



BOUND
TO
SIN

EVE DANGERFIELD

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EVE DANGERFIELD

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page

Velvet Cruelty

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Epilogue

Silk Malice

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Epilogue

Lace Vengeance

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Epilogue

About Dangerous Press

About Eve Dangerfield

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VELVET CRUELTY

EVE DANGERFIELD

For my Zias.
Blood is blood.



PROLOGUE

Adriano Rossi

A GIRL BARELY old enough to be called a woman is sitting on a bench two hundred feet below me. She's laughing, a cutesy box of cupcakes on her knees. I adjust my lens scope and her face comes into focus. Green eyes, pale skin, and a wide, soft mouth with lips as red as blood—a color I've seen more of than most. She picks up a cupcake and holds it away from herself, as though afraid to taste it. Knowing her stepmother, she probably is.

Parker says something and she laughs, her long ebony black hair catching the light. People stare as they walk past, their mouths falling open. The girl's always been pretty but since she turned eighteen, no one can take their eyes off her. I move my scope half an inch to the left and find Parker. Clean-shaven with a hint of baby fat around the cheeks and chin. He looks younger than thirty-eight. And soft. The kind of guy you'd size up if you were looking to jump someone at a train station.

My finger brushes the rifle trigger. One squeeze, the whisper-jerk of a bullet, and he'd be gone. But a quick death is better than Zachery Parker deserves.

He can't take his eyes off the girl either. From forty stories away I can tell he wants to grab her hair and pull her mouth onto his cock. He won't, though. Two benches away, not bothering to look like anything but muscle, are her bodyguards. Kurt Cooper and Theodore Murphy. Their Rugers are in full view at their sides as they chat and eye up female

joggers. I could be killing John F Kennedy behind them, and they wouldn't notice. They're there to stop Parker from grabbing teenage tits and that's all.

I'll see Cooper and Murphy soon. Show them exactly how bad they are at their jobs.

The girl stops laughing and brings the pink cupcake to her lips. Her small tongue flicks at the frosting and Parker almost nuts in his jeans.

She's not teasing him. She's just fucking clueless. A doe-eyed little girl. Never been on a date. Never had a friend sleep over. Her mom dresses her in shirts that puritanical grandmas wouldn't be caught dead in. Whenever anyone talks to her, those big green eyes glaze over. Bobby says she's pretending to be clueless, Doc and I think she's the real deal. If she had a different last name, she'd have flunked out of high school. But when you know you'll be married before you can buy beer, why bother learning?

Parker moves to wipe the pink frosting from her nose and the girl glances at her bodyguards. They snap to attention and Parker's hands fall to his sides. He's smiling, but it's fixed. Irritable. He doesn't like being told what to do, but rules are rules, and no one touches January Whitehall. He's lucky to sit next to her. When the girl graduated from Trinity Grammar, she received her diploma offstage. She's danced at the New York Ballet Academy since she was nine, but no one's ever seen her perform. A kid once tried to film her riding a horse at Kensington Stables and Murphy hit him so hard, he got a concussion.

Parker's spent millions gaining the stepmother's loyalty and that bitch has made sure no one's so much as brushed up against the girl's side. She's as pure as snow and in four weeks she'll say 'I do' and belong to Parker forever.

Or so he thinks.

Parker's security team is almost invisible. Two guys in the skyscraper across the road. Two more in a Buick idling by the

curb. A sniper on top of St. George's Episcopal Church. If I shot Parker this morning, I'd have to execute five men in under a minute to get away. Not impossible, but messy. I shift my position, easing the ache in my spine as the girl finishes her cupcake. She sucks leftover frosting from her fingertips and a throb runs down my cock. There's a body begging for corruption under those ugly clothes. It'd be fun to tear her out of them. She'd cover herself with her hands, but that'd only make it hotter, her tits jiggling as tears ran down her face. I'd feed her Orchard, so she'd be wet and writhing, whatever her prissy little mind told her. I'd pin her to the floor, shove her thighs wide with my knees, and press into her pussy. I'd watch her virgin blood smear up and down my shaft as I fucked her. She'd fight me the whole way, her little fists pounding against my back as I broke her open.

The perfect Whitehall princess, ruined by a dirty lowlife like me.

But that's not the plan. Whatever Morelli decides to do with the girl, she doesn't really matter. Parker matters. Making him regret the day his father slided into his whore of a mother matters.

There's a chance I'll fuck January Whitehall, but it's more likely I'll kill her. Kill her, cut out her heart, and feed it to Parker. And it won't be personal. As Parker taught us a long time ago, sometimes you're in the wrong place at the wrong time.



CHAPTER ONE

January Whitehall

*I*T'S MY WEDDING day.

I've thought it a hundred times since I woke up, but it still doesn't feel real. Maybe it never will. Maybe I'll float from the cathedral to the reception to my new married life without having to do anything at all.

Anita's brush sweeps lightly across my closed eyes. "Okay, January. Open."

I look at myself in the special dressing room mirror and see my eyelids are now peachy pink. "What a beautiful color!"

"Well, you're a beautiful bride."

Anita's trying to sound happy but the skin between her eyebrows is pinched. She's done my stepmom's makeup for years. I'm sure it's strange that the first time she's doing mine, it's for my wedding. I wish I could talk openly. If I could, I'd tell Anita that what's happening isn't so strange, that arranged marriages are still common in other places. But I'm not allowed to talk openly. My marriage is family business and Anita isn't family.

I watch as she puts away the eye brush and selects a pot of shimmering powder from the dozens lining her flat leather satchel. "Highlighter," she explains. "Let's make those cheekbones pop."

My sister, Margot, shakes her empty glass at me. "JJ, have some champagne..."

She's been drinking since we arrived in the suite to get our hair done. That was five hours ago. I take her glass and put it on my side table. "Maybe you should have a Coke?"

"Maybe you should have a drink?"

"I'm only eighteen."

"Yeah, and you're getting *married*. You can have one glass of fucking champagne."

I look around, praying no one heard her curse. "Margot, please chill?"

She sticks her tongue out at me but doesn't say anything else. Margot is braver than I am—and tipsy—but she knows about family business too.

She yawns, stretching her arms over her head, and her platinum bangle tumbles down her wrist. She catches me looking. "As soon as the wedding's over, I'm selling it."

Anita moves in front of me, blocking Margot from view, and I'm glad I don't have to answer. The bracelets are Mr. Parker's gift to my bridesmaids. Around the hotel suite, identical bangles are sparkling on the wrists of my cousins Sadie and Penelope and my school friends Giuseppina, Darcy, and Quinn. All of them are getting their makeup done, sipping champagne, and having a far better time than Margot.

When Anita is done highlighting my cheeks, she moves back to my eyelids and applies black winged liner and false lashes. "You sit like a statue, January."

I look at my hands. "Thanks. It's probably because of ballet."

"Half the girls I work with wriggle more than you. You should be a model."

I smile. I'm sure Anita is just being nice but the idea of me being a model is crazier than me going to the moon. I get overwhelmed when two people speak to me at once. I can't imagine going down a runway with hundreds of cameras flashing in my face.

