and wrap my arms around her, cradling her close but not too hard, so she'll feel comforted, not trapped. "It's okay, you're safe," I say quickly, stroking her hair back from her cheek. "We can stop if you want, but you can let yourself go with me. I'm here, baby. I won't hurt you. Can you keep going?"

Her eyes clear, and she relaxes. I begin to move her against me, adding a little motion in my own hips to rub my cock right at her center. After a minute, she closes her eyes and drops her head back, her beautiful hair falling in waves down her bare back to brush my hand that holds her hip. I watch her rock, her tits rising and falling, the little freckles that dot her skin like a constellation on full display. I take her nipple between my fingers again, squeezing it gently while I massage her breast with my palm. When I apply pressure, a stitch pulls between her brows and her pink lips part in a little "o." Her fingers dig into my skin, and she tenses up, but this time, it's not fear gripping her. I can feel her cunt throbbing

against my cock, and I have to think of horrible things just to keep from exploding with her.

I watch her cum, and it's everything I thought it would be. Breathtaking. Triumphant. Agonizing.

When she relaxes at last, I can't help but grin.

"Holy shit," she says, letting out a shaky laugh. "Is that what it's all about?"

"Yeah," I say, cradling her head and rolling over, laying us both on the pillows. "That's what it's all about."

She looks at me, her big, luminous eyes magnified as they fill with tears.

"Hey, whoa," I say, stroking her cheek. "What's wrong?"

In answer, she covers her face and begins to sob.

eighteen

Eliza

Sometimes, I know I'm doing something stupid, and I can see that as if I'm my future self or an outside observer, and I know it's not helping, but I keep doing it. I know that crying like an idiot after my first orgasm is stupid. I know the thoughts clashing in my head are irrational and self-sabotaging, but I can't stop them. I'm terrified by what just happened, by what I felt for King in that moment.

I'm past thinking he's the enemy, but I realize as he's holding me that he's something much more dangerous than an enemy. He's a lover. And a lover can destroy you in ways an enemy can't even begin to imagine. You know better than to let an enemy in, after all. A lover is already in. They may not even mean to cause you harm, may not hold any ill will toward you. And yet, you can see their soul like the trap that it is, open and ready to pull you and swallow you whole, drown you in pleasure, trap you in bliss like a fly in amber.

It's everything I always feared about sex. I've never even had full sex, but one orgasm and I know I was right. It

makes me weak, makes me need it, craving it already like a junkie needing a fix already after the first hit. I knew it could trap me, I just didn't know how fast it could happen. Maybe that's why I kept holding back, why I stopped every time King got me right to the edge. I knew once I went over, once I felt orgasm and knew what it was like, I'd want more. Less than that would never be enough—never again.

I knew it was a trap, but it felt so good that I let myself be caught. And now he holds me in his arms so gently, as if they aren't teeth waiting to snap shut on me, consuming my life until I don't even remember what it was like before, until I want to stay home and make him spaghetti and clean his house, and one day I'll look back on the big dreams I never had a chance to even imagine, and I see that all that's left on the path behind me are little shards of bone that he picked clean and spit out.

“What's wrong?” he asks, smoothing my hair back and looking at me with those dark eyes like wells I could fall into and no one would ever find me. His brows furrow with concern that could drown me.

I push him away and roll toward the far side of the bed, trying to get away from his clinging hands.

“Why’d you do that?” I demand. “You know I didn’t want to do that.”

“I asked,” he protests, sitting up. “I didn’t make you do anything.”

I jump up from the bed and turn to face him. “You made me want to do it!”

He gives me a look that says I sound just as crazy to him as I do to myself. “You didn’t want to orgasm?”

“No,” I say, throwing my hands up. “I knew once I started to believe in this marriage, once I started to feel something, I’d never get away. I don’t want this tiny life as your maid and your cook and your sex slave. I want my own life, my own freedom. And I can’t have that and this, too.”

“Eliza,” he says, looking so earnest it makes my heart twist. I turn away so I don’t have to see him when I hurt him. I don’t want to hurt him. I already care about him way too much. But I know this is my last chance, and it makes me desperate. I came so close to falling in a way I’ll never get up from.

“What?” I snap, hating the sympathetic tone in his voice. I don’t want pity. I want a life where I’m in control of

my own choices. Why didn't I run when he gave me the chance? Why didn't I realize that this was where it would lead? I think I love him, but it doesn't feel good. It's terrifying, and even though I know I'm sliding backwards into the way I was at first, I can't stop it. The instinct for self-preservation is too strong inside me.

"I never asked you to be any of those things," he says. "After everything that's happened over the past few weeks, you're really going to accuse me of wanting you for a *sex slave*?"

"That's what marriage is," I say, repeating the words I've been saying since I was too young to understand their meaning.

"Obviously it isn't," he says. "And I don't want it to be. Our marriage can be whatever we want, whatever makes you happy. Only we can define what it will be."

I don't want to hear his promises because they sound too rational, and I'm not rational right now. I'm shaking with emotion. I don't want to think about marriage as protection and support, the way it's felt lately, because then I'll need him, and what happens when he walks away from me then? It's easier to fall back into the ingrained ideas I've held so long.

“It’s the end of freedom,” I say, clinging to the empty words I heard so many times, and now I’ve repeated so many times like a mantra.

“What do you want the freedom to do?” he asks. “If you want to go to school, or get a job, or travel... Eliza, I’m here to support you in that, or work through whatever you’re going through, or figure out what you want to do. Just let me be part of it.”

“I don’t know what I want, okay?” I say, fresh tears springing to my eyes. “I just want to be free.”

“As long as it’s not the freedom to fuck other guys, you can still have whatever freedoms you want. Just talk to me, Eliza. You seem obsessed with this idea, but I don’t know what you want the freedom to do.”

“To live my life,” I say, throwing my hands up. “The life *I* choose. As I please. Just like my mom did.” A life not controlled by him or my father or anyone, not even my own body. Most of all, I want to be free of my demons. But they are clawing their way out of me, tearing me apart from within, and I can’t stop them. I know I’m ruining this, all the progress we’ve made, and it’s not even his fault. It’s mine. But I keep on doing it because I want him to go, to show me that he’s one

more person who wants to use me in the name of love, to hurt me and twist my heart around until I don't know what's right and wrong, what I want, how I feel, because everything is all wrong.

King is quiet for a minute. "The freedom to leave your daughter to grieve both you *and* the death of her brother because you can't handle the child you chose to have?"

"You don't know anything about my mother," I snap. "She was protecting me."

"I know that if one of your parents is a hero, it's not your mother."

I don't want to hear his words, don't want to think about them. I can't. I have to hurt him more than he hurts me, hurt him before he can destroy me. So I give a derisive snort. "Of course you'd think the killer is a hero," I say. "Because you're a pussy, and you'd rather follow in a monster's footsteps than admit it."

I don't know where the words are coming from, it's like they're someone else's, the last words of that wounded animal that lives inside of me with one instinct, the instinct to protect me, to keep the secret, to keep others away because if they know, they'll destroy me. It's telling me that I don't need

anyone else, that they'll always leave, and it's all I will have left. It's been with me since I was a little girl, this little monster of my own, born in the bottom of a bathtub where there was no air, because I was a bad girl.

Good girls obey. Good girls get to breathe.

Bad girls get fingers around their throats, pushing them down, and lungs that burn for oxygen, and a head that thunders like waves crashing against the shore in a storm, and the yearning for one abstract idea that worms from the back of their black eyelids into their brains and makes a home there until it takes shape when they're old enough to understand what they've wanted all along.

Freedom.

“Your father might be a killer, but he also raised you on his own,” King says quietly. “I know how fucking hard that is, trust me.”

I take a deep, shaky breath and give my eyes an angry swipe before I turn back to him, so relieved for the opening that I could cry all over again. “How would you know that?”

He pauses for a moment, his dark eyes troubled. “I wouldn't,” he says at last.

“What, you’re a dad?” I ask. “Where’s this kid you raised all alone?”

“I’m not a father,” he says, turning away.

“Then how would you know?” I press. I can feel I’ve hit a sore spot, and I want to keep poking it, the way my thumb will keep finding a bruise, worrying it. Poking it to make sure it still hurts, that I can still feel something, that I’m still part human. I’ve spent half my life proving to myself that I’m still alive, that I’m not numb anymore. I’ve drank and partied and danced and fought with my friends and made out with guys, all in a quest to prove that I still feel, that I’m not a monster.

“I don’t,” King snaps. “Forget it.”

“Who are you talking about, King?” I press. “I heard you and your brothers moved to the South with your dad. That means you’re talking about him. He’s such a big hero for leaving your mom alone in the city?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“See how it feels when someone acts like they know you?” I ask, though I want to ask about his sister, his parents, his brothers. I want to know everything about him. There is

more to this man than I know, so much more. But it's dangerous to go down that path, because knowing someone means caring about them, and I can't care more. It brings us too close, brings him too close to the truth that I swore I'd never tell. I don't get close to people for this very reason. My secrets are too dark, too horrible. If I let someone in, I'll care, and when they find out the truth, they'll leave, and I won't survive another blow like that.

I bend and pick up my clothes, turning away from the bed before pulling on my bra and reaching behind me to hook it closed.

“It was your mom, wasn't it?”

My hands freeze, and I just stand there with my fingers paralyzed on the clasp, the hooks an inch from engaging. “What?”

“It was your mom,” he says. “That's why you aren't triggered by touching a man, even in the most intimate ways. You're only freaked out when I touch you.”

“So?” My voice is small, like a little girl's when she's sitting on the tile floor, refusing to stand up, to unwrap her arms from around her knees, even though she knows she'll be

punished, but she can't do it because she knows she'll fly apart if she's not holding herself together so, so carefully.

King's hands are tentative on my hips, tugging me back with gentle insistence. My body tenses, and he stops pulling, but his hands are there, warm through my jeans. But he doesn't push. He just sits there, not making me do anything, not even look at him. The tears on my face are silent this time. They come quick and steady, like a rain that could wash away the pain and the dirt and the glue I've used to patch myself up every time I start to break, the glue that holds every jagged edge together.

He doesn't say a word, but he's there. And I'm too tired to run away, to hide and lick my wounds and take a shot and dance and pretend I'm happy or strong or free. I'll never be free until I stop pretending. And I'm tired of pretending that I believed her when she said she loved me or that she did it for me; tired of pretending that she's a hero for striking out on her own as if that made her brave and not just a coward who knew her life would be over if her husband found out the things she did to his daughter in the bathtub. I'm too tired to patch myself up even one more time.

So, I let myself fall, and this man, my husband, my king, he catches me. His skin is rough, but his hands are gentle as he takes me in his arms and holds me. And I know I don't have to hold myself together alone anymore. Or pretend I'm whole, that I'm not scarred and cracked and dirty like the pavement on the streets outside. I can break apart, fall into a million pieces. I know that he will catch me every time I fall, that he will pick me up and hold all my pieces together as long as I need him to, and he won't break or drop or lose a single one. He'll just hold them until I'm ready to start the slow and painful process of building myself back into the girl I once was, before the person who was supposed to love her broke her instead.

That wasn't love. This is love.

nineteen

King

“You ready?” Uncle Al asks, drawing me into the room where I first met his men, the room where I took the oath.

I’m not ready. How could I be ready? I didn’t want to leave Eliza’s side, but I know I have to. I can’t hover around her forever, as much as I want to. I’m ready to take my mind off her confessions for a few hours, and that’s going to have to be good enough. I’ve already pleaded out of a few days of work and rushed home to her after every job for the next week, ever since she admitted the truth about her abuser and fell to pieces in my arms. She’s probably sick of my face by now, if I’m honest.

“Yes, sir,” I say.

“Your shoulder all healed up?”

“Yeah,” I say, rotating my arm. “Good as new.”

Al steps back into the room, gesturing for me to follow. Around the table sit five of his seasoned men and his consigliere. Besides them, a guy stands in the corner like a six-

and-a-half-foot marble statue covered in ink from his chin to the backs of his huge hands, which he holds crossed in front of him as he waits, staring into the room with blank eyes.

“What’s up?” I ask Al, turning away from the unnerving giant. I’m suddenly running over what I told Al about the Lucianis and Eliza’s confession. My throat tightens as I think how easily someone could throw my name out there, and it would be me walking the plank.

“We’re going to pay Luciani a visit,” Al says. “I normally wouldn’t take a rookie, but since you were shot, you might like a chance to see justice served.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“This is Divo Bertinelli,” Al says, cutting his eyes toward the giant but not stepping toward him. “He’ll be joining us.”

I realize in that small gesture that even the great Al Valenti himself is ill at ease with the man I’ve heard of but never met. His name precedes him, as Little Al and the other guys refer to him by his nickname, *Il Diavolo*. If my job is breaking fingers, his is breaking necks. His specialty is getting men to talk, so it makes sense he’s coming along, since we still don’t know who tipped off Luciani and his men. If Al’s going

after Lou Luciani himself, he must have found enough information to be sure that the men who ambushed us were sent by Bianca's family, hired goons who weren't supposed to make it out alive or lead us back to them if they failed.

Of the eight men paying Luciani a visit, I'm by far the youngest, though it's hard to tell about Il Diavolo. The tattoos and hardened expression make him look older than he probably is. The rest of the guys range from around thirty to fifty, all seasoned veterans whom Al trusts with his life.

"Lou's house has four guards," Al says, grabbing a paper from the table and making a few quick lines to sketch out the house, pointing to the rear and front entrances. The house is a row-style one, he explains, so there's no chance of entering through a side window. A few minutes later, we're all strapped and piling into a pair of black SUVs. Al takes the passenger seat of one, another of his men driving while Il Diavolo and I sit in the back. Conversation is limited to a few small comments.

We reach Luciani's building without issue. His building is a three-story townhouse style that stretches as long as the street, each home with a different colored exterior. The front of the building has a small, wrought-iron fence with

arching gateways leading to the steps, which lead to the entrance on the second level. Luciani's place is set apart by the grey exterior and thick, wooden double doors without windows. One guy stands outside, but we don't stop. We follow the street and double back around to the back of the building.

A security guard stands outside the privacy fence, and when he sees us, he grabs for his radio. Al pops him before he can hit the button to call, his gun making a quiet *pffft* sound with the silencer on. Then we're all out of the vehicle and racing through the gate onto a slate tile patio with a square of sod, an outdoor fire pit, and two enormous grills built into the brickwork. The entrance on the back of the building is at ground level, though there's a set of stairs to a second-floor terrace with a second entrance. The terrace partially protects us from view on the second level, but the third floor offers us up for the picking. The large windows give an easy view of us—for Luciani and for anyone in the adjacent homes on either side.

They haven't realized we've breached their guard, or they'd be shooting already. Al's men fan out in pairs as instructed. Al and three of his men go in the back door while I

follow Il Diavolo up the iron staircase to the second floor with two more guys. Just as my foot touches the terrace, I hear the muffled shot from a silenced gun, and a bullet pings off the stairs behind me.

“Fuck,” I mutter, drawing my own gun and aiming upwards. The terrace is exposed, with no cover, which means I’m all that stands between the shooter and the three other lives at risk right now. My eyes sweep the windows on the floor above us, all closed.

“No fire escape,” I mutter to the others, jerking my eyes at the top floor. “They have roof access.”

Another shot rings out, and I just spot the head of the shooter ducking back before I can get off a shot. But I know his position now, so I wait. One of our guys is cursing up a storm, and I know he’s hit. Il Diavolo races across the terrace in a crouch before lowering his shoulder and crashing into this thick glass. It splinters, raining down around him and crunching under his boots as he ducks inside. Another guy follows, then the last guy, cursing and bleeding from his arm, where he was hit. For a few seconds, I’m alone.

I wait in silence, adrenaline spiking through me with every heartbeat. When the head peaks over the edge of the

roof, I get off another shot. I hear it connect, the cry that goes with it, and the guy slumps over on the roof. I take off, getting inside to some cover. For some reason I was expecting bedrooms, but of course this is the entry floor from the front, so I'm in a long living room with an exposed brick wall and a kitchen at the other end of the open floor plan.

At least it limits hiding places. The area is empty, but I hear the shouts of men downstairs and bursts of gunfire. Il Diavolo appears from a doorway at the far end of the kitchen, gesturing for me to follow. I run through the long living room crowded with overstuffed chairs, wincing when the wooden floorboards squeak underfoot. But it's not like we're being stealthy at this point. I duck through the white tiled kitchen with white-and-black marble countertops and duck through the doors into a small entry hallway. A guard lays face down on the floor, a pool of red spreading across the white tile. From there, we have access to the front door and the stairs.

Il Diavolo turns to the stairs, leveling his gun in front of him as he creeps up, his back flattened against the wall as he goes. I follow him up, covering the stairs behind us. The house is suddenly silent, the gunfire having ended below. I don't know if they've already gotten the Lucianis, but we have

to check the top floor, anyway. We don't know how many people were in the house to begin with.

We reach a small landing, and Il Diavolo extends the silencer of his gun a few inches past the corner. Nothing. He edges forward, peering around. A gunshot sounds, and he jerks back. The bullet sinks into the wall behind us. I hear a creak and level my gun on the bottom of the stairs. A guy ducks around, his gun pointed straight at me. I almost shoot, at the last second realizing it's one of our guys. I turn to Il Diavolo, who edges past the corner and squeezes off one round after another.

He ducks back into the hall. "Cover me," he says, stopping to shove another magazine into his gun. Seconds later, he motions me forward. Together we step into a kitchenette area. A man lies slumped over the counter, another two on the floor. To the left, a small den sits empty. To the right, we can see into a bathroom, and beyond that, two closed doors.

We turn that way, but a slight rustling behind us catches Il Diavolo's attention. He spins and shoots without time to even aim properly, and my first thought is that he shot the guy coming up behind me—one of Valenti's guys. But the

piercing scream hits my ears just as I turn. The Valenti guy is on the floor, and a pretty, fortyish woman huddles behind the rocker in the den, covering her mouth.

Il Diavolo aims and fires before I can say a word, and all I can think is that I'm next, that he's going to take out any witnesses that he killed one of our men. The woman's scream is cut off, and her body thuds back against the wall behind her before sliding sideways to the floor, leaving a streak of blood in her wake.

"We're killing everyone?" I grit out. "Even the women?"

Il Diavolo strides into the den, kicking aside a chair, and drags the body up by her hair. A gun falls from her lap to the floor, and I see the hole in the rocker. It takes a second for me to put it together. *She* shot Valenti's man. Il Diavolo shot her through the chair, and she screamed and dropped her gun. And then he killed her.

The way he tosses her body aside like a bag of trash and strides past me turns my stomach, but at least I know we're not killing innocent bystanders. Il Diavolo gives me a disgusted grunt before heading for the closed bedroom doors.

Not a sound comes from either one. “Cover me,” Il Diavolo says before swinging open the door on the left.

A girl is kneeling in front of a safe, shoving bundles of money into a duffel. I know it’s Bianca by the cascade of wavy black hair, but she doesn’t turn to show her face until Il Diavolo strides into the room. He grabs her by the hair and yanks her backwards, sending her sprawling on the floor. “Would you look at that,” he says, a cruel smirk twisting his lips. “It’s the mouthy bitch who got you shot.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Bianca retorts, her tone defiant even as she struggles to rise while Il Diavolo drags her backwards across the floor, her body sliding on the hardwood.

“Want to cut her tongue out?” he asks me, shoving her head toward me.

“Not now,” I say. “We still need Luciani.”

“Where’s your dad?” Il Diavolo barks at Bianca, shaking her by the head. He maintains his grip on her hair as she flails and tries to pry his hand loose.

“I’m not turning in my dad to you monsters,” she snaps. “You can kill me first!”

“He’s in that room, isn’t he?” Il Diavolo asks, a triumphant gleam in his eye as he drags Bianca to her feet. She looks like a doll against his giant form as he holds her in front of him.

As if in answer, a rain of bullets splinters the door from within.

“Unless you want to hit your daughter, stop shooting,” Il Diavolo shouts, ducking back into the adjacent bedroom.

“You sons of bitches are setting me up,” Luciani yells. “You don’t have my daughter. I told her to get out.”

“Tell him you’re here, or I’ll put you out of your misery right now,” Il Diavolo says, pressing the silencer of the gun to Bianca’s throat, still holding her pinned to his chest.

For the first time, fear writes itself across her face, as if she’s just realizing this is real. She can see out the open door to the handful of bodies spread across the kitchen.

“I—I’m here, Daddy,” she calls. “I was getting money from the safe. They caught me.”

“Good girl,” Il Diavolo growls, shoving her forward as he turns to the bedroom. I step in front, kicking down what’s left of the door and then jumping aside. No bullets come. Il

Diavolo steps through the door, still holding Bianca in front of him, the muzzle of his gun pushing her chin up as he presses it to her throat. I step in behind him, edging in with my gun raised.

The room is small, probably meant to be a bedroom, but it's set up as an office with a thick leather armchair near the window and a heavy walnut desk to our left. Lou Luciani is sitting in the armchair, an automatic rifle lying across his lap. Bianca start sobbing and choking out apologies to her father. I lean around my partner, aiming carefully at the man sitting in the chair. While his eyes are on his daughter, I squeeze the trigger.

The bullet rips into his thick torso, and he curses savagely.

“Daddy,” Bianca screams, flailing in Diavolo’s arms.

“Shut the fuck up and stop squirming unless you want my finger to slip on the trigger,” Diavolo says, squeezing her until she whimpers.

“She had nothin’ to do with it,” Luciani says, his voice thick with a Jersey accent and edged with panic. “Let her go and I’ll put the gun down. See?”

He raises both hands, leaving the gun in his lap.

“You think we fucking trust you?” I ask, cradling the gun in my palm, keeping one finger on the trigger and the barrel aimed at his face as I stride across the room.

“Don’t kill him yet,” Il Diavolo says behind me.

Right. Dead men don’t talk.

“How’d you know where we’d be that day?” I ask, pressing the gun to Luciani’s temple.

He lunges out of the chair, his arms clamping around my torso as he tackles me to the floor. My finger convulses on the trigger, sending a bullet into the ceiling when I hit the floor, the air knocked from my lungs by the fat man. I bring the butt of the gun down on his temple, and he slumps on top of me, groaning. I heave him off and frisk him quickly, tossing his pistol into the corner and kicking the rifle away.

“Don’t kill me,” he wheezes when I roll him onto his back and press the muzzle of my gun to the underside of his chin. I grab his tie, pulling his face up. Blood is coursing down his face from where I struck him, and his eyes are small and teary as they roll around in his head.

Even the most powerful men are reduced to nothing in a moment like this, so much like the ones I see every day with Little Al. Lou Luciani may be a sneaky bastard, and he may have tried to kill me, but at least he loves his daughter. So much so that he's giving up his life for hers, letting us walk in on him. He must know it's over. He may have executed a sloppy ambush in broad daylight, but he's not stupid, and he's not heartless. There are worse people in the world, at least.

“Answer the fucking question,” I demand.

“I'm no rat,” he spits back at me, his lips coated with saliva and trembling as he tries to get the words out.

Il Diavolo spins Bianca and pushes her face down on the walnut desk, yanking up her skirt and pushing the muzzle of his gun against her panties. “Answer the fucking question, or we'll know your daughter is the rat,” he barks.

Bianca screams out a sob, her terror palpable as she writhes on the desk, begging for mercy.

“Don't touch my daughter, you sick son of a bitch,” Lou yells, bucking under me.

Il Diavolo pulls aside her underwear and rubs the tip of the silencer against her entrance, his other hand flat against her

back, pinning her down. “Oh, but I bet she’s never been touched,” he taunts. “It’s such a shame to waste good virgin pussy.”

“Is that really necessary?” I growl, glaring over at him while I wrestle to keep Luciani down. If I thought I could let go of Lou without him going for his guns, I’d take down the devil himself. But if I did that, Lou would kill me, and Eliza would be left a widow, and that’s one thing I promised I’d never do. I could kill Lou and go after Il Diavolo, but then I’d never find out who tipped him off, and the blame will fall on Bianca whether she’s guilty or not.

Besides all that, I don’t even want to think what this guy will do to me if I try to take him down and fail. And even if I succeed, if anyone figures out I’m responsible, there’s no question about leaving Eliza a widow then. If I killed one of our own men, Al’s inner circle no less, to protect an enemy who could be responsible for the attempt on Al’s life...

I force myself to hold onto Luciani’s throat, my fingers digging in while I kneel on his chest, the gun still shoved against his throat. This asshole needs to talk, and fast.

“Please,” Bianca sobs. “I didn’t tell anyone anything.”

Il Diavolo grins at Luciani, who's going nuts in my hold, and forces the tip of the silencer into Bianca's hole. "You got one more chance to talk, or I'm going to shoot and then fuck this tight little cunt until she bleeds to death."

I ram the gun into Luciani's jugular. "You're going to die anyway," I snap. "If you love your daughter, you better talk right fucking now."

"It was Al," he howls, his voice high with panic as he tries to rise, to go to his daughter. "Little Al De Luca. He tipped me off."

I pull the trigger and jump up, grabbing Il Diavolo and shoving him. He grins at me and slides the tip of the silencer out of Bianca, who is sobbing uncontrollably on the desk.

"Works like a charm," he says, wiping the gun on his pants. "Too bad he talked. I wouldn't mind a few minutes inside that pussy. She's tight."

I pull Bianca to her feet, and she collapses into my arms, clinging to me like I'm some kind of savior, her body convulsing with sobs. "We'd better go find Uncle Al," I say.

"Bring her along," Il Diavolo says, gesturing lazily with his gun for me to follow as he heads for the door. "To the

victor go the spoils, right?”

I follow him out, Bianca hanging off my neck. “What are you going to do with me?” she wails as we start down the stairs.

“Nothing,” I say firmly.

“Al can keep you until we check out your dad’s story,” Il Diavolo says. “If he was lying, you’ll die like the rest of your family. If he was telling the truth... You’re Al’s problem then. Maybe he’ll put you to work at one of his clubs until you’ve paid off what Lou owes him.”

Damn. Luciani owed him money. No wonder he tried to take us out. He must have thought his debt would be erased if he got rid of one of the other families.