Kurt, my bodyguard, barks out a laugh that makes everyone in the room jump. "... I said, '*Go fuck yourself, Hardaker!*'"

Theodore, my other bodyguard, slaps his thigh. "Fucking asshole. You should have done it again."

The two of them are tucked away in the corner of the suite, a bottle of Glenfiddich on the clear coffee table in front of them. I'm sure mom wouldn't like them drinking on the job, but in a few hours, they won't be my bodyguards anymore.

Margot bends her head toward me. "At least after today, you won't have to deal with those chucklefucks."

"Shhh!" I say, suppressing a smile. Kurt and Theodore are nice, but they're also loud and kind of rude. It'll be good not to worry about what they're saying to the girls at ballet anymore. A clock on the wall chimes, announcing midday. There's less than an hour until the ceremony. My nerves sizzle like strip steak.

"Nervous?" Margot asks.

"A little. But I bet Mr... I mean Zachery, is nervous too."

Margot scowls. "First of all, who cares? Second of all, you still call him 'Mr. Parker?'"

"Sometimes! He's intimidating, I guess."

"Bullshit. It's because your nanny calls him 'Mr. Parker.'"

My body temperature ticks up a notch. "Margot, for the millionth time, Zia Teresa isn't my nanny."

"No, she's *mom's* housekeeper."

I look over my shoulder. Mentioning mom always makes me feel like she's going to show up and scream at someone. Probably me. But the room is as friendly and mom-free as ever. "Zia Teresa is my friend," I tell Margot. "And she's yours too. Do you remember how she helped out when you threw up on mom's chintz lounge?"

Margot clicks her fingers at her makeup artist, Helen. “Hi? Yeah, can you bring me more champagne?”

Helen purses her lips, but she puts down her eyelash curler and leaves. I wince. It isn’t like Margot to be rude, but she’s scared, and I have no idea how to help her. If Zia was here, she’d know how to calm Margot down. She knows how to do *everything*. I wanted her to come to the wedding, but mom refused. “What would people think, having a servant at a formal celebration?”

But Zia—Auntie—Teresa isn’t just a servant. She was my father’s housekeeper when he was young and when my real mom died giving birth to me, Zia Teresa bottle-fed me and read me stories, and sang to me in Italian. She’s tiny, less than five feet tall with a beautiful, wrinkled apple face and the sharpest, funniest tongue in the world. She smells like DNKY’s Be Delicious and Pond cream and Newport menthols, even though I always ask her to stop smoking. For her not to be here today... It’s just wrong.

Anita pats my shoulder. “Okay, baby girl, almost done. We just need setting spray.”

I close my eyes and Anita blasts me with so much wet mist, I’m surprised I’m not dripping. I imagine being sealed in a cocoon, a clear plastic barrier so that when Mr. Parker kisses me at the altar, he won’t really be kissing *me*. But when I open my eyes, I’m not in a cocoon. I’m just me, but shiny.

Beside me, Margot sips her fresh glass of champagne, her face gleaming with the same setting spray. She looks fierce and gorgeous. I reach out and touch her arm. “You look beautiful, M. I’m so glad you’re here.”

Margot sighs. “I wish daddy were here. If he were, this wouldn’t be happening.”

I fight to keep the smile on my face. “I wish daddy were here too, but I’m happy to be marrying Mr. Parker.”

“You have no fucking clue. This isn’t *fair*.”

I return my gaze to my mirror. “Margot, when Zia Teresa was fourteen, her dad pulled her out of school and sent her to work for our grandma. He took three-quarters of her paycheck until she got married and then her husband took her whole paycheck.”

“So?”

I straighten in my makeup chair. “So, I’m sorry today is hard for you but I have to get married.”

“God, January... *whatever.*” Margot fumbles with her purse and pulls out her neon green vape. Mom would go crazy if she knew Margot vaped but if there’s something risky that she hasn’t specifically banned, Margot wants to do it. As she blows out a dragon-like puff of smoke, Fabrizia from Abbagliante Bridal glides through the door in a silver power suit. “Good afternoon, ladies! Prepare to be amazed!”

A team of assistants carries in dresses, each carefully sealed in opaque protectors.

Giuseppina squeals. “Oh my God, it’s time! January’s getting married!”

It takes five assistants to bring in my wedding gown. One on each corner and an extra at the end. I have no idea how much the dress costs, but from the assistants’ terrified expressions, a lot.

“Up, January,” Fabrizia calls. “To the dressing area.”

She ushers me behind a small curtain where I take off my satin robe. Mr. Parker chose my wedding lingerie and two days ago, I was taken to a salon where every hair below my neck was waxed away. I’m still getting used to the bareness, but it does make the underwear, a short white corset and skimpy panties, look nicer. I try to imagine Mr. Parker seeing me half naked like this and my stomach turns over.

One of Fabrizia’s assistants lifts a pair of kitten heels from a shoe box and hands them to me. I slide the patent leather onto my feet and grow an inch taller. Originally, Fabrizia

wanted me in high heels, but mom freaked. “Do you want my daughter to tower over her fiancé?”

My dress is hung on a wooden frame beside me, and the assistants stand around it whispering nervously like it might come to life and run away. Fabrizia unzips the opaque sleeve and I see a stretch of white lace and pearls. My stomach contracts. “It’s gorgeous.”

“Hmm.” Fabrizia stares at me in the mirror. “So, the princess is still marrying the goblin?”

Unlike everyone else, Fabrizia doesn’t hide her disapproval of Mr. Parker. Probably because she’s even scarier than my mom.

“I’m very excited to get married.”

Fabrizia makes a ‘pffeew’ noise. “Dutiful, *bella*, but you’ll need to give a better performance in bed tonight.”

My cheeks burn under all Anita’s makeup. I know there’s a chance I might not be a virgin tomorrow, but I’ve never even been kissed before. Surely Mr. Parker won’t take things that far. Maybe we’ll get to the bridal suite at the Ritz Carlton and just talk and hold hands?

My wedding dress is cool against my skin. I’ve had lots of fittings, but it’s different today. Heavier. Fabrizia slides up the zipper, but her progress halts halfway along my back.

“Oh my gosh, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Fabrizia calls an assistant over and the two of them delicately but firmly urge the zip toward the hook and eye.

“I’m so sorry. Mom made sure... I mean, I haven’t eaten in two days.”

Fabrizia tuts. “It isn’t your weight, silly girl. You’ve grown since the last fitting.”

“Grown?”

“Your *il petto*.” *Bosom*.

I look in the gilt-framed mirror and see Fabrizia is right. Cleavage swells over the sheer lace cups of my dress. “Do we have time for an alteration?”

With a tiny grunt, Fabrizia manages to close the zip. She snaps the hook and eye with her efficient fingers and steps back, wiping her hands on her suit. “Your fiancé will not have complaints. What do you think?”

I bite my bottom lip. I’ve never shown off my collarbones, let alone my breasts, and the ivory lace make me look even paler than usual. I normally wear my hair up for special events, but Mr. Parker wanted it down in loose curls. I don’t look *bad*, but I don’t think I look very bridal. At least not the way I imagined I would for my wedding.