The remaining men gather in the little fenced yard. Al is bleeding from a cut on his cheek but otherwise fine. Three of the guys were killed, and one more is seriously injured. Il Diavolo has a cut on his side that I didn’t even notice, as he showed no reaction whenever he got it. The rest of us got away without injury. We pile into the SUVs, anxious to get out of there before more Luciani men show up. With the head cut off, either the family will fall or more likely, someone will rise

to take his place immediately, and we don't want to be there when a bunch of thirsty heirs show up to duke it out.

I end up in a car with Al, Il Diavolo, and Bianca, who has fallen silent and stares out the window with mascara running down her cheeks from her blank eyes. She's probably in shock.

"You need to get that looked at?" Al asks Il Diavolo, who sits up front with him.

"I'll stop by the chop shop later," Il Diavolo responds.

We don't discuss the findings until we're back at Uncle Al's. His housekeeper takes Bianca off to clean up, I assume, and the rest of us head into his office space downstairs. When we're all seated around the table with the consigliere, Al speaks up.

"What information did you get from the late Luciani?" he asks.

I wait for Il Diavolo to speak, but he gestures a giant hand at the me, his other mitt holding a towel to his side. "It's your moment, rookie," he says. "Tell him."

I clear my throat, not wanting to deliver this news and unable to keep from wondering if this is a shoot-the-messenger

situation, and Il Diavolo knows it and doesn't want to be the one to tell Al that his beloved grandson conspired to have him killed.

“He said Little Al tipped him off,” I say quietly.

Uncle Al doesn't even bat an eye.

“I'm sorry, sir,” I add.

“Were you aware of this?” he asks.

My blood runs cold. I'm Little Al's partner. Of course scrutiny falls on me. “No, sir.”

“Then don't apologize,” he says. “He set up the meeting and wasn't there when shots were fired. You joined at the last minute and took a hit for me. And I'm going to let you deal with him.”

I nod, gulping down the protest. It's one thing to shoot the bastard who tried to have me killed and set up my wife's family, trying to pit us against each other. Luciani's another family. Little Al is a Valenti. And not only is he family, he's my partner. Sure, he's kind of a tool, but we've worked as a team for the past three months, since my first day on the job. It might as well have been my whole life. I've grown a lot, learned, and hardened to become a man who gets shit done,

who does what he needs to survive. A lot of it is thanks to Little Al.

He taught me well.

So I used what he taught me. I nod, and I give the only answer that lets me live another day, go home to my wife, and try to be a better man tomorrow. “Yes, sir,” I say.

“He’s not answering his phone,” the consigliere says with a frown. “I’ll try his old lady.”

One of the men at the table grunts. “You think someone tipped him off?”

“We didn’t leave anyone alive to tip him off,” says Joey One-Eye.

“Did anyone take Bianca’s phone?” I ask.

There’s a long moment of tense silence while the consigliere calls Mrs. De Luca. After a brief conversation, he hangs up and shakes his head. “She says he left early this morning and she hasn’t heard from him since.”

“Son of a bitch,” Uncle Al curses quietly. “He was here for some of the planning to take down Luciani. He must have known he’d talk, and he ran like the coward he is.”

“He’ll be lying low, waiting to see if we succeeded,” the consigliere says.

“Need me to find him?” asks Il Diavolo, his voice a low rumble.

“We’ll find him, alright,” Al says, grimacing. “He’s a threat that needs to be eliminated.”

As we leave the room after a few more minutes of discussion, Al lingers, putting a hand on my shoulder to keep me another second after everyone leaves. “Brother killing brother is just another day in the Life,” he says. “You seemed a little shaken in there. It’s just business, son.”

“I know.”

“Good,” he says. “You’ve had enough excitement for tonight. Go home to your wife.”

“Thank you.”

He gives me a long, shrewd look. “Is that going better?”

“Yes,” I say. And then, because he’s the only person I can talk to about this, I stay a minute longer. “Can I ask your advice about something?”

“Sure,” he says. “Does this need a drink?”

“Thanks,” I say as he pours a couple glasses of whiskey from a decanter on the liquor cart in the corner. “What would you do if someone hurt the person you’re supposed to take care of, but that person doesn’t want you to do anything about it?”

Al nods slowly, sinking back down into his chair and leaning back, swirling the liquor in his glass and watching me. “I don’t know all the details, and I’m guessing I’m not going to get them, so it’s hard to say,” he says. “But forgiveness is a personal matter, King. If someone chooses that over revenge, that’s their way. You might not choose the same for yourself, but you can’t stop someone else from choosing it.”

“I don’t think she chose forgiveness,” I say. “She’s held onto it all this time, and she’s starting to deal with it, but she hasn’t chosen either revenge *or* forgiveness. She’s just living in it.”

“Then I’d say you’re doing the right thing by waiting for her to decide,” he says. “When the time is right, she’ll choose what she wants to do. If you get revenge for her before she’s made that choice, she might never forgive *you*. And I was married long enough to know that’s not something you want in the bed between you.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding. “Thanks for the advice. And your trust in me.”

“You’ve done well so far,” he says. “As long as you keep giving me no reason to doubt you, you’ll get along just fine.”

I think of Little Al, about how much it must hurt to be betrayed by your own family—and not just far extended family or people who work for you, but your own grandson, whom you’ve groomed to take your place. Uncle Al may not show it, but he’s got to hate that. Which means if I want to show my loyalty to him, I have to kill the guy who betrayed him.

I thought pulling the trigger on a stranger would be the hardest thing I’d ever have to do, but this is so much harder. I don’t hate Little Al. And he’s not a stranger whose face I can pretend I don’t see when I can’t sleep at night. He’s a friend. I don’t know how in the hell I’m going to go through with it. I’ll find a way, though. It’s time to put what I’ve learned to use. This is my first true test. This will make or break me, put me in a grave or maybe in Uncle Al’s inner circle. And more than that, it’ll prove something to myself. I need to know if I can survive this life when it’s not just easy jobs, or if I choke in

crunch time. Time to prove that I can do the right thing even when it's hard.

There's no easy way out on this one. The mafia rules are clear. He violated them. He knew the risks, the consequences. Those are clear, too. It may have been my job to worry about my partner's life when we were working side by side, but he's not my partner anymore. He's the fallen heir to this empire. He chose where to put his loyalty, and I choose where to put mine. He made his bed, and it's my job to make sure he sleeps in it—permanently.

twenty

Eliza

“What’s wrong?” I ask King, sliding a hand over his cheek. He’s lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, the same as he’s done for the past three nights. I don’t think the guy ever sleeps.

He gives me a distracted smile and covers my hand with his. “Nothing.”

“Talk to me,” I plead, snuggling up next to him. “You can tell me anything.”

“It’s not you,” he says. “It’s just... Work stuff. The less you know about that, the better.”

“King,” I say. “I know all about your job, the families, the Life. I know you want to protect me, but you don’t have to do that.”

“But I want to,” he says, turning his face toward me. “I’m your husband. It’s my job to protect you. And I couldn’t do that when you needed it most.”

“You didn’t even know me then,” I point out.

“But I want to do something for you now,” he says. “Maybe we can go find her. I have an uncle on the force, and one who’s a lawyer. I can find her, Eliza. I can make her pay for what she did.”

I swallow hard. I don’t know if I’m ready for that. But I know I have to figure out a way to move on, and I don’t know if I can do that without seeing her at least once. Do I want revenge, though? I’m not sure what I want from her, which means I’m sure I don’t want to see her. Not yet. I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready to confront her, if I’d be able to handle it.

“I’ll think about it,” I say.

King turns back to stare at the ceiling again. “What about your brother?”

“He’s dead.”

“I meant... Was she abusing him, too?”

I swallow hard and roll onto my back. I never wanted to confront any of this, but some part of me knew he’d keep asking, that he’d want all the answers. And he deserves them.

“I don’t really know,” I admit. “He was a lot older than me. I remember sitting on the floor in the bathroom one time,

and she'd left me there, but I knew she was coming back. And she was trying to get Jonathan to come in, but he wouldn't. I don't remember the reason she was giving for why he needed to. I just remember that I was scared he'd come in and know. I remember him saying something like, 'I don't want to be a part of this house of horrors anymore.' A week later, he was killed."

King's jaw clenches, and I cringe back, imagining what he's thinking of me. "Where was your dad?"

"He was at work," I say. "He was always gone. I don't know if anything happened to my brother when he was younger, but he was old enough to refuse then. He just walked away. But she always made me feel guilty, like I'd let her if I loved her. She always said it was good for me, that I should enjoy it. And she'd get mad when I didn't, like there was something wrong with me."

"Eliza, you know that's not true, right? She was a sick person. And you were a kid, and she was the person who was supposed to love and protect you."

I nod, unable to meet his eyes. "I know," I say. "And the fucked up part is, she only did the right thing once in her whole fucking life, and that's when she left. So I kept focusing

on that, on the one time she protected me. And I convinced myself that meant she loved me, even after everything else she did. I kept telling myself that, until it grew like a tall tale into this legend. She didn't just protect me one time, didn't just love me, but she was a hero."

"I wondered why you admired her."

"I don't," I say. "You know that. I just...I guess it was a defense. I kept repeating it until if I didn't think about it too hard, I could believe it. But I never thought about when she was here. I only thought about her leaving. It's like she was only here to do one thing—walk out. There was nothing before or after that day. That's all she was. The mom who left. Because if she was that, she didn't have to be a monster."

"And your brother?"

"Dying was his one act. He was only sixteen. When I do think about him, before he died, I remember he was so angry all the time. I was a little scared of him. So maybe Mom did hurt him, too, when he was little, and that's why he was like that. And then when he said that he didn't want to live in her house of horrors... I don't know, maybe... Maybe they just said he was shot to cover up how he really died. I always

thought some things didn't add up. Now I wonder if maybe he did it."

King is quiet for a minute. "I've thought about that with my sister, too. I don't want to, but sometimes I wonder."

"If she killed herself?"

"Yeah," he says quietly. "She was seeing this boy my family hated. My father was set on destroying his whole family. And we're family, so we go along, the way you hate the Valentis because your family does. It was like that."

I swallow hard, knowing he doesn't talk about this to just anyone. He's never really opened up to me before, but he's finally letting his guard down, letting me in. I wish there wasn't painful parts of his past, too, but I'm glad he's sharing them now. Those are the hard parts, and when we can tell each other even the ugly things, there's nothing left to hide.

"Your family wouldn't let her see him?" I ask.

"We tried to stop her. I knew she'd get hurt, that if she loved him, and we hurt him, it would hurt her. I tried to make her see that, to make her stop, but it was like she couldn't. Like she was addicted or something."

“She was in love,” I say softly, running my fingers down King’s chest.

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess.”

“So, what happened?” I ask.

“We had this big fight with their family,” he says. “She wasn’t supposed to be there. But she insisted on coming, and even though I knew I shouldn’t, I let her come along. I...I was supposed to watch out for her.” His voice catches a little, and he looks away.

“I’m sure it wasn’t your fault,” I say softly.

“It was,” he says fiercely. “I was worthless that night, Eliza. I got myself shot, and then I couldn’t even fight when things went down. Crystal ran off, and my brother was so mad at her, he said we should leave her. I argued with him, but I didn’t stop him when he drove off and left her.”

I run my finger over his hipbone to the scar above it, soft and still slightly pink with freshness. I remember Bianca telling me how recently his sister died. “You were shot,” I say. “You weren’t in any condition to be stopping anyone from anything.”

“But I should have been,” he says. “It wasn’t my brother’s fault. He was her twin, and she chose her boyfriend over him. Over us.” He’s quiet for a minute, staring off. “I told myself she’d be fine. We’d left her with her boyfriend. We went to this stupid party, and my brothers started a fire. There was a big fight. By the time we went back for Crystal, she was gone.”

“Gone... How?”

“It was in the middle of this storm,” he says. “We looked for her, but by the time we did, it was too late. The river had come up and taken her boyfriend’s car with both of them in it.”

“Oh my god,” I say. “I’m so sorry.”

“They found the car a couple days later,” he says.

“They were... Stuck in it?” I ask, swallowing hard.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “They never found them. But they found... Evidence... in the back seat that they’d been there that night. I guess too busy fucking to notice the water rising. Part of me thinks... What if she didn’t care that it was? She never thought things through in the long term. She was impulsive and sort of fragile, too. In that moment, she

had him, and she didn't want us interfering. We'd pretty much told her we were going to kill the guy. She probably thought it was the only way not to lose him. If she couldn't have him, they'd go out together. That's the sort of thing she'd do. Dramatic. Romantic. Tragic."

"That's very Romeo and Juliet," I say. "But did you ever think maybe she's still alive?"

He shakes his head. "We hired private investigators and looked for her for a few months after the cops gave up, but the river goes right to the Mississippi, and we were just a little above Louisiana. I like to think she's in the ocean somewhere. She loved the ocean when we were kids."

We're quiet for a minute, two. Then I hug myself around him. "It wasn't your fault," I say again. "And I know you don't want to hear this, but maybe that's the best way to go. With someone you love."

"We could have stopped it," he says. "I could have. I could have convinced my dad to leave him alone. To leave his family alone. I'm sure I could have."

I shake my head. "If they're anything like mine, then you couldn't. Wars between families are bigger than two people."

“But I should have tried,” he insists. “Instead of trying to keep them apart. Maybe if I’d understood what love is like...”

“I think I understand,” I whisper, my heartbeat picking up speed. “Nothing could keep me from being with you.”

He turns in bed to face me, his hand falling on my waist. “That’s why I didn’t want to fall in love with you. I didn’t want you to fall for me, either. If anything happened to me, at least your heart would be safe.”

“Too late,” I whisper, cupping his cheek and leaning in to kiss him. “I think you stole it, King Dolce.”

He smiles into our kiss. “I think you’re the thief, Eliza Dolce.”

I shiver at the way he says my new name. I was so insistent on keeping my independence, not belonging to him. But when he says my name like that, I know I already belong to him, and not because of any agreement between our families. My heart is his. He’s treated it so carefully, I know he’ll always protect me.

“I love you,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his again.

He pulls back gently, his gaze finding mine, his eyes so deep and dark they seem bottomless. “I love you, too,” he says, his voice thick with emotion.

“Make love to me,” I whisper.

He searches my eyes, then leans in and kisses me. “You’re ready?”

“I want to try,” I say. “You deserve a wife who gives you everything. I want to be that for you.”

We kiss for a long time, until my lips feel hot and swollen, and my body is tingling all over. We undress each other, and I marvel in his body the way I always do, the ridges and smooth lines of muscle, the dips and points of bone. He runs his hands over me, too, adoring me without touching me in a sexual way. Still, his touch is electrifying as well as reassuring, and pressure aches between my thighs. When he slides his hand down my belly, I tense, though.

He touches me, and I lay frozen, my heart racing in my chest. I tell myself it’s not so bad, that it feels good. It does feel good. I’m wet against his fingers. But my head is screaming for me to get the fuck out, to fly off the bed like I did the last time he touched me there.

“Tell me if it’s too much,” he murmurs, his mouth on my neck, sending chills of desire through me. So why can’t I just fucking enjoy it like a normal person? I want to scream at myself, my mother, the world. It’s so fucking unfair I want to cry.

He pushes a finger into me, and I let myself breathe, force myself to. He’s saying how good it feels, and it does, it really does. He wants it, and it feels good to him, and maybe I just need to do it and get the first time over with. Only that one time will be scary and painful. I’ll get used to it after that, and it won’t be scary after a while. He deserves a wife who can satisfy him, a wife who isn’t broken. I won’t let someone evil define me, won’t let her rob me of this.

It’s my body. My choice. I can reclaim it, take back the experience, replace it with this. With a good man who loves me, and I can feel how much he wants and needs me in every part of his body, in the trembling of his restraint, in the thick, hard ridge of his cock biting into me as he pushes against me, in his rapid breaths, his heart hammering under my fingertips when I touch his chest. I remind myself to move so he knows I want it, too, that I’m not frozen, that I’m participating.

He moves on top of me, pulling back to look down at my face, his eyes searching mine with concern and desire blurring the lines between us. Reaching down, he grips his cock, rubbing the head slow and hard through my wetness. Pleasure ripples through me, and I open my legs for him.

“Tell me what you want,” he murmurs, his cock straining against my entrance.

I can only manage one word. “This.”

“I’m going to put it in,” he whispers. “It might hurt a little at first, but I’ll be gentle. If you need to stop, let me know.”

I nod, biting my lip. He pushes harder, and I wince as he breaches my entrance with the slow, steady pressure. He begins to sink deeper, and I gasp as I feel him straining against my walls, filling me until I think I’ll rip apart.

“You ready for the rest of it?” he asks.

No, I’m not ready. But I may never be ready, and if I don’t do it now, it’ll just get bigger and scarier in my head until I can never do it. And I want to. I want to give myself to him fully, with every part of myself. So I nod my head.

King pushes against the resistance inside me, and a sharp pain stabs through me when he breaks the barrier, pushing in until I can't hold back tears. I suck in a shaky breath, trying to blink them away before he sees. He's all the way in, resting on his elbows with his head hanging down beside mine, his breath hot and quick against my neck.

"You feel so fucking amazing," he whispers, kissing my neck, my ear. He doesn't move, waiting for me to adjust, so I force myself to relax.

"Keep going," I whisper. "I'm ready."

He pushes in a few more times, slow and deep, and my whole body rebels, as if we're the wrong ends of magnets being forced together, and at the last second, I just can't. The pain is still there, and oh god, the sensation fills me with paralyzing terror and dread, and tears begin to pour from my eyes.

"Eliza," King says, sounding alarmed. He stops moving, using his hands to smooth back my hair. "You didn't tell me to stop."

"It's fine," I say, gripping his shoulders, wrapping my legs around him. "Just finish."

“You’re crying.”

He says the words gently as he rolls away, as if that’s all the reason anyone needs to stop, as if what my body is showing is more important than what my mouth is saying. His strong, long arms wrap around me, and he holds me against him, and I can feel the hard, wet ridge of his cock pressing into my belly, and it makes me cry harder because I can’t satisfy it. I want to scream and scream and scream until I can’t breathe and can’t speak and can’t feel anything. He stopped and I’m so angry at myself because I’m just. So. Broken.

But he just holds me and doesn’t say anything. Not about how hard it must have been to stop, or how once again he wasn’t satisfied, or that his wife failed him yet again. He strokes my hair and kisses my forehead while shame and fury pour from my eyes. I know I’m safe. That’s the worst part. I know I am, but my body still reacts like I’m not, and I don’t know how to fix that.

At last, my tears run dry, but I can’t look up at King. This feels like the worst failure yet, confirmation of my worst fears—that I can’t have sex.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper at last.

King takes my tearstained face in his hands, raising it to his. He kisses my salty cheeks, my puffy eyes, my red nose. “No, I’m sorry,” he says. “I should have known.”

“What are we going to do?” I ask, clinging to him with all the desperation I feel. I’ve never told anyone the things I’ve told him, my deepest darkest secrets. Now I feel like those secrets are pushing us apart, that they’ll continue to grow between us until there’s no way back to each other. Maybe telling him was a huge mistake, and I never should have opened up to him. I know one thing for sure. If he leaves me, I’ll never tell another soul, never let them destroy another relationship.

“I don’t know,” King admits. “But we’ll get through it. I promise.”

I nod, another tear slipping from my lashes. I want to ask how he can promise that, how he can know. How we can get through it. But it’s my burden to bear.

“Maybe you can talk to someone,” he says. “A therapist or someone who specializes in this type of thing.”

“I can’t see a therapist,” I say, shaking my head. “I’m bound by the code of silence just as much as you are.”

“You don’t have to tell her about the mafia stuff,” he says. “My mom’s been seeing one for years, and she’s Al Valenti’s niece. She doesn’t talk about certain things, but for personal problems... It’s New York, Eliza. Even therapists have therapists.”

I try to smile at his attempt at lightheartedness, but when I think about telling a stranger the things I’ve told King, my heart nearly stops.

“I’ll think about it,” I say, but I already know I won’t. A niece is far removed from the don of a mafia family. I’m a don’s daughter. I’d be terrified of someone thinking I’d rat him out, not to mention I’m now tied to the Valenti family, and they’d be the first to blame me if something got leaked. After all, they already blamed my family when the Lucianis attacked.

“Speaking of talking,” I say, toying with the dark hair at the nape of King’s neck. “I don’t want any secrets between us. I know you think you’re protecting me by not talking about work, but I want to know. I can help, remember?”

“Yeah,” he says. “But not with this.”

“What is it?” I ask, searching his eyes. “You can trust me, King. I’m not just sworn to silence. I’m sworn to you. I

can tell something's been on your mind since you confronted the Lucianis. Tell me."

He sighs and rolls onto his back. "I killed him," he says. "Yeah, we were all there, and no one knows it was me except our fixer, but... I'm the one who pulled the trigger. He's not just anyone, Eliza. He was their boss. What if someone finds out it was me and comes after you?"

I shake my head. "The bastard who took his place is probably blessing you in his prayers every night. These guys are ruthless. They're just happy they got a promotion."

"I didn't even think about it," King says. "I just did it. It was like it was nothing. Il Diavolo had Bianca, and I wanted to get her away from him, and her father was just something in the way, like a door you push through to get somewhere. It's like I forgot he was a person."

I shiver. "You were with Il Diavolo?"

"You know him?" King asks, drawing back to look down at me.

"I know of him," I say. "He's gotten a few of our men to talk before, and they paid."

He frowns and looks back at the ceiling. “Have you heard from Bianca?”

I snort. “She almost got you killed. I think our friendship is officially over.”

King is quiet for a minute.

“What?” I ask, leaning up on one elbow. “She didn’t?”

“No,” he says.

“Then who?” I ask.

“I don’t think I should talk about this.”

“Come on,” I say, laying a hand on his chest. “I’m as much a part of the mafia as you are. I’ve told you everything, King. No secrets. Please?”

He sighs. “It was Little Al. My partner.”

“Shit,” I say, sinking back onto the pillows. “I’m sorry.”

“Which means I’m under the microscope to prove my loyalty,” he says. “And to make matters worse, the son of a bitch took off, and we haven’t found him.”

“You will,” I assure him. If there’s one thing I know, it’s that the mafia doesn’t let go of a grudge. They don’t let

traitors hide forever any more than they let snitches disappear. Even Wit-Sec can't hide most snitches, and nothing can hide a man who ratted out his own family for personal gain. Eventually, they're found and punished.

"I'm supposed to kill him," King admits. "What if I can't do it, El?"

He turns to look at me, his dark eyes brimming with doubts and fears that have kept him up these past nights. I feel like I've been given a sacred gift in his sharing them with me.

"You can," I say. "When the time comes, you'll make the right choice."

"But is that the right choice?" he asks, rolling toward me again, tucking his arm under his head. "What if we're made up of all our choices, and every time, we tell ourselves it's right, but really, we just didn't want to make the impossible choice. And one day, we look at ourselves, and we see all those choices add up to make us a bad person?"

"You're not a bad person," I say firmly. "If it's not the right thing, then you won't do it. You'll do something else. You said it yourself, that when it came to pull the trigger on Luciani, you didn't think twice. You did what you needed to do."

“I didn’t know him,” King says. “He wasn’t my partner.”

“Little Al may have been your partner in name, but if he was really a partner, he wouldn’t have tried to have you killed,” I say, anger rising inside me on his behalf. “If you can’t do it, I will. That asshole almost left me a widow at eighteen.”

Instead of smiling, King’s frown deepens. “I think about that every day,” he admits.

“Well, stop,” I say, throwing a leg over him and cuddling closer. “You’ll find him, and you’ll make sure he never gets a chance to leave me a widow. I know you’ll do it. You have everything it takes to fight and win.”

“And what’s that?” he asks, adjusting his arm to pillow my head before smiling down at me.

“You’re a good man, and you have loyalty to your family and a reason to make it home at night.”

“I think I’m starting to get it,” he says, squeezing me closer. “I thought love was the enemy, but it’s just what you make of it.”

“Sure, love is dangerous,” I agree, turning my head to kiss his shoulder. “But isn’t that what makes it worth it?”

“It must be,” King says. “Because I’d risk anything for you, Eliza. Whatever I have to do to keep you, to make you happy, to be your man, that’s what I’m doing to do. And it’s so fucking worth it.”

“I know you miss her, but maybe that’s what your sister wanted, too,” I say. “To die for love. Maybe that was worth it for her.”

“I wish I could have saved her,” he says quietly, pressing his lips to my forehead.

“I know,” I say. “But maybe she didn’t need you to. Maybe she didn’t want that. You can’t be a hero to everyone.”

He snorts. “I’m no hero.”

“Maybe not,” I admit. “But maybe a hero doesn’t have to swoop in wearing a cape and save everyone. Maybe you can be a hero just by showing up, by being there for someone when anyone else would have walked away.”

“Eliza, I’m never leaving you,” he says, turning my face to his. “You’re my wife.”

“People leave their wives all the time.”

“I’m not one of those people,” he says. “When I make a promise, I mean it. Okay?”

I nod. “Then you’re already a hero in my eyes.”

“Hey,” he says, kissing me lightly on the nose. “Anyone would have to be crazy to walk away from this.”

“And that’s why you’re a hero,” I say, twisting to press my lips against his palm. “You save me a little bit each day just by staying.”

“Then get ready to be rescued, my little mafia princess,” he says, pressing his lips to mine. “Because you’re never getting rid of me.”

“Good,” I say. “Somehow I don’t think I could find someone else to love me even when I’m unlovable.”

“You’re not unlovable,” he says, pulling back to gaze into my eyes. “You are worthy of love, Eliza Dolce.”

“I know,” I whisper. “I must be, or you wouldn’t love me. You don’t love just anyone.”

“I’ve never loved anyone,” he corrects. “You’re the only one, Eliza. There was only ever you.”

I look away, my throat tight. “I just don’t know what I did to earn it,” I admit.

“You don’t have to do anything to earn it,” he says.
“You’re worthy just by being here.”