“It’s a beautiful dress,” I tell Fabrizia. “I hope I can make it look good.”

She makes the ‘pffeew’ sound again. “I shouldn’t be asking you your opinion, should I? Nothing about this wedding is for you.”

Before I can reply, Fabrizia strides away, barking at her assistants in Italian. One of them brings forward the veil Mr. Parker chose. My hair stylist Monika fixes the diamond circle around my head and the Venetian lace falls almost to my feet.

I study myself in the mirror, rearranging my face into a shy smile. This is how I’ll look as I walk down the aisle. I transition into a toothy beam. This is how I’ll look as the Archbishop announces us Mr. and Mrs. Parker. I touch a hand to my cheek. This is the blissful astonishment I’ll hold through our first dance, giddy at what a fairy tale this has turned out to be.

“January,” Sadie calls. “Can we come see the dress?”

“Of course,” I say, letting my face relax.

By the time everyone has admired the dress, there’s only twenty minutes until the wedding cars arrive. Staff bring out flutes of champagne and orange juice and Kurt and Theodore pour themselves one last whiskey.

“Cheers,” Penelope says, and we clink glasses. I take a small sip of my cocktail and put it aside. Margot downs hers and reaches clumsily for mine. As Margot chugs it back, there’s a sharp tap on my shoulder. It’s Fabrizia. “Come with me,” she says.

I follow her to a corner of the suite hoping mom hasn’t called with some insane last-minute request. But Fabrizia points to a small person slipping through the door. My mouth falls open. “Zia!”

I run toward her, but Fabrizia clutches my wrist. “Don’t ruin your dress.”

I pull up short and stand there waving at Zia Teresa like a moron. She seems smaller than usual and kind of withdrawn. Only her brown eyes are the same, bright as a sparrow’s. She looks me up and down with the same assessing look she used to give me before school. “You’re magnifica, *bella*, but what is...?”

She gestures at my breasts.

I raise a hand to my barely covered chest. “It wasn’t my idea, Zia! Mr. Parker chose the dress.”

“He could have chosen a little more of it.”

I grin even though my heart is tearing open. I want to hug her so badly, it hurts. By the time I was nine, I was already taller than Zia and I started picking her up and crushing her to my chest. She pretends to find it annoying, but I know she loves it. If it wasn’t for this stupid wedding dress, I could do it again.

“I can’t believe you came to see me!” I say.

“Of course, I came. Nothing could keep me away.” Zia looks at Fabrizia and I wonder if she’s about to criticize her for showing off my cleavage, but their eyes meet in some mutual understanding.

“I’ll give you a moment,” Fabrizia says and walks back to everyone else.

Zia takes my hand. “I can’t stay long. If your stepmother knew I was here...”

“I know.”

She turns her head and coughs. A long, wet cough I could recognize in my sleep. “Zia, please quit smoking.”

“Bah, what’s the point?” She looks around then stands on tiptoe and kisses my cheek. “You look beautiful.”

I try to smile but my face won’t move. “I wish you could come to the wedding.”

“What do we say about wishes?”

“They’re for fools.”

“That’s right.” Zia pushes her tiny shoulders back. “Stand tall.”

I lift my spine, imitating her.

“Better. Now smile.”

I try again but it makes the corners of my eyes sting. Zia Teresa has the heart of a soldier and today, of all days, I don’t want to disappoint her, but the thought of what will happen once I’m Mr. Parker’s wife is terrifying. “Zia—”

Her hand tightens on mine. “This is not the place.”

“I know, I just wish I could make brodo with you.”

Zia stares at me and to my horror, her brown eyes gloss over.

Zia Teresa hates weakness. She finds art pretentious, music sentimental and she scoffs at romantic comedies. We’ve spent thousands of hours together and I’ve never seen her cry. “Zia...”

She raises her fingertips, squashing the tears away. “Tell me the recipe for brodo.”

“But—”

“The recipe, *bella*. Now.”

I swallow. “Boil three osso bucco and two chicken breasts in salt water. Skim the fat and add garlic, onion, celery, carrot, potatoes and Roma tomatoes. Simmer for an hour then strain the broth and serve it with pastina. When everyone is done with pasta, you serve the meat.”

She gives me a curt nod. “You can use gravy beef if you can’t find osso bucco, but the marrow is better for colds.”

“Yes, Zia.”

“And buy fresh parmigiano. None of that disgusting supermercato cheese.”

“Of course, Zia.”

“You should make brodo in your new home, just like I showed you.”

“I will.”

We look at one other and I want to say that I love her, that she is my mother and that she taught me everything I know. But we both already know it and a better gift to Zia would be to stay strong. I lift my chin. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Of course.” Zia digs into the pocket of her heavy brown coat and pulls out a gold coin. “This is for you.”

I take the coin and see a little man engraved into the side. There’s a bubble on top, a place for a necklace to thread through. “Is it a medallion?”

“Si. A St. Christopher. Protection for whenever you journey from home. I gave one to all my girls when they went to Foggia for the first time. It should be on a chain, but...” Zia shrugs.

But then my mom would see it.

I tuck the medallion into my bodice. I’ll have to find somewhere safe to hide it later but for now I need it with me. I take Zia’s hand again. “I’m so sorry you can’t come today.”

Zia shakes her head. “Do not blame yourself for what other people do. Just focus on your own survival.”

My own survival? That seems a little melodramatic, even for Zia Teresa. “What do you—”

Another tap on the shoulder. Fabrizia’s mouth is a thin line. “Miss Whitehall, we need to leave.”

“Okay.”

I turn to hug Zia Teresa but she’s already slipping out the door, her hand fumbling in her purse for her menthols. I watch her leave, heaviness washing over me.

“You ready?” Fabrizia asks.

“Of course.” I throw my shoulders back. I will be a flawless bride. I will make Mr. Parker happy, and he’ll give me permission to bring Zia Teresa from my stepmother’s household into my own. Then I’ll pay Zia to drink espresso and watch E! entertainment news and tell me my hair is getting too long. I touch the medallion resting against my right breast. I don’t know what I’m scared of, but I hope Zia is right and the St. Christopher will protect me anyway.



CHAPTER TWO

January Whitehall

ST. MICHAEL'S CATHEDRAL towers above me, rising into the light blue sky. I feel like an ant quivering before God. The air is icy and the maple trees lining the street are bare. Margot and my other bridesmaids stumble out of Cadillacs behind me, shivering and huddling close to each other.

Penelope moans. "Who gets married in winter?"

Someone who turns eighteen in late fall, I think and chew my lower lip. I'm about to marry Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker with his silk shirts and crow's feet. Inside the cathedral, four hundred guests are waiting for me to say, 'I do.' Margot moves toward me, turning her bouquet so white petals sprinkle her feet. "Still time to run, JJ."

I imagine sprinting down the street, my priceless train swirling into filthy gutters, the leather on the bottom of my shoes rubbing away on the pavement.

The back of my neck prickles and I turn.

"What?" Margot asks.