I lean in to kiss him, and I don’t pull back. I run my hands over his chest, his abs, his thighs. I love that he’s so liberal with his body, that he lets me have all the access I want, as if it’s my body as much as it is his. I love touching him, exploring every inch of his skin.

I just wish I could give him the same in return. Someday, somehow, I’m going to do it. I don’t know how yet, but I vow right here and now that I’m going to make it happen. I will be worthy of him. He may think I am now, but I’m going to prove it to myself, and I won’t stop until I believe it, too. If I have to see a therapist, or tell my father, or make a fucking pilgrimage to the top of Mt. Everest, I’ll do it. I will do it to bring this man the gift he gives me every day, the gift he deserves—me.

twenty-one

King

“It’s time,” Il Diavolo says, nodding for me to get out of the car. We’re parked under a bridge with nothing but warehouses behind us. The river crawls sluggishly by in the other direction. I climb out of the car, pocket the keys, and join the others. The night is windy and crisp, and as I cross the lot, lit only by security lights, I scan the building ahead for signs of life.

As quietly as we can, the four of us creep toward one of the darkened warehouses. Al may have promised this one to me, but he’s not taking any chances. A guy with enough balls to make an attempt on a don needs to be taken out—now. We’ve spent the last month searching for the bastard, and we’re not going to lose him again.

We pull up short at the front of the warehouse, and I look to Joey One-Eye, who gives the signal for two of us to go ahead while he waits outside in case we flush Little Al out. Il Diavolo heads around the corner to watch the back door. I step inside with Arthur, one of Valenti’s other guys.

Any chance at stealth disappears when we find the door locked and have to crack it with a crowbar. After that little delay, we open the door and peer into the darkness. Little Al will be armed, and one of us has to take the first step inside. Since I'm the new guy, it falls to me.

I fight the urge to cross myself before stepping into the darkness. Silence greets me, and I gesture the okay for Arthur to come in. He swings his rifle in an arc, aiming the mounted light around the cavernous space. Around us, light pine boxes sit in giant stacks, with shelves containing boards in the same color along the walls.

A coffin warehouse.

If this isn't the perfect place to die, I don't know what is.

Arthur gestures for me to go right, and he goes left. His light bounces off the pale coffins, and shadows stretch across the room. I edge along a towering stack of the body-sized boxes, wondering how the hell we're going to flush Little Al out of a place like this. I think about everything I know about him, everything he's told me. A coward runs out the back. Only a desperate man, or a stupid one, fights when he knows he won't win.

Little Al's obviously got balls to set up a plan like that against the head of one of the most powerful crime families in New York. He's no coward. He's not stupid, either. But he is cocky. Again, no one else would orchestrate a plan like that. As far as how desperate his is, I'm guessing he's gotta be pretty fucking close to the edge by now. He's been on the run for a month, but he hasn't gone far. He must be sticking around for a reason. Either he's out of money, or he's stayed for someone he cares about.

I creep along the wall, waiting for a sound, a sign that he's here. Maybe he saw the car arrive and slipped out. He was feeding the Luciani's information, and if that family's leadership hadn't changed hands and made fast alliances with us, I'd think they were protecting him. But he doesn't have anyone in his corner now. He's alone, and that's a bad place to be when you've pissed off a criminal organization.

Suddenly, I see a shadow move. I spin that way, my finger steady on the trigger. At first, I don't see anything. But then I see what caused the flicker in the corner of my eye. It wasn't a person. It was a stack of coffins.

I shout a warning to Arthur, but it's lost in the enormous crash. Coffins tumble and cascade, bouncing off

each other and splintering as they smash against the concrete floor. The roar is so loud I don't hear Arthur, so I don't know if he screamed. I only know that I see a dark shadow streak for a small door in the side of the building, a fire exit that's unguarded outside. Joey is at the front entrance, where the workers come and go, and Il Diavolo is at the back, where the shipments go in and out.

Unless one of them is prowling and happens to be on that side, Al's going to have a good head start. I'm lucky to have been against the wall, unharmed by the toppling coffins, but I have to scramble over the debris to get to the fire exit door. By the time I shove through, I see his figure retreating toward the bridge. I take off at a dead sprint after him.

He's almost to the supports on the bridge when I see that he's got nowhere to go except into the river. I imagine him plunging into the polluted water, disappearing under the scummy surface. I pull up short, take careful aim, and get off one shot before he disappears behind the pillars supporting the bridge. I hear cursing behind me and know that at least one of the lookout guys saw him run, and they're after me.

Without waiting for them to catch up and give me backup, I run for the spot where I saw him disappear. My

chances of hitting him are slim once he's in the water. He won't go down without a fight, though. He's probably behind the column, taking aim right now, so I weave in and out as I run, hoping he won't hit me, that the guy behind me will cover me well enough. Dust and grit from the concrete sloping down toward the river blow into my face, but I blink it away, ignoring the stinging in my eyes.

When I'm nearly at the supports, I hear a crack, and I can feel the air move the bullet comes so close to my cheek. But I'm still standing, so I keep going. I could pull up and aim and wait for him to peek around his hideout. Instead, I go full force, pushing myself as hard as I can, until my thighs burn and my feet thud against the pavement. I don't slow as I reach the massive structure. I fly around it and slam into Little Al so hard he goes flying off his feet. Together, we hit the ground with bone-splitting force.

Lucky for me, Al's on the bottom, and he takes the brunt of that force. He groans, cussing and wheezing as he tries to hit me with his gun. Before he can recover himself or get air in his lungs, I grab his wrist and twist it hard. He howls, the gun skittering from his grip as his bones snap. He curses, delivering a crushing left hook to my jaw. It knocks me

backwards, and he scrambles up, but I'm just as fast. I jump to my feet and level my gun at him.

“Don't fucking move,” I warn before he can take a step toward his gun. He's dirty, his clothes ragged, his hair unkempt and greasy, a beard darkening his jaw. Guess he's not visiting a special someone in the city after all.

“I should have known they'd send you alone,” he snarls in disgust. “They don't care about you, King. You're disposable to them.”

“Is that why you tried to fucking dispose of me?” I snap. “You're the motherfucker who sent me into an ambush, after all.”

“Don't get all butt-hurt,” he says. “It wasn't personal. I didn't even know you'd be going when I tipped Luciani off.”

“But you sure as fuck didn't discourage me from going,” I remind him. “In fact, if I remember correctly, you thought it was a splendid idea for me to go. I thought you were just being a dick because you knew I'd have to face Eliza's father, but it wasn't that, was it? You wanted to get rid of me and Al in one shot. You're a sick bastard, you know that?”

“Give me a fucking break,” Little Al says. “You’re nothing, King. Just a worthless little soldier. I might have been having a little fun with you, but you were never even part of the equation.”

“Yeah, well, you should have calculated better,” I say. “Because I’m the reason Al survived.”

“And I bet he’s sucking your dick and kissing your ass for that,” the man’s grandson says in disgust. “You’ve only been at this a few months, and he probably already likes you better. I’ve been doing this my whole fucking life, and I’m still a measly little soldier, no better in his eyes than a rookie who grew up like a pampered prince and showed up barely a day over eighteen with a lollypop in his mouth, thinking he’d take my place. You never even killed a guy, you fucking pussy.”

“I never wanted your place,” I say. “And I sure as hell don’t envy it now.”

We stare at each other for a minute. And maybe he’s right about me, because I’m hoping Il Diavolo shows up and puts a bullet in his brain, puts him out of his misery so I don’t have to do it.

“He wasted my talents,” Little Al says at last. “I could have been something great, you know. I could have been a

legend. Instead, I was a fucking babysitter.”

“Maybe he didn’t trust you,” I say. “Can you blame the guy?”

“I’m his fucking grandson!” Little Al throws up his hands, then howls in pain at the reminder of his broken bones. “He never respected me, never listened to me,” he rants. “I had great ideas, but he passed me over every fucking time. I’m next in line, but he didn’t teach me shit. I’m twenty-three years old, and I’m still doing the same fucking job I was doing when I started.”

“Maybe he could tell you were a sneaky son of a bitch, and he was never going to let you take over. Al’s a smart man. He probably knew you were a coward.”

“I’m not a fucking coward,” Little Al growls, his eyes looking feral in the pale lights reflected off the water. “If I were, I wouldn’t have risked it all to get him out of the picture.”

“You tried to kill your own grandfather because you didn’t get a promotion?” I ask, hardly believing anyone could be so small.

“Because I’ll never get the fucking promotion I deserve,” he rages. “Al’s not going anywhere anytime soon. The guy’s sixty and still going strong. If no one took him out, he’d be around another twenty years. Was I just supposed to wait around until I’m almost fifty before I take over? It’s my rightful place! He had his turn. It’s my turn!”

“Sorry, but I don’t think so.”

“You can’t kill me,” he says, his eyes going even more wild than they already are. “I have a wife, a kid! Let me go, King. What’s it to you? Here, take my things. Bring Al my watch, tell him you killed me.” He pulls off his watch and tosses it at my feet, then starts taking off anything else he can, tossing his wallet and shoes down with them.

“You know it doesn’t work like that,” I say, but I consider it. What would it hurt if I stripped him of everything he owns, everything that identifies him, and let him run? I could tell Uncle Al I dumped his body in the river.

I think of my sister sinking into the river. What if she didn’t die that night?

But of course she did. Just like Little Al has to die tonight.

“What does it matter if you let me go?” he presses. “I was your partner, King. I did right by you. You think you’ll come back a hero if you kill me, but just watch. You’ll never move up. You’ll be stuck at the bottom forever. He doesn’t care about you. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself, the selfish old bastard.”

“And you did?” I ask. “That’s why you thought it would be funny to send me into a death trap that you set up yourself?”

“I told you, I wasn’t even thinking about you,” he says. “It wasn’t about you!”

“You’re right,” I say, cocking the gun. “It wasn’t about me, but you didn’t care if I died, if I left *my* wife a widow. It was all just a cruel joke to you, pushing me to join Al because you couldn’t handle the fact that he saddled you with a rookie.”

“Don’t shoot,” he says, holding up both hands. “I’m unarmed, man. You don’t wanna do this. Please. I’ll disappear, and no one will ever know you didn’t do it.”

“I’ll know,” I say quietly. I’ll know, and I’ll never sleep easy knowing he’s out there, that he could show up and put another hit on me so I can’t tell them he’s still out there. I

think of Eliza telling me I can do it. Of my sister, at the bottom of the ocean, sleeping in peace with her boyfriend, someone she loved enough to die for. Little Al can rest easy, too, but he's never loved anyone enough to die for them. He mentioned his wife and kid now, but he wasn't thinking about them when he risked everything. Uncle Al has shown me more kindness in our few encounters than this shithead ever did. He's the one who only cares about himself.

I care about someone else. Someone I need to get home to because she'll be waiting and worrying, wondering if tonight will be the night I don't come home. She's been through so much, lost her brother and her mother and her childhood. She doesn't need to lose her husband, too. I promised her I'd never leave. I intend to keep that promise.

I'd die for her if that's what she needed. But she doesn't. She needs me to kill for her.

I always knew this moment was coming. I knew before I even took the oath of omerta that I'd be here one day. That Uncle Al would ask me to kill, and I'd have to do it or take the target's place. If I can't kill a traitor, then I am a traitor. If I don't have it in me to kill a man, then I'm a dead man myself. Little Al made his choice. I need to make mine. To prove I'm

worthy of the Life, of Uncle Al's trust, of the beautiful, broken wife they gave me.

For her.

I pull the trigger. Little Al drops to his knees, his eyes wide, as if he can't believe I had the balls to shoot him. He clutches his chest, his bewildered gaze finding mine. The moon behind me reflects in his eyes, and I'm grateful for what it hides.

"You—You shot me," he says in disbelief.

"You knew what you were doing," I say, my voice hard, as empty as my chest. "You chose to turn your back on family. You know this is the way it has to be."

I pull the trigger again, and he falls forward on his hands before crumpling to the dirty pavement. I'm relieved I don't have to see his eyes. But I bend and swipe a hand over his face to close them, anyway. It's the least I can do. I didn't hate Little Al. I'd rather it ended some other way. But this is how it is.

I turn and head back up the bank, leaving his body. When I reach the pillar he hid behind, just ten feet back, a

figure steps out of the shadows. I nearly shoot before I register the hulking giant form of Il Diavolo.

“I stand corrected,” he says. “Guess you had it in you after all.”

“You were there the whole time?” I ask. “Thanks for the fucking backup.”

“After your little hissy fit about the Luciani girl, I didn’t think you’d be able to pull this one off,” he says. “You’re soft, kid. In this business, there’s no room for that. Eat or be eaten.”

“Spare the lecture,” I say. “I did my job. What was yours? Stand there and watch him kill me if that’s the way the chips fell?”

“My job was to make sure *you* got the job done,” he says. “And to kill him if you didn’t have the balls. This was a test, in case you hadn’t figured it out. Big Al wants to know what you’re made of. Probably wanted to know where your loyalties lay, too. After shit like this goes down, family killing family, you have to take a good hard look at everyone in your inner circle.”

I'm not surprised. I knew he'd want to make sure I hadn't been tainted by Little Al's treachery. Again, that's just the way it is. I can't be offended. I get it.

All the way home, I repeat Il Diavolo's words in my head.