I want to say 'I feel like someone's watching me' but that's stupid. People *are* watching me. All around us New Yorkers are pointing at me, the bride on her wedding day as though I belong to all of them.

"Did you hear what I said?" Margot mutters. "You can still get out of here."

"Where would I go? The train station? Starbucks?"

“Anywhere. Just run.”

I know Margot means it, that she would even try to help me, but it doesn't matter. It would take Kurt and Theodore five minutes to find me, and then what? I touch my bodice, feeling for the St. Christopher. “Margot, I can't wait to be married.”

She rolls her eyes and I poke her cheek the way Zia Teresa did whenever I questioned her. Margot swats me but she's smiling. “Your nipples are coming right through your dress.”

“It's the lace! It's chafing me!”

“You better hope Billionaire Boy has no complaints or mom's gonna kill you.”

Carolyn, the wedding planner, rushes down the cathedral stairs to meet us. “Hello, girls! Get in the order we rehearsed, please!”

I know the signs of someone being bullied by my stepmom and Carolyn has all of them. Her voice is high, her perfect eye-makeup is smudged at the corners, and she's sweating buckets. My bridesmaids and I arrange ourselves in a line and climb the steps to the cathedral. I can already hear the respectful murmur of the guests inside, politicians, Mr. Parker's business associates, and the entire Whitehall family.

A string quartet begins to play a light, hopeful song.

“Okay, girls,” Carolyn says. “Time to go. Giuseppina, you're first.”

There are ‘ohhs’ and ‘ahhs’ from the crowd as Pina disappears into the cathedral. Queasiness builds inside me as Darcy and Quinn go next. The aisle at St. Michael's is very long. It's a full five minutes and a new song before Sadie and Penelope air-kiss my cheeks and depart. They're Whitehalls and the sight of them makes the crowd murmur even louder. They know the main event is getting close. Me.

Goosebumps rise on my arms. I've never been the main event. I'm the youngest of my family, the least important, and

the worst at school. The freak with bodyguards who until last year didn't know what a passport was.

Margot kisses my cheek properly, lips to skin. "I'll see you soon."

It feels like a lie. I squeeze her hand as she slips away into the church.

"Oh my fucking Christ, she's moving too fast for the music," Carolyn moans. "Oh *God*, your sister's moving too fast!"

Yup, mom definitely told Carolyn she'd be planning debutante balls in Idaho if she screwed this up. I smile reassuringly at her. "Everything's going to be okay."

"Shh!"

Behind us, Kurt and Theodore are leaning up against a bridal Cadillac and drinking out of a flask. When I walk into the cathedral, it will be the furthest I've moved in public without them in almost ten years. My stomach twists. I wish I wasn't alone. My brother Harris wanted to walk me down the aisle, but mom said no. I'm not sure why. Maybe it was my daddy or no one for Mr. Parker.

"January?" Carolyn tugs my arm. "You're shaking. Are you okay?"

I think of Zia Teresa, of the St. Christopher medallion against my chest. *Protection for whenever you journey from home*. "I'm fine. I'm wonderful."

The music changes to a slow, melodious song. I haven't heard it before, but it feels familiar. Inevitable. As though in the back of my mind, it's always been playing. The song I'll walk down the aisle toward Mr. Parker to.

Carolyn looks like she's about to pass out. "Okay, January. Now!"

I move automatically, slowly in time with the music. I'm aware of my whole body. My feet in my kitten heels, the lace

shifting across my thighs, the air brushing my bare shoulders, the circle of warm metal at my breast.

The crowd turns to face me, a thousand-headed monster. I keep my gaze unfocused and walk forward, one step at a time. The aisle is so long, Mr. Parker and his groomsmen are just tuxedoed blurs. I haven't met any of his friends before. Maybe we'll become friends too and I'll entertain them and their wives at dinner parties. I could make arancini and stuffed artichokes.

I pass Senator Billingham, Princess Clara of Sweden, my father's old friend Joshua Price the third, and Uncle Benedict, the patriarch of the Whitehall family. He gives me a small smile and relief floods through me. Whatever else happens, I'm making my family proud.

My stepmom stands in the front pew, flawless in her lavender Chanel suit. Her eyes sweep me for imperfections, narrowing when they fall on my cleavage.

Sorry, mom. Not my choice.

Her gaze flicks from my chest to Mr. Parker and I know what she's trying to say. *Look at your husband. Do your duty.*

I obey and meet Mr. Parker's eyes. His round face shines with sweat and he's smiling so hard his cheeks are apples. The song swells around me and I smile like I practiced in the mirror, but inside my stomach turns over.

Mr. Parker's tongue flashes out, licking his lips, and my left heel turns underneath me. I stumble sideways and gasps echo around the cathedral.

"January!" Mr. Parker makes a nervous motion forward, but my gaze is caught by a flash of gold. Behind the alter, a blond priest grins at me. I know that man. I met him once during pre-wedding counseling. Archbishop Bancroft said he was Father Monastero and said he was there to take notes. But why is he here now? And where is Archbishop Bancroft?

Cursing myself, I straighten and continue my way down the aisle. A murmur of relief rings around the church and Mr.

Parker steps back into place.

I glance at the priest, hoping I imagined him out of wedding nerves. But there he is. He doesn't look like a priest; he looks like Zia Teresa's forever crush, Elvis. He has the same razor cheekbones, sneering mouth, and bright blue eyes. If his golden hair was black, he'd be a dead ringer. I sneak a peek at my bridesmaids. They're staring at the priest too, but none of them look worried. Margot's cheeks are pink, and Penelope is running a finger over her lips.

I reach the base of the marble altar, my bridal smile glued to my face. Someone—Sadie?—takes my bouquet and Mr. Parker steps toward me, his pale eyes scrunched in skin. “January. Finally.”

He holds out a hand and I wish I'd run. To the train station. To Starbucks. To anywhere. I think of the St. Christopher medal and pray that someone will help me.

A crashing roar tears through the air, and I stagger backward, my ears ringing. The walls are shaking and the carpet moves beneath my feet. I've done this. I wished on St. Christopher and now he's bringing down the cathedral.

All around me people are screaming, pushing, running, knocking over pews, and crashing into each other. Mom. Giuseppina. Strangers. Hats fall, mouths freeze into wide O's. Mr. Parker is balled up in front of the altar, his tuxedo's arms over his face. I whirl around looking for his security team. For Theodore and Kurt. For anyone. A rough palm closes over my mouth, another around my waist. “You're coming with me.”

A man is touching me. A man is touching *my mouth*. I try to scream but the sound is swallowed by his palm.

“Shut the fuck up,” he hisses in my ear.

The arm gripping me has white and gold sleeves. It's Father Monastero. My stomach knots. Are priests allowed to curse? He drags me backward past the altar and toward the tabernacle. His arms are hard with muscle, and his cologne is

heady, almost boozy. My blood turns to ice. A priest might swear in an emergency, but he'd never, ever, smell like that.

I pull at the gold-lined sleeve. Wrapped around his wrist is a snake tattoo, its fangs dripping black blood. "You're not a priest."

He laughs in my ear. "Nice work, idiot."

I struggle as I'm dragged through a small door at the back of the cathedral, kicking his shins and tossing my head, trying to bash his nose.

"Bitch!" He lifts me off my feet as easily as if I'm a doll and carries me into the room. The door slams shut, and he drops me like I used to drop my schoolbag. I hit the carpet gasping for breath. The room is small, the walls covered in bookshelves and priest robes. Father Monastero's blue eyes glitter down at me. "Don't move."

A second explosion rumbles the cathedral. The floor shakes and heavy books fall from the walls. It must be terrorists. Men who want to kill the senator or the princess or uncle Benedict. How many bombs do they have? Are we all going to die? I think of Zia Teresa and her small, beautiful face. Thank God she's not here, thank—

Pain explodes in my head as I'm yanked upward. Father Monastero grins at me, his hand tight in my hair. "Hi."

"H-Hi," I say automatically.

He jerks his head at the back of the room. "Two minutes and we're going through there."

"The... wall?"

"Fuck you're even sillier than you look. The door."

I blink and see the outline of a second door embedded in the stone. A secret passageway. My mouth goes slick with fear. The priest shakes me by my hair. "Hey. Focus. If you pass out, I'm gonna have to slap you."

I let out a dry sob. "Who are you?"

“Just some guy.”

“What do you want?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not worried about it.” His gaze travels down my body, a shark’s smile curving his mouth. “Nice dress.”

“I... I didn’t pick it.”

“I know you didn’t, moron. It’s what *he* wanted. A pristine little virgin gliding toward him with her tits out.”

My scalp is on fire. I try to pry his fingers out of my hair but they’re like iron bands. “Excuse me?”

The not-priest throws his head back, cackling at the ceiling. “Let me guess, how dare I speak to precious little January Whitehall that way?”

I don’t say anything, but he must read the answer in my eyes because his fist tightens in my hair. “Welcome to the real world.”

He traces a fingertip along my collarbone, and my skin feels like it’s melting. Since I became engaged to Mr. Parker, no man has touched me. Even my brothers stopped kissing my cheeks. It was like I had a barrier around me. Like men couldn’t touch me even if they wanted to. But this false priest’s finger is trailing down into my cleavage.

“Does that feel nice?”

“N-No.”

He grins, and his handsomeness flashes out at me like a knife. “You think I’m sexy, huh?”

Shame heats my insides. I look away, trying to find sense in this whirling nightmare.

“Hey.” He taps my cheek hard. “Don’t be embarrassed. It’ll be more fun if you like it.”

The door leading back to the cathedral bursts open. It’s Mr. Parker. His hair is on end, his face bright pink.

“Oh my God, help me!” I scream.

Mr. Parker isn't listening. He's staring at the priest. “*Stop touching her!*”

The priest's free hand slides down my back to my bottom. “Sorry, Zach. No can do.”

Mr. Parker's face goes white. “Who...?”

“Don't recognize me, do you? I don't blame you, it's been a long fucking time. Here's a little reminder. *Alessia Valente.*”

Mr. Parker withers like sped-up footage of a plant dying. “You.”

“Not me,” the priest says. “*Us.*”

A window opens in my head. This isn't an accident. The fake priest didn't drag me in here to help me, or even hurt me. The explosions, whatever's happening in the cathedral... it's because of Mr. Parker. I'm not the main event, not even on my wedding day.

“Just let her go,” Mr. Parker shrieks. “Give me January and I'll—”

The door opens again and a giant man ducks under the frame. His face is hidden under a black balaclava and before I can shout a warning, he wraps an arm around Mr. Parker's neck and forces him to his knees.

“Let go of me,” Mr. Parker gurgles, his hands slapping frantically at the giant's.

The priest laughs. “Hey, Zach. Watch this.”

He turns me to face him and his mouth crashes onto mine. He kisses me deeply, the sharp scent of him wrapping around me like a thorny rose. His lips take on a soft, coaxing quality and my own part in shock. The second they do, his tongue is in my mouth. I try to pull away, but his hand is still clenched in my hair, trapping me. Heat surges through my body and all I can think is that *this* is my first kiss. Not Mr. Parker in front of the altar. A crazy not-priest in the back room of a cathedral.

I don't want to kiss him back but I'm already doing it, pressing my lips to his, touching his tongue with mine. Something in me knows what to do. More than knows. *Wants*.

A high, awful scream rips through the air and the priest laughs into my mouth. He pulls away and the desire I feel to keep kissing him is a hundred times worse than his hands on me. He leers like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "You kept this pussy on ice too long, Zach. One little kiss and she's butter."

The huge man still has Mr. Parker in a chokehold. My fiancé writhes and jerks, tears streaming down his dark red cheeks. "*Jnggguary! Jnggguary!*"

My heart slams against my ribs. "Please let him go?"

The priest ignores me, spinning me around so his hips press into my backside.

There's another explosion. A thick book bounces onto my foot, but I barely feel it. The priest's hand is sliding along my stomach, rising to cup my left breast.

"Let's see what we have here," he mutters.

"Nnnggijos," Mr. Parker moans.

"Yes," the priest says, caressing my breast. My legs go weak. I want it to feel bad, but it just feels wrong. Like saying the alphabet backward. Everything inside me is hot and ringing with fear, but I know it's not my fault. I don't want to do this. He's making me.

The priest nuzzles his face into my neck. "Me and the boys are gonna have fun with her. But don't be jealous, you'll get to watch."

Mr. Parker makes a high, whining noise like a dying insect.

The priest's fingers toy with my nipple through my dress. "We'll break her in. Fuck her every way a girl can be fucked."

The man in the balaclava gives a rumbling laugh and I stop breathing. Thinking. I try to disappear inside myself.

“You think you know what’s gonna happen, Zach,” the fake priest says in my ear. “You’re wrong. You’ve got no imagination. The things the four of us have dreamed up to do to your little virgin... you’re gonna blow your brains out just to end it.”

Two loud bangs from behind us. Someone knocking on the hidden door. The fake priest lets go of my breast. “Time to leave.”

Balaclava man raises a fist and brings it down on the back of Mr. Parker’s head like a hammer. He slumps to the floor.

I scream but my throat is too dry for noise. Mr. Parker’s eyes are still open, but he isn’t looking at anything. He’s like a fish at a market.

“The fuck are you doing?” Father Monastero snaps.

I jump but he’s not talking to me. Balaclava man is unzipping his fly.

I cry out and manage a second of sound before the priest grips my jaw and forces it shut. “Hurry the fuck up.”

I watch as the balaclava man pees all over Mr. Parker, the stream running over his face and soaking his wedding tuxedo. I want to scream again but my body is floating apart like dandelion seeds. The urine stream ends, and I’m left staring at a stranger’s penis.

I’ve only ever seen one penis. Paul DeLuca took his out during science class as a joke. But this penis is nothing like that short pink thing. It’s long and fleshy and covered in tattoos. Balaclava man has tattoos on his penis. He shakes his penis, releasing droplets onto Mr. Parker’s unconscious face. The scream that wouldn’t come before makes another attempt against the priest’s hand.