He said everyone in Uncle Al's inner circle. He included me in that.

When I started this job, I wanted to be the kind of man Al Valenti approves of, hard enough to survive the Life. As twisted as it is, killing his grandson is the way I proved that I am. Not just to him, but to myself. I don't know if I've become a better man, but I know I'm a stronger one. I know I'm going to do well, despite my initial reservations. In the past six months, I've gone from a boy who thought he was a man to the real thing. Eliza turned me from a cocky high school kid who thought he was all that because girls wanted to fuck him, to a real lover. And the mafia has turned me from a scared boy wondering if he could pull the trigger to a man who's taken lives in self-defense, for revenge, and as payment.

The last night I stayed at Ma's, I told myself I was closing the door to my old life and stepping into a new one. I didn't know then how true that was. Now I do. I couldn't walk

back into my old life now if I tried. I wouldn't fit. I've become what I was always meant to be, ever since my father made a business deal with the mob—a made guy. And not only a made guy, but one worthy of Al's inner circle. One who would do what a man has to do in this business.

What I said to Little Al is true, though. I don't want to be an heir to this empire. But I want to be indispensable, and maybe I just proved that I am. I may not ever be a don, but maybe one day, I can be the consigliere to one. I may have come to them without experience, but I've proven myself to them, proven my loyalty, my protectiveness, my strength. After all, this is my family now, and no one fucks with my family.

This is where I belong. And what I did tonight shows what part I play in that family.

And best of all, there's the little family of two that I've made with Eliza at home. That's my reason now, the only one I need. I'll always love my brothers, I'll always miss my sister, and protect the Valenti name, but Eliza is what I live for. I can finally move on from the mistakes of my past and face a future more promising than I ever imagined. I have the kind of life I never dared to hope for. I have a wife I love and a job that

recognizes my value, and a family that's proud of me. And I'm alive for one more day. That's all I can ask for.

Once, I thought a family was a liability, but now I see it for everything it offers, in all its complexity. Yes, it's a liability, and it makes me vulnerable. It also gives me the strength to do what I need to do while keeping me grounded, making sure I don't lose who I am despite the monstrous acts the job sometimes requires. When I started working for the Valentis, I thought it was easier to feel nothing than to feel pain, so that's what I would do. It's true, in a way. It is easier. But sometimes it's worth it to feel the pain just to feel everything else that comes with it. After all, a man with no feeling is nothing but a monster in a suit.

Once, my sister said I'd see love differently if I felt it. Now I know she was right. If I've learned anything from loving Eliza, it's that love is hard and sometimes painful, but it makes everything in the world worth it. It makes even one day with her worth risking it all. I hope Crystal got to feel that before she died. I hope it was worth it to her.

I know it is to me. Eliza helped me see that. She helped let go, give up control, and live in the moment, knowing that the next one is not guaranteed. This is the only moment we're

given, the only moment to tell my wife I love her, to *show* her I do. Instead of holding back and being selfish, I'll love her with every bit of my heart, for every moment we're given, and be grateful that she loves me back. That's something worth dying for.

twenty-two

Eliza

I sit in the back of the car, clutching my purse in my lap and staring out at the city bathed in cool November sun. Every few minutes, I thumb open the bag's closure and peek inside at the Glock nestled there, and my heart does a funny little flip. I glance up at the driver and my bodyguard, busy discussing the Yankees, before checking my phone to make sure King hasn't checked in. He'll get worried if I don't answer within a reasonable timeframe, and that's the last thing I need today.

We turn into a sketchy neighborhood, and I sink a little lower in my seat, acutely aware of how much our opulent town car stands out in this part of Manhattan. I'm glad I brought the bodyguard along and not just the driver. King doesn't use the driver, since he's the rare New Yorker who actually owns a car, but I'm glad he kept him on payroll for when I need to take... Let's just call it an unauthorized outing.

And hey, I'm being safe. I brought a bodyguard.

We turn into an area of project houses in East Harlem, and the driver slows, glancing at the GPS on the dash. I've

spent plenty of time in Manhattan, and while I know there are bad areas, we never go there. This street is slummy as fuck, and I'm hoping we're lost, because that's better than the alternative.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I ask, glancing nervously at the sun as it sinks into a murky stew of smog in the west. Suddenly, this seems like a very bad idea.

“I'm afraid so,” the driver says. “I'll stay with the car.”

My heart stutters erratically in my chest, and it's not because this neighborhood is scary. What am I doing? What if I can't go through with it?

But then I think of my husband going to work every day, facing the most dangerous men in New York, taking down the partner he should have been able to trust but who tried to get him killed, and then coming home to a wife who is still broken despite my best efforts to move on.

I take a deep breath and reach for the door. “I'm ready.”

My bodyguard gets out first, but I step in front of him, leading the way. After scanning the tall buildings of the Jefferson Housing project and rechecking the address on the

sticky note where I scribbled it after secretly contacting King's uncle with connections, I head for the doors. A couple Hispanic guys stand out front smoking cigarettes and watching us with calculating, suspicious gazes. I hurry inside and start up the stairs. I have to pull my shirt over my nose halfway because the smell of urine is so strong it brings tears to my eyes.

When we reach the fourth floor, we exit into the hallway. An old man lies against the wall, hopefully sleeping, though I don't stick around to see if he's breathing. I head for the door to the apartment and knock. I can hear loud music thumping from down the hall, and I have to knock a couple more times. Someone in the next apartment yells for us to shut the fuck up, though they don't bother opening the door.

At last, the door opens a crack, and a bloodshot, unfocused eye blinks at us from inside. "Yeah?" a deep woman's voice asks. I can just make out brown skin and frizzy cornrows in the dim lighting from within.

"I'm Eliza Pomponio," I say, using my maiden name. "I'm looking for my mother. Is she here?"

"And who's that?" the woman asks, her eye moving to my bodyguard.

“This is my friend,” I say.

“Nuh-uh,” she says. “That’s the DEA.”

“He’s not DEA,” I say. “He’s here to protect me.”

“You gonna need it around here,” she says. “A pretty little thing like you, shit. Won’t last an hour.”

“I just want to see my mom,” I say, my voice steady despite the trepidation growing inside me. “I haven’t seen her in ten years, and I heard she was living here. Her name’s Margaret, or Maggie, Pomponio.”

“Maggie, baby,” the woman calls behind her. “You got a kid?”

I hear a quiet voice speak, but I can’t make out the words.

“She says she don’t have a kid,” the woman tells us, looking me up and down with suspicion.

“I told you, I haven’t seen her in ten years,” I repeat. “I need to see her. Just this once. Then I’ll leave you alone, and I’ll never bother you again. Can you just get her to come to the door for one minute? Please?”

The woman sighs and steps back from the door, yelling that this isn’t her business, and she doesn’t want to deal with

it. A minute later, another face appears for just a second, and then the door closes, and I hear the chain lock rattle, and then it opens fully. For the first time in ten years, I stand face to face with my mother. My abuser.

I wish I could say I hate her, or that when I see her, I feel nothing. That I could take out my gun and shoot her and walk away.

Instead, I stare at her, and I feel sad and sick and shocked.

“Come in,” she says quietly. “Your bodyguard can wait out here. There’s just a bunch of women in here, and most of them’s asleep.”

I nod to my guard, but he insists on checking the apartment before he’ll agree to stand outside and let me go in with her. When we step inside, it’s so dim I can barely make out the two figures lying on the floor in the living room, the carpet around them threadbare and stained, with holes from cigarette burns and who knows what else. One more woman lies sprawled on a sagging couch with the springs exposed.

Mom gestures for me to follow her into the kitchen. A cracked, plastic dish rack holds clean dishes, and the room itself is clean, though it’s literally falling apart. Strips of

linoleum are missing, as well as half the ceiling, so you can see up to the floor of the next apartment and bits of insulation hanging down. The counters are burned and stained and missing chunks of the Formica or whatever they used for the counters when this place was built.

My mother sits down at the table, which is in similar condition to the rest of the place.

“Mom, what are you doing here?” I ask, trying to keep the horror out of my voice.

“What are *you* doing here?” she asks.

When I pictured this meeting, I thought I’d come in guns blazing. I thought I’d be so angry, that I’d punch her teeth out and put a bullet in her head for ruining me for the only person who’s ever loved me besides my father. But I can’t imagine anything I could do would punish her more than this.

Once, Mom was a mafia princess like me. She grew up rich, and she married a mafia king.

Or maybe she never grew up at all. Maybe that’s why she thought she could do whatever she wanted, and it would never come back on her. That she could run off and become an

actress and everything would go her way, the way it always had.

But now, as we sit across a wobbly table from each other, I look at her full in the face for the first time. I have to admit that as bad as this place looks, it's just a place. Just as they keep it clean even though it's a shithole, good people can come out of the worst circumstances. People can come from nothing.

The opposite is also true. Bad people can come from every opportunity, every privilege. Someone can grow up rich, with everything handed to them, getting away with everything, and then marry a rich man who doesn't watch them in the bathroom with their own kids. And they can end up like this. Her once lustrous chestnut hair hangs in thin strings from her head. Her clothes droop off her body, her shoulders so thin I can see knobs of bone sticking up against her shirt. Her cheeks are sunken, her teeth stained and broken, her eyes lifeless.

“Mom, what happened? I thought you went off to become an actress.”

“I did,” she says. “Just—give me a minute. I can't believe this is real. Am I dreaming?”

“Not dreaming,” I say. “I came to talk about what happened when I was a kid.”

“Let me get a smoke,” she says, getting up and pulling open one drawer and then the next, muttering curses. At last, she comes back with a pack of cigarettes and sits down, lighting up with a shaking hand. She immediately coughs, a deep, wet, rattling cough. “You want one?”

“No, thanks,” I say, making a face before I can help it.

“That’s right,” she says. “Don’t want to stain those pretty teeth. Looks is all a woman has at your age. Gotta keep up appearances until you can be auctioned off to the highest bidder.”

“Mom,” I say, my voice hardening. “I’m already married.”

She coughs again, waving smoke away with one hand as she stares at me in the dim lighting of the kitchen. I can see track marks on her arms from whatever she’s shooting up. “Is that why you came?” she asks, her voice bitter, like I’m selfish for not coming to see how she is.

“Yes,” I say, anger building into a hard knot in my chest. She didn’t even ask about him, about the wedding that

she didn't attend.

“Well,” she says. “Congratulations.”

“I didn't come for congratulations,” I say, my voice hard. “I don't need anything from you, not even your best wishes.”

She snorts, then holds in a cough. “Don't tell me you need money.”

“No,” I say. “I came to kill you. You ruined me, Mom. How could you do that to your own daughter? What kind of sick fuck does that?”

Her fingers tremble as she holds her cigarette, staring at me like she's shocked that I'd bring it up, that I'd dare speak those things aloud. After all this time, she probably thought she'd never have to answer for what she did.

“I never wanted to marry your father,” she says, her voice trembling. “I wanted out, but he wouldn't let me. My father wouldn't, either. Women are just pawns to them, pretty playthings to use and sell off when they tire of them.”

“That's your excuse?” I ask. “Your father used you the way you used me?”

She goes on speaking without acknowledging my words, sucking angrily at her cigarette every few sentences. “They just want to breed you like an animal and make more pretty playthings for them to use. And then once you’ve made them an heir and another piece of meat to auction off, they have no interest in you. Your usefulness is gone by twenty-five, and they don’t need you anymore. They go find a new little whore and leave you at home to raise their kids so they can use them to their advantage all over again.”

“Don’t you dare speak badly about my father to me,” I say, gripping the edge of the table so hard I think it’ll crumble. “He’s the only person in my life who did the right thing.”

She snorts smoke out both her nostrils. “Your father’s a monster, Eliza,” she says, and I remember that she’s the first person I ever heard call him that. “You really think that other family killed your brother? No, sweetheart. It was your own beloved father. He found out what Johnny’d been doin’ to you, and he killed his own son.”

“What *he’d* been doing?” I swallow hard, staring at her through the haze of smoke. I don’t want to believe her. If my father found out but thought it was my brother hurting me, not Mom, he might have killed him. But she’s lying. I know she is.

Dad would have gotten me help. And my brother's death was too hard on Mom, and that's why she left.

Or maybe she left because she was afraid he'd talked before he died.

"That's why you left, wasn't it?" I ask. "Not to protect me, not because you loved me but couldn't stop and you wanted to keep me from what you were doing to me. You weren't even conflicted about it, were you, Mom? Are you even sorry?"

"You look like you're doing fine," she says. "Come in here looking all pretty. Expensive clothes. That handbag probably cost a year's rent in a place like this. Am I supposed to feel sorry for you, Eliza? Would you rather I'd taken you with me?"

"No," I say, horrified at the thought. I don't even want to imagine what I'd have become by now if she'd taken me from Dad. But he'd never have let her. He might have let her leave him, not gone after her like most mafia men would. But if she'd taken his daughter? He would have hunted her to the ends of the earth.

"Then I did a good thing by you," she says. "You'll see soon enough. Marriage takes the best years of your life and

leaves you with nothing. You're too young to believe me, but you will."