“Shut up,” he hisses, pressing harder against my mouth.

I want Zia Teresa to snap a tea towel at these disgusting men. I want Margot to swear at them. I would even take my stepmom, her face tight, screaming at me as much as anyone

else. I want Theodore and Kurt. The police and the army and the FBI. I want this to *stop*.

The balaclava man looks from Mr. Parker to me. His eyes are electric green, so bright they look fake. And the *way* he looks at me. He hates me. No... that's too personal. He *nothings* me. He could kill me, crush my throat underneath his foot and it would be like swatting a bug. My knees buckle.

"Shit," the priest snarls, hauling me up. "She's gonna faint. Are you done?"

"Yeah," balaclava man mutters.

The fake priest carries me through the secret door and into the cathedral courtyard. It's empty though the air is full of sirens and screams.

"Margot," I mumble. "My brothers. My cousins. Is everyone okay?"

The priest ignores me. "Where's the van?"

"It'll be here." It's a third man, shorter than the others, but with muscles that are almost bursting through his tight black turtleneck. There is a gap between it and his balaclava, and I can see a tuft of dark brown hair. I wish I couldn't. I don't want to be able to identify any of these men.

A white van whips around the corner, driving across the smooth concrete of the churchyard. I want to struggle but my legs are noodles. I try to toss my head against Father Monastero, but he just laughs. "Careful with the veil. I want you wearing it when we get home."

Home. The word sends a jagged bolt of fear through me. Where do men like this even live?

The van screeches to a halt and I'm tipped onto my feet. "Time to get in, Tesorina."

Tesorina. That's an Italian word.

"What?" The priest raises a blond brow. "You want another kiss?"

“We don’t have time,” balaclava man grunts.

He picks me up as the back of the van slides open and tosses me inside. I fall onto a pile of what feels like towels. “Help,” I whisper to no one.

The van sinks as the balaclava man climbs in, settling into a seat built into the wall. He glares down at me. “*Stronza piagniucolosa.*” *Whining little bitch.*

Fear shimmers through me like fog and I ball my knees into my chest trying to fold myself into nothing. The van sags lower as the priest and the third man climb in.

“Who we waiting on?” the priest asks. “Morelli?”

“Yeah.” The third man bangs the panel behind my head. “Get ready to drive.”

He glances at me and quickly looks away, but not before I see his eyes are dark brown. A jolt goes through me. Do I know him?

Father Monastero slaps the third man’s arm. “What’s wrong, Basher? You don’t want to look at the sweet little virgin?”

“Don’t use my name.”

“Ah but you’re not really Basher, are you? Besides...” Father Monastero’s gaze finds mine. “... January Whitehall’s gonna know all our names soon. And a whole lot of other things.”

Terror wraps its icy fingers around my throat. I’m going to die today. On the day I was supposed to get married. There’s a loud rap at the back of the van and the door slides open again. A fourth man stands backlit by the afternoon sun. His balaclava is pulled on top of his head and even my panic-fried brain recognizes he’s gorgeous. Tanned with thick brown hair and a perfect angular face. The kind of handsome that makes your tongue go numb.

“Fucking shit-show,” he says in an accented voice. “Give me a hand with him.”

The van sinks another inch as a body is hauled in beside mine.

“Who’s that?” Father Monastero asks, but I already know. Kurt’s face is turned toward me, dark blood running from his forehead to his ear. I clap my hands to my mouth.

“Go,” the handsome man says, climbing in and shutting the door.

Basher pounds the back of the van three times. We jerk forward and I grip the floor, trying not to slide into Kurt. I can’t tell if he’s alive.

The handsome man makes a talking gesture with his thumb and two fingers. “Doc? The girl.”

“Right.” Father Monastero pulls a white bag from the wall.

“Doc?” I say. “Like ‘doctor?’”

The handsome man smiles at me. “You didn’t think he was a real priest, did you?”

Even in all the chaos, my stomach surges with excitement. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so beautiful before. “I… Who are you?”

The handsome man laughs. “A question for another time, *bella*.”

He’s Italian too. He sounds exactly like Zia.

Father Monastero grabs my chin, turning it to expose the side of my neck. There’s a huge needle in his hand. “Don’t worry,” he says. “This’ll only hurt a little.”

I scream and hands come down from everywhere, pinning my arms, my legs, my stomach. Father Monastero hovers above me, smiling his sneering Elvis smile. “Sweet dreams, Tesorina.”



CHAPTER THREE

Doc Valente

Seventeen years earlier

MY HEAD IS pounding, my mouth is dry. I want to scream but the sounds are stuck in my throat, choking me. Alessia can't be dead, but she is. The doctor might have been bullshiting but the body lying on the hospital bed in front of me isn't.

My sister's thick blonde hair was shaved off imperfectly so she's bald on one side of her head and the blue hospital gown doesn't hide the bruises ringing her neck and dotting her cheeks. She died in agony. She died like a fucking animal.

Beside me, Bobby is sobbing into his palms, snot and tears mixing on his face. A face barely starting to grow stubble. He's older than me but he's such a fucking kid. And now his dad's dead. He and his older sisters are orphans. I sling an arm around his neck, pull him close. His crying has a ragged hysterical note and I unwillingly remember that Marco Bassilotta wasn't just shot through the head but in both his legs and his groin.

Disrespect on every possible level. Humiliation for all of us. That's what Parker promised, yet none of us believed he'd go through with it. Now the jokes on us.

Adriano is staring into the wall. His eyes are like two universes spinning separately. His mother died a few hours ago in this same hospital. Shot three times in the gut. She was naked when Adriano found her. Worse than naked, her clothes were torn open in the front. I loved Mrs. Rossi. She was the

prettiest mom in all five boroughs. The thought of what happened to her in her own kitchen before she died...

I force all thoughts away and close my eyes, my head throbbing like a freshly picked scab. I want to cry, to try and puke up this sick, swollen feeling but my brain feels jammed. Stuck. Broken. I need to kill Parker, but how? He's got a million bodyguards and all I have is my stepdads Ruger and—

“Boys.” Morelli appears in the doorway, phone in hand. Usually, his uptight attitude and fancy clothes make him seem older. Right now, with his eyes red and his nose running he looks about twelve.

“We need to go,” he says. “My Nonno's arranged a chartered flight from Newark. I've hired us a car. We need to go out front and find it.”

Adriano speaks for the first time in hours. “No.”

Morelli swipes a hand across his face. “We don't have a choice. Parker's not going to stop.”

“Good,” Adriano hisses. “He can come find me.”

“He won't come find you, *idiot*! He'll send his men after your brother, your cousins, Doc's mom, Bobby's sisters and then he'll have snipers pick us off the streets one by one.”

“How does us leaving help that?” Adriano demands, nostrils flaring.

Morelli draws himself up, trying to impersonate the man he was yesterday, before this all happened. “My family can protect everyone in New York who needs protection. But if we're still here, we've got targets painted on our heads. Parker won't quit until we're dead.”

“I don't care,” I say quietly.

“What Valente?” Morelli asks.

“I don't. Want to. Live anymore,” I say clearly. That's one thing that feels true. I'll kill Parker and then I'm done. Out of here. Without Alessia... what's even the point?

“Domenico,” Morelli says in a low voice and I’m pretty sure it’s the first time he’s ever used my first name. “You feel that way now but I’m not letting Parker kill—”

“Why not? We all know I did this. I pissed him off. I brought this down on all of us. You three fuck off and I’ll stay here and kill him.”

Bobby looks up from between his soaked fingers. “How are you gonna manage that?”

“With a gun, Basher. With my bare fucking hands.”

He shakes his head. “You can’t kill Parker. You’ve never killed anyone.”

“I’ll learn. I don’t give a fuck.”

“You are not responsible for what Parker has done,” Morelli barks. “You think the three of us want your death on our consciences along with everything else?”

I push myself off the wall and stand, toe to toe with Morelli. “I don’t give a fuck what the three of you want.”

My words hang in the air like grenade fragments. Morelli turns away. Adriano’s eyes go blank. Bobby lowers his face into his hands and starts crying again.

“I didn’t mean that.” The words tumble out without my consent. “I didn’t mean it, you know I don’t... you know I want... but I need him dead. I can’t live while he’s still alive.”

“I understand,” Morelli says quietly. “But you can’t throw your life away Domenico. You won’t get your revenge by staying here. He’ll kill you like he’d killed your sister.”

His words send heat flooding up my face and it’s like a dam bursting, the tears and the rage that wouldn’t come before comes now. The room spins and everything jerks and folds. Everything goes black and then I watch as I sink my fists into the hospital wall, feeling nothing except hollowness because Morelli’s right. I can’t kill Parker. I wouldn’t stand a chance and knowing that is like knowing Alessia was violated and murdered all over again.

“Stop.” Bobby pulls me away from the wall. “You’re gonna get us kicked out.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Morelli says. “I’ll pay for the damage. We need to get downstairs and take the car to the airstrip.”

I scrub a hand over my eyes and see bits of wood and plaster embedded in my knuckles. “I need to kill Parker.”

“You will,” Morelli says, with a touch of his old arrogance. “We’re not leaving because we’re running away. We’re leaving to collect ourselves, gather our strength and find a way to make Parker wish he’d never been born.”

Another silence, this one more loaded than the last.

“You mean it?” I say to Morelli.

“On my honor as a man, we will hurt Parker like no one has ever been hurt before. For Bobby’s father and Adriano’s mother and Alessia and... and...”

Morelli breaks off as his eyes fill with tears. He looks even younger, like he’s shrinking in front of me. “Sorry,” he mutters. “I don’t deserve to ...”

He feels guilty, I realise. The three of us lost family members but Parker was too chicken shit to kill any of the coveted Morelli family. But why does that matter when his men snatched Eli’s dog, broke its back and all its legs and let it bleed out on the sidewalk? Morelli got his share of humiliation and disrespect. Even I knew he loved that dog more than anything.

Morelli’s phone slides to the floor as he starts crying, his hands clamped over his face. I move toward him and wrap my arms around his back. He smells like fancy cologne and soap and he buries his face in my neck like a girl but I don’t push him away.

“It’s okay,” I lie. “We can work this out.”

“I promise,” Morelli sobs. “I promise we’ll get revenge. Just come with me. Just don’t fucking kill yourself.”

I briefly press my cheek against Morelli's head. "I won't kill myself. I don't want to..."

Tears well up inside me and then we're hugging each other like assholes, sinking down onto the floor and howling for what we've lost and the revenge that has to wait.

"I'm sorry," Morelli keeps saying and he's so wrong to be sorry eventually I can't stand it. I disentangle myself from him and walk back to Alessia's side.

"Go to him," I snarl at Bobby. "Help him out."

But to my surprise, Adriano gets there first, reaching down and pulling Eli into his chest. He strokes the back of Morelli's head as he weeps, mutters something soft in Ukrainian and I see tears sparkling in the gargoyle's eyes. The sight of them almost as shocking as the sight of my dead sister.

Bobby joins the two of them, wrapping his arms around Morelli's back and weeping like a little boy. His face is flushed with shame and rage, but I guess he needs the comfort more than he needs to be a man. Soon they're all crying, screaming, moaning in a nightmare chorus. I don't know who is making noise and who is helping.

I turn and look at Alessia. Some doctor or nurse closed her blue eyes to make it look like she's sleeping. It doesn't matter. She still looks like hell.

I dig in my pocket for my Marlboros, and light up. The hospital are probably going to sue me for busting up their walls, so why not have a few cigarettes? I stand there, chain smoking as I watch my friends fall apart and it occurs to me I know two things.

This happened for no reason and it's all my fucking fault.

Present Day

JANUARY WHITEHALL IS balled up on Morelli's dark red carpet, still unconscious from her sleeper injection. I lean against the banister of the main staircase, waiting for her to wake up. I've heard all brides are beautiful on their wedding day, but she's a

pretty little thing. She reminds me of a colt, all legs and lashes and long, dark mane. And those tits... Mama Whitehall did a good job hiding them away. My eyes almost fell out of my head when the brat walked down the aisle toward me.

A moan falls from her red lips. Even twitching on the carpet, she looks too pure to exist. Like she's been kissed by angels. It makes a man want to violate her. Or at least it makes me want to do that.

On the other side of the room, her useless bodyguard is still out cold. He didn't get a sleeper injection; Adriano just kicked him in the head. I would have slit his throat and pushed him out of the van, but Morelli wants him alive for now.

"Mmmfff." The brat turns over, her fingers contracting like kitten claws. Her eyes flick open. They're green. Not psycho green like Adriano. Pale green with a dark ring. The kind that make you think of Irish hills and secret gardens. I push myself off the banister. "Evening, Tits."

January squints at me. "Father Monastero?"

I grin. When we got home, I changed into black jeans and a T-shirt. I'd have kept the priest robes on but Morelli told me to quit showing off. "Not a real priest, dipshit."

Her lower lip trembles and I watch as today's events replay in her brain. She touches the side of her neck. "You drugged me."

"I did." The needle pierced her so easily. I'll never get over how simple humans are to penetrate. How quickly you can turn the living into the dead.

January sits up, her wedding dress spread around her like a white puddle. Her eyes scan the entrance hall, lingering on the oil paintings and the fire roaring away in the corner. "Where am I?"

I yawn pointedly. The kidnapped are so fucking boring. 'Why am I here?' 'Please let me go?' 'I have a family...' Things won't get fun again until the others are back downstairs.

“Mr...” She blinks at me. “I don’t know your name?”

“You can call me Doc.”

“Doc, can you please let me go?”

With a sigh, I pull my butterfly knife from my pocket and flick out the blade. “What was that?”

She shuts up.

I pick my thumbnail with the point. There’s a little blood under the nail. Not from today. Probably from when Adriano and I worked over Nicci Fattore. I wish I’d cut Parker, sliced his eyelid, or taken a finger. But I did tongue his virgin bride and Adri pissed in his face. We have plenty of time to make the ugly fuck pay.