"You're wrong," I say quietly. My voice is firm, though. Her words played on a loop in my childhood, cursing marriage and men and my father. I didn't even realize how much of my objection to marriage came from her until now. She's the one who told me over and over, when I was way too young to understand, that marriage was a trap, a curse, a pit of quicksand to be avoided at all cost. As she splattered my little plastic plate with dinner, she cursed my father for not being home, cursed her life, her marriage, and the institution in general. Somewhere along the way, my impressionable little kid brain internalized it.

But marriage isn't a trap. Not for me. For me, it's the net that caught me on the way down when I was falling off the tightrope she put me on all those years ago. It's a support system, someone who will always be there for me because he has no choice, either. That's not a bad thing, though. It means he'll work harder than anyone else ever would because we know we have to make it work. Even when it's hard, we are there for each other, making the other grow, making ourselves better for the other. Marriage means someone who tries to

understand me when I'm irrational, to love me even in my most unworthy moments. It means learning to think of someone else's needs, to stop being selfish and running from reality.

My husband didn't ruin me. He threw me a lifeline, and now he's slowly saving me, pulling me from the quicksand she pushed me into when I was too young to understand what it was, too young to take a step and get out. Her toxic beliefs are hardwired into my brain, screwing me up for life. That's the curse. Not marriage.

"You buy into it, don't you?" she muses, watching me. "All your father's lies. The Life. I'm too smart for that. I wasn't going to be part of it. They're all sick bastards, every one of them. I wanted my own life."

"And it looks like you fucking found it."

We stare at each other across the table for a long minute. Mom gets up to get an ashtray and crushes out her cigarette before sitting back down.

"Your father's the monster," she says again, a familiar refrain from my childhood. "All of them are. The way they treat us. We're nothing but a conquest, some dumb thing to stroke their ego and their dick. You think you won't wind up

that way, but mark my words, as soon as you've served your purpose, that new husband of yours will trade you in for a younger model. See, once you have kids, you're not so tight anymore, and he'll want a young one again so he can show his prowess, make him feel powerful when she worships him, make the other men admire how many sluts he can get to spread their legs for him."

"Not every man is like that," I say. "And not every woman does what you did when a guy cheats on her. I'm sorry Dad was unfaithful, but that doesn't excuse the fact that you hurt me."

"Don't judge me," she snaps. "Once you see what you'd do to get his attention, how you lose your mind sitting home night after night, knowing you have nothing to look forward to for the rest of your life, living on nothing but the fuel of your own rage while some teenage whore at one of his clubs gets his affection, the gifts, everything you once got. You'll convince yourself that maybe it's because he didn't get to pick you, that it was all chosen for him. That if he'd gotten to choose for himself, he would have chosen her. Everyone deserves love, after all."

I shiver, remembering King's words.

Mom laughs. “You already know it’s true. You’ll be a fool once or twice, but pretty soon you’ll see the truth. He doesn’t love the first one or the fortieth. He just keeps shoving his dick into more of them in desperation to fill the empty cavern inside him where his heart should be. He can’t love those girls any more than he loves you. He can’t love anyone. That’s what the mafia does to you. It makes men monsters, and women into empty shells.”

“Stop,” I say, slamming my palm down on the table. I let her control me for too long, not just my body, but my brain. She told me lies, and she knew I wanted to trust her so badly I’d believe them. But no more.

Mom jumps, licking her lips nervously and glancing around like she forgot where she was, who she was talking to. She reaches for her cigarettes and pulls out another one.

“I’m sorry if your father abused you, too,” I say. “I’m sorry if Dad cheated on you, though I’m guessing it had at least something to do with you not wanting anything to do with him. He shouldn’t have done that. But I didn’t come here to hear about what a monster Dad is. I know what people say. He likes women. He’s killed people. He’s far from perfect. But he doesn’t abuse children. Nothing excuses that.”

She smirks and lets out a stream of smoke. “How old’s his current *goomah*?”

“Twenty-seven,” I say. “Yeah, she’s young. But she’s not a child.”

She sits there smoking for a few minutes before speaking. “I thought I’d strike out on my own, you know. Have a glamorous life. Be a Broadway star. You know what they told me?”

I shake my head.

“They told me I was too old. That I should’ve started earlier. I wanted to take acting classes, you know, but where was I going to get money? My father wasn’t going to give me money. If I contacted him, he would have been furious, would have sent me right back home. And your father, of course he wasn’t going to support me. At thirty-five, I was already done with life. I had no purpose in my marriage, no prospects as an actress, no skills to get a job...”

“What have you been living on the past ten years?” I ask. “Welfare?”

She gives a mirthless laugh. “I’m still married to your father,” she says. “I wouldn’t qualify for help. I did things...”

The things a woman with no prospects has to do to get money.”

I close my eyes for a second. I don't want to feel for this monster, but I do. She's my mother, after all. She may be a monster, but she's a human one. I have compassion for her the way I would if a stranger told me this story. Because that's what she is. A stranger.

I never knew her then. Kids don't know their parents at that age. Parents are rulers, providers, protectors, jailers, and sometimes heroes. They are not complex human beings who make mistakes and have flaws and opinions and dreams that they gave up. Even having parents who talked to me about those things didn't really make me see them that way, as someone with internal struggles equal to mine.

I'm just starting to want to know my father as a person, now that he's not in control of my life. I could stay in contact with my mother, try to get to know her, too, with all her hurts and failures. I could save her.

But then I think of something King said. That people make their choices, and that makes them who they are. They do right or they do wrong, and each choice adds to the sum of their character.

My mother made her choices. She hurt me. Maybe she hurt my brother. If she's telling the truth, and Dad somehow found out, and she made him think Jonathan was the one hurting me, then she got him killed. And yes, she has a horrible life now, but it's one she made for herself. I won't invite it into my life. After all, I want kids. I want to be a good mother. And a good mother would never have someone in her life, and one day her kids' lives, who's made the choices and done the things my mother has done.

There's one thing that might have swayed me. Maybe that's the real reason I came.

To see if she'd changed.

And now I know.

Because the last choice she's made, the one she made today, the one that lets me know she'll never change? That was her choice not to apologize.

I didn't come here for that, didn't even expect it. But she could have offered. She could have taken responsibility, told me she'd made a horrible mistake, told me it haunted her every day of her life. She could have cried and begged forgiveness. Or even just acknowledged what she did and that it was wrong, that it hurt me.

I may never have forgiven her, but she could have asked. Maybe that's why I came. Just to hear her excuse, to see what she'd say, as if anything she'd say could justify what she did. Still. Maybe I wanted that, the impossible. I wanted her to have a reason good enough to make me understand how you could do such a thing to a child who trusted you, a child you should have protected.

I push back from the table, the chair nearly dumping me on the floor with the uneven legs before I catch myself and stand. "I think I've heard all I need to hear."

"That's it?" she asks. "I thought you came to kill me."

I sling my bag over my shoulder and face her squarely. She doesn't stand, just looks up at me through the smoke, her strung-out face framed by the linoleum-stripped floor and the gaping hole where a cabinet door is missing behind her. She doesn't sound like she'd mind if I killed her.

"I think you're doing a bang-up job of that on your own," I say. "Guess karma's a bitch."

"If karma were real, we'd all be living like this," she says, gesturing around with the stub of her cigarette. "You think you'll be different, but I was there once, too. Just

married to some big shot, I bet. I was just like you. Thought I'd have it all. Now look at me."

"You left," I say. "That was your choice."

"Stay in the Life, do what they do, and you'll become a monster, too," she says. "You just watch."

"No," I say firmly. "I'm nothing like you."

"And watch those babies around that big shot husband," she says, tapping her cigarette. "Your father killed his son. Would have killed you, too, if he found out."

I just stare at her. "If he found out what? That you were abusing me? No, Mom. He wouldn't have killed me. He would have killed you."

Mom crushes out her second cigarette without taking her eyes from mine.

"You know, despite everything, I admired that you left," I say. "I really believed you when you said you were protecting me. I admired you for having the guts to leave such a powerful man. For going off on your own, to find your way, do your thing, and take your daughter out of harm's way, even if that harm was you. You told me you left to be free, and I really believed it. All these years, I believed it. But you never

really had a choice, did you? You weren't leaving to protect me. You were leaving to protect yourself.”

I don't wait for her answer. I got all the answers I wanted and more today.

twenty-three

King

I watch Eliza through dinner. She's been quiet all through the meal, unlike her usual chatty self.

"Everything okay?" I ask, selecting a piece of sushi from the platter Eliza ordered from a delivery service.

"I was thinking about something you said a while back," she says. "About therapy."

"What about it?"

"Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea."

"Do you want me to help you find someone?" I ask, careful not to sound too enthusiastic in case it makes her feel more broken than she already does.

"Maybe I could try the one you said your mom sees," she says. "If that doesn't work, I can find someone else."

I nod. "I'll call and ask if she's taking new clients."

She takes a piece of sushi and dips it in soy sauce.

"Thank you."

We eat for a few minutes in silence. “What changed your mind?” I ask after a bit.

“I want to be better for you,” she says. “I want to be everything you’ve ever wanted in a wife.”

“You are,” I say, tightness twisting in my chest. “You’re that and more.”

She smiles. “I want to be better for me, too. I want to be the person I was supposed to be, that I could have been, if none of that had happened. I think I just need to get clear and learn to move on, you know? From my brother’s death, my mom, and my issues. I want to work through it, not hold onto it forever. I want to be a good mom when that day comes.”

I take another bite, watching her carefully from the corner of my eye. “Is that what’s bothering you?”

“No,” she admits, setting down her chopsticks. “I have to tell you something, but you have to promise you won’t be mad.”

“I don’t know if I can promise that without knowing what you’re going to say.”

“Fine,” she says lightly. “Then I won’t tell you.”

I sigh. “Okay, I won’t be mad.”

She grins slyly. “I love that that actually works, but you know I would have told you anyway. Like I said before, I don’t want secrets between us.”

“Now I’m intrigued,” I say, arching a brow. “What’s this secret?”

“I went to see my mom yesterday.”

My throat catches, and I have to set down my bite and get a drink of water before I choke. “What?”

“I know what you’re going to say, but I took my bodyguard and a driver and my Glock. I was careful, and I’m fine. I just thought you should know.”

“I would have gone with you,” I say quietly.

“I know,” she says, reaching over to lay her hand on mine. “But it was something I needed to do on my own. I hope you can understand.”

I can’t. I can’t see how she could do something horribly traumatic and not want me by her side, but think her bodyguard and driver would be better adept at sharing the experience with her. But it’s not what I’m supposed to say, so I nod stiffly.

“I’m sorry if that upsets you,” she says. “I knew you’d want to do something about it, and believe me, I thought about it. That’s why I brought a gun. But in the end, I’d just be putting her out of her misery. She deserves to suffer.”

“And was she?” I ask. “Suffering?”

“Yes,” Eliza says. “She lives in the projects.”

I try to soften my voice level and not sound like a controlling dick, but it’s hard. “You went to the projects alone?”

“No, I had a bodyguard,” she says. “And it wasn’t even dark.”

I take a deep breath, trying to control myself. Anger never solves anything, and it usually makes things worse. I search for the relevant answer here, the one that shows her I love her even if I don’t approve of what she did.

“How are you?” I ask at last, turning my hand under hers and linking our fingers.

I can see the tension melt from her, her shoulders relaxing, and I know blowing up at her would have been the worst thing I could do. “I’m okay, I think,” she says. “I mean, as okay as you can be after seeing your mother has turned into

a crackhead. I don't know. I saw her as her own person for the first time, not just my mother who left me."

"Who hurt you," I clarify.

"That, too," she says. "I spent so much time pretending it didn't happen. And then pretending she was good for leaving. And seeing her now... It was just sad. I guess I'm a little angry that I didn't get to be angry."

"You can be angry."

"I know," she says, squeezing my hand before withdrawing hers and picking up her chopsticks again. "But it's hard when the person is literally sleeping in the bed they made for themselves. It's like I didn't have a chance to get revenge. She got revenge on herself already, even if she didn't mean to. And I'm kinda pissed that I didn't have a chance to do that, but at the same time, I'm relieved that I don't have to live with that."

"It's a lot to live with," I admit. "Taking someone's life."

"I know," she says. "I'm sorry."

I shrug, remembering Il Diavolo's words. "Eat or get eaten, I guess."

Over the rest of dinner, she fills me in on more detail about her visit, her mother's poor condition, and her lack of remorse. After dinner, we clean up together.

Something about the simple act makes the place in behind my sternum that used to fill up with cold slush so warm it aches. I know that each of these moments, no matter how sweet, is fleeting. Not only fleeting but numbered. One day, my number will be up. Until then, I enjoy each moment, even when the sweetness hurts my teeth.

I used to think leaving her a widow would be the worst thing I could do, but now I know better. Treating her like a business deal is worse. Not loving her and showing her how much I appreciate her as my wife is worse. Like a greedy dragon, I treated my own heart like a treasure to be hoarded and hidden away from her. But she was too smart. She snuck in and stole it when I wasn't looking. For that, I am nothing but grateful. She opened my eyes, made me stronger, strong enough not to be afraid to hurt again. Strong enough not to be afraid to love.