I can feel the brat watching me. I count the seconds until she asks another stupid question. *One, two, three—*

“What are you going to do to me?” Her voice is clear but there’s a little wobble at the edges. She’s a minute from tears, max. “Can you please tell me where I am?”

“Stop talking.”

“Please just... Why is this happening?”

“Tesorina, I don’t know why you think I carry a knife, but keep talking and I’ll bleed you all over the carpet.”

Her mouth snaps closed, and she starts whimpering into her hands like a bunny. I like when girls cry, but she’s not doing it properly. She’s sniffing like a five-year-old who lost her teddy bear.

I groan at the molded ceiling. “Fucking hell, can you quit your whining?”

She looks up at me. She’s even paler now—and she didn’t have a lot of color to lose. She looks half-dead. But then maybe she’ll be entirely dead by the end of the night. That’s Morelli’s call.

“How many people died?”

I frown. “The fuck do you mean?”

“The explosions. How many people died? Do you know?”

I lower my knife. I could tell her that her whole family’s dead, but looking at her grey complexion, the news might kill her, and then I’d be in the shit. “No one died, Tits.”

“But... the explosions?”

“C4 down in the sewers. So, I guess some NYC plumbing died. You gonna cry about it?”

January stares into the middle distance. “Everyone’s safe?”

“Yup. You’re the only person who got fucked over in this arrangement.”

“Oh.”

I expect her to start bawling, but she just blinks rapidly. “So, are you really a doctor?”

I stare at her. For a girl with unicorn stickers on the back of her phone, I wasn’t expecting this much backchat. “Does it matter if I’m really a doctor?”

“I... No. I just don’t know what to call you.”

I grab the front of my jeans. “You can use Father Monastero, if you want. That got me hard.”

She flinches. “I don’t...”

I laugh. “Or you can keep playing innocent, *lurida squaldrina*. That gets me hard too.”

“I’m not a whore.” Her eyes widen and she claps a hand to her mouth.

For a second, I don’t understand, then it clicks. “You speak Italian?”

She shakes her head.

“You speak Italian,” I repeat more to myself. “*Capisci cosa ti sto dicendo, vero?*”

She keeps shaking her head, but I can see the comprehension in her eyes. I swear under my breath. How could we have missed this? She's Anglo. Her whole family is Anglo. Mentally scanning our plans, her speaking Italian doesn't change anything, but how did we miss it? "Who taught you Italian?"

She shoves herself backward on the carpet. "No one."

I point the blade at her. "Who. Taught you. How to speak Italian?"

"My Zia."

"Your *Zia*?"

"She's not really my auntie. She's my housekeeper. My nanny. She's lived with me my whole life. I call her Zia Teresa."

There was an old woman around the house, but neither of us gave her a second thought. "Dyed hair? Smokes cigs?"

January blinks rapidly. "Yes. How—"

"This old girl taught you how to say, 'filthy whore?'"

"No. Our gardeners... they were Sicilian. I used to overhear them sometimes."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Sicilians are swine."

A small smile creases her mouth.

"What?" I ask.

"Why do all other Italians hate Sicilians?"

She's trying to be funny. Sweet. I drop to my heels beside her and flip the knife over my knuckles. Her eyes go glassy. *Better*. I jerk my head at the blackened windows. "It's dark now, Tits. If you'd stayed at your wedding, you'd be married. Eating crab while Zachery Parker gropes your thighs under the table."

She swallows, her eyes fixed on the blade. "I... I guess."

“I know. And in a few more hours, you’d be on your way to the Ritz-Carlton to suck your ugly husband’s cock. Do think Parker’d fuck you like a dog the first time? Bend you over and nail you from behind?”

Her gaze skids away, coming to rest on the wall behind me.

“No, he’d want to see that perfect rack. But then he’d only last thirty seconds.”

I can almost see her thinking *‘don’t let him upset you.’* I laugh. I could tear her apart and watch her piece herself together again all night long. “You’re in luck, Tits. All four of us are better-looking than Parker and we all know how to make it last hours.”

Her ruby red lips tremble. I remember pressing my mouth to them at the cathedral. I was mostly focused on Parker, but it was a sweet kiss. Sugary. She didn’t want to like it, but she couldn’t help herself. I bet she’s the kind of girl who soaks her underwear while you’re making out. “When I stuck my tongue down your throat at the cathedral, was that your first kiss?”

She blinks her doe eyes at me. “I... What?”

“Was it your first kiss? Or did you practice with the girls at school?”

Her mouth twitches and I know she wants to tell me I’m disgusting. My cock thickens in my jeans. I lift the knife, examining the point again. “Tesorina, if you don’t tell me about your first kiss, I’ll give you another one. And this time I’ll bite.”

She shudders. “It was my first kiss.”

“Glad to hear it. I know Tweedledee and Tweedledum didn’t let anything with a cock within ten feet of you, but there’s always a chance someone slipped under the ropes.”

Redness rushes into her pale cheeks. I want to make her cry and then eat her pussy. Listen to her sob while she comes all over my face...

“Mr. Parker never kissed me,” she whispers. “He was a gentleman.”

“He was a weirdo playing fucked up games with his cock.”

Her face registers only confusion. Fucking virgins. “He was edging himself. Waiting for you to grow up. Fantasizing over your jailbait pussy like it’s an apple getting ripe enough to eat. He’s a freak.”

She shakes her head, dark curls whipping around her shoulders. “You’re a psycho.”

I roll my tongue across the inside of my cheek and grin. “Yeah, but I’d never piss ten years away waiting for a girl to get legal. Now you’re eighteen, I don’t plan on waiting ‘till the end of tonight.”

“Please leave me alone,” she whispers, beautiful tears collecting in her eyes.

I look up the stairs. Where the fuck are the others? I was planning on saving this bombshell until my brothers were around but they’re taking too fucking long. For years I’ve watched this brat float around with her head in the clouds. Pearl earrings; summers in Paris; parties with nine different fucking birthday cakes. She’s a spoiled bitch. Already crying when nothing’s happened yet. She’s not cut or shot or getting it in all three holes.

I get to my feet. “Quick question. Do you think the first time I saw you was when you met with the Archbishop for marriage counseling?”

Her hand jumps to her throat. “What do you...?”

“If I could extort my way into being the priest at your fucking wedding, who do you think you’ve been confessing your boring, petty sins to?”

Horror stretches across her face. “No, you can’t...”

“I can’t?” I tap my chest. “I dunno. Do you have a weird thing about secretly eating tiramisu that you feel the need to tell priests about?”

She throws herself on the carpet and resumes her silent snuffling. My enjoyment is slightly deprived by realizing I should have put two and two together about the Italian housekeeper. This bitch had way too much access to tiramisu.

“Doc?”

Basher bounces downstairs, buttoning the sleeve of his navy shirt. He reeks of Tom Ford and his dark hair is ruffled with wax. I know exactly what he’s doing. “Dressing up for the little brat?”

Basher looks pointedly at my bare feet. “You know you’re not seventeen, right?”

“You know you’re not the bass player in a Midwestern wedding band, right?”

Basher rolls