I vowed never to love her or let her love me because I was so afraid of hurting her. That may happen, but I can't let that stop me from living here and now. It only makes me treat

each day with her as something sacred. *She* is the treasure. Every day, I get to show her that all over again. I'll love her hard, with everything in me, like this day is my last. One day, it will be.

When we slide into bed later, Eliza rolls toward me, tangling her smooth legs with mine, rubbing my calf with her soft toes. "Want to try again?" she asks.

"Really?" I ask, drawing back to search her face. My cock throbs against her bare belly, only my boxers and her underwear separating us from being skin to skin.

"Yeah," she says, pressing her soft little body up against mine. "Did you think I'd be done after one time?"

"You cried," I remind her.

"I know," she says. "It wasn't my finest moment. But don't give up on me, okay? I'm going to work on it, and I was hoping you'd work on it with me."

"Of course," I say, my throat thick with desire. I didn't think she'd want to try again for a long time, and I was prepared for that. That doesn't mean I don't want to, though. She's fucking beautiful in every way, and not just physically. This is beyond frustrating. It's agonizing. It's not the waiting. I

could deal with that, hard as it may be. It's not thinking of her needs, her pleasure. That can only be good for us both. It's that I can't have my wife the way I want her, and beyond that, that I can't be in control in the one place I need to be. I don't mind if she has her own life, if she does her thing, if she needs things that are only hers, even friends that aren't mine.

Here in the bedroom, though, I need to be the one calling the shots. It takes everything in me to give over control to her, to let her set the pace and pull the brake when she needs to, to be the one in charge, making the rules. I keep telling myself it'll make me a better lover to her later, and that's worth it. But damn if it isn't the hardest thing I've ever done.

We kiss for so long I'm dizzy with wanting her, my head spinning by the time she reaches between us, pushing down my boxers and gripping my cock in her warm hand. I roll onto my back, pulling her on top of me so I can watch her. If I can't pound her into the mattress, at least I can watch her in all her glory as she sits astride my hips. She squiggles down the bed, pushing off the blankets and lowering her head, smiling up at me before opening her lips to take my cock. I push up into her mouth, fisting my hands in the sheet as she slides down deep, letting me feel her straining throat.

After a minute, when I'm shaking with the effort of holding back, she throws her hair back and kneels up, grinning down me as she hooks her thumbs into her panties. I can see the shape of her pussy against the thin fabric. My cock jerks against her thighs, glistening with her saliva as she draws her panties down, letting me see what I can't touch. With a groan, I take hold of her thighs and tug her up to straddle me. She sinks onto me, gasping as we make contact. Her eyes fly wide, and she tenses.

"You're safe," I remind her, massaging her thighs gently. "I won't move a muscle until you're ready. Do what you need, baby. I'm yours."

She nods, letting out a breath and sinking down on top of me without putting me in. "Thank you," she breathes.

Slowly, she begins to grind against my shaft, riding me until she's as wet as I am. I love watching her move, the sensual rolling of her hips, the sway of her tits as she rises and falls, the little frown of concentration between her brows, the way she bites her plump lower lip when she starts getting hot. It makes it all worth it when our eyes meet and she smiles.

"Is this okay?" she asks.

"So fucking okay," I say, my voice hoarse with desire.

“I’m ready,” she says.

I lift her hips, supporting her weight. “Put it in.”

She swallows before reaching for my cock, guiding it to her entrance. She bears down, biting her lip as I strain against her opening. At last, I breach her entrance, nearly groaning at the sensation of her slick cunt gripping my bare cock. She gasps, tensing up for a minute. I wait for her to adjust, trying not to move, though my cock aches inside her as it strains against her walls. She’s so tight it almost hurts. When she’s ready, she moves a little deeper, panting as she goes.

I remember the last time, and how she didn’t tell me she was upset, that she’d had enough, until she’d had too much.

I grip her hips gently, my gaze locking with hers. “Talk to me, baby,” I manage. “Let me in. What’s going on in that complicated mind of yours?”

She seems to relax a little more, turning her attention away from her determined effort. “I’m okay,” she says.

“Tell me how it feels,” I say, my voice low and hoarse with desire. Holding back is fucking killing me, but I wouldn’t

change it for anything. Not when I can see every inch of her spectacular, sexy body being slowly impaled on my cock.

“Fucking enormous,” she says, and then she gives a little laugh, and I can’t help but smile, too. Not just because I’m a man, and a guy can never hear those words too many times. But because if she can laugh, maybe it’ll be okay this time. Maybe she knows she’s safe, that she can stop any time she wants, that I’d never push her for more than she’s ready and more than willing to give.

“Does it feel good?” I ask. I know that’s not everything. Sometimes she freaks out when it feels good more than when it doesn’t.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “It feels good.”

“You feel good, too,” I tell her. “So fucking good.”

This time, she makes it until I’m all the way in again, gripped so hard inside her cunt that I want to scream. Instead, I see panic flicker in her eyes, so I sit up, wrapping my arms around her. I cradle her gently so she won’t feel trapped in my embrace.

“Come back to me,” I say, gently stroking her hair back from her temple. “It’s just you and me, El. You’re safe,

and I love you.”

She stills, not continuing but not pulling away, either. We sit there for what feels like forever while I talk her down, trying to say the right thing, do the right thing, be what she needs. At last, she nods, draping her arms over my shoulders and moving a bit. I hold her hips gently, so she can pull back when she needs, and I help her move, slow and gentle strokes. When she’s breathing hard, I loosen my grip, letting her ride me at her own pace, choosing her own rhythm.

She moves faster, harder than I expected, her bare cunt gripping me like a vice as she slams down on me. The sensation of her slick, hot walls around me makes me nearly explode. I stroke her tits, thumbing her nipples while she rides me. When she’s ready, she throws back her head, letting her long black hair tumble down her back, and a shudder wraps around her body as she sighs. That one quiet, long, breathy sigh is the most soul-satisfying sound I’ve ever heard.

Her walls clench around me, and I can’t help but groan at how insanely hard she squeezes my cock. I watch her cum, watch her come undone, and it’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen. I want to watch her and not worry about getting

mine, but I can't stop myself. The sight of my beautiful naked wife lost in pure bliss pushes me over the edge.

When her cunt pulses tight around me, I let myself go, wrapping my arm around her back and grinding up into her as I explode with everything I've been holding back for months. She cries out as my hot cum spurts into her. Before I can react, she grips my shoulders, gasping out two words.

“Don't. Stop.”

Together, we are lost. Lost to everything but what truly matters. This moment, right here, right now, and the long-overdue pleasure we find in each other. Lost to everything but each other, two broken souls who thought they'd never find love, never deserve it.

Our bodies meld in bliss, locked together like our souls have finally fit together in perfect alignment, fusing into one love. I know in that moment I'm well beyond saving, that there's no hope of me ever resisting the love I thought I could deny. I love her beauty, her delicateness, even her brokenness. But I also love her strength, her mind, her sharp tongue. I love that she's a match for me, that she made me fall for her without even noticing. That she challenges me and makes me grow so much it hurts. And god, I love fucking her. I give her

everything I have, not just my body but my soul, my heart, my
life. She is all that matters.

We are all that matters.

This.

Us.

Forever.

epilogue

One Year Later

Eliza

“I have a surprise for you,” I say, grabbing King’s hand the moment he walks in the door. I pull him into the living room before he can ask.

He looks around and smiles. “It looks great,” he says. “Did you clean?”

“The maid did that,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Now come here. I got you something.”

“You already sent me a picture today,” he says, a naughty gleam in his eye. Even though I don’t need to do that anymore, and King can feast his eyes on me any time he wants and satisfy himself with my body instead of his hand, he still likes it when I send him racy pics. So, I keep doing it.

I hand him a small, wrapped box. “Before you open it, I just want to say... Thank you. For being so patient with me, and working with me through my therapy, and my relapses,

and—Just thank you. For everything. I want to say I don't deserve it, but I'm not allowed to say that anymore."

"That is correct," he says, leaning in to kiss me. "And you didn't have to get me anything. But thank you."

"You taught me that," I say. "That I'm worthy of love. That it's okay to accept it."

"I think you're confusing me with your therapist," he says with a grin.

"I'm not," I say, shoving his shoulder. "She only *says* that. You *do* it. You're the one who works with me on it. You're the one who loves me and forces me to accept it."

"Damn straight," he says. "Now, are you going to propose, or can I open this?"

I laugh and shake my head. "I think you have to be married more than a year before you can renew your vows. Open it."

"It's been almost a year and a half," King reminds me, but he obeys. He opens the box and stares down at the little white wand inside. I wait, not even breathing, waiting for him to say something. I start to think this was a really stupid idea,

and what if he's not excited, and he doesn't consider this a gift?

At last, he raises his eyes to mine, and if I didn't know better, I'd swear they're a little shiny.

"You're pregnant?" he asks.

I nod, biting my lip to keep from squealing out loud.

"I know, it took my stubborn uterus long enough," I say. "I was beginning to think we jinxed it by saying we'd tell people we couldn't have a baby."

"Well, we have been trying awfully hard," he says with a little smile, removing the test from the box.

"You might not want to touch that," I say. "I did pee on it. In fact, now that I think about it, a symbolic gift would have been a lot more sanitary. You know, like a keepsake rattle or ___"

King interrupts my rambling by leaning and kissing me hard on the mouth. I melt into him, not realizing how much I needed him to be excited about this until he shows it. He kisses me long and deep, his tongue roughly claiming mine, his big hands wrapping around my still-slender waist. He lays me back on the couch as if I'm as delicate as the baby will be.

“So, you’re happy?” I ask with a breathless little laugh.

“Want me to show you how happy?” he asks, taking my hand and pulling it to the front of his pants, so I can feel the hard ridge of his cock.

“Wow, I didn’t know the thought of me getting fat and swollen was such a turn on,” I say. “Or is it the thought of sealing the pact between our families that has you so hot and bothered?”

“It’s the thought of what I’m about to do to you in celebration,” he says, a wicked grin on his lips.

“Tell me more,” I say, wrapping my legs around him. It took way too fucking long to get here, and I’m enjoying every single moment of it now that I can have sex without freaking out the majority of the time. Things were a little rocky for a while, but I’ve been working through them in therapy and with King, and lately, even my ovaries must have relaxed and come around to the idea. At least, that’s the only explanation I can think of. Lord knows we’ve tried—over five hundred times, if anyone’s counting.

I am, but not for any creepy reasons. I feel a sense of triumph every time we cum together, as if I’ve earned a ribbon—#1 at Successfully Completing Intercourse. So, I started

counting the victories, because my therapist said I should count small victories. I don't know if she meant literally, or if orgasms qualify as small, but I figure it doesn't hurt anyone and it makes me feel accomplished, so why the hell not?

After King and I add another tally to the number, we end up on the living room rug, staring at the ceiling.

"I guess it's time to convert the guest room into a nursery," I say.

"Maybe Bianca could help," he says. "If you're in an on-again stage of your relationship."

I grin. "She's going to be so jealous. I can't wait to tell her. I bet your uncle's too old to even get her pregnant."

King just shakes his head. "I will never understand your relationship."

"So, stop trying."

"Trust me, I did that a long time ago."

I smile and lay my head on his arm. "Unless she *actually* tries to get you killed, you can assume we will be best frenemies for life."

"Fair enough," he says, rolling toward me and gently stroking his fingertips down my bare belly. "We've got a lot to

do to prepare. Nursery, babyproofing, all the stuff, names..."

"I was thinking about that," I say. "If it's a girl, how about we name her Crystal, after your sister?"

"I'd like that," he says, his eyes going darker the way they always do when he talks about her. I know he'll never get over that loss, that he'll always feel the sadness, but maybe this will help just a little.

"And if it's a boy," he says. "Maybe Jonathan, after your brother?"

"I was thinking Anthony," I say. "After all, both our dads share that name."

"We can definitely put that on the list of options," he says, cracking a small smile. He's gotten pretty bossy in the bedroom, which I am actually enjoying, but I try to nip it in the bud when he does it out here. I may be happy being his wife, but I still bristle at the thought of anyone controlling me. But a baby name is something big, something we should both be on board with.

"Okay," I say, laughing. "We have nine whole months to decide. In fact, I saw there's a class on making your own baby food downtown. I thought I might go."

“What have I gotten myself into?” he groans. “You want to name our daughter Crystal and make your own baby food? Next thing I know you’ll be changing your name to Star Child and making hemp necklaces.”

I laugh and give him a shove. “And you’d love me just as much.”

“Fine, you win,” he says. “I would love you just as much. But I’d rather you change your name to Pussy Galore and go make me dinner, woman.” He gives my ass a playful swat, and I throw a leg over his and give him my most inviting smile.

“You know what they say,” I remind him. “A woman can be good in only one room in the house. You get to pick which one.”

“Hold on, let me order a pizza,” he says, reaching for his phone before pulling me on top of him. We find our perfect rhythm together, the one we taught each other, the one that is pure magic, so perfect it created the greatest miracle inside me.

Love.

The End.

This concludes King and Eliza's story. I hope you enjoyed it! The next book in the series follows a new couple—Al Valenti and Bianca Luciani. Needless to say, this is a romance with a large age gap. If that's your jam, or you've never read age-gap and want to give it a try, [click here to pre-order!](#)

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See you there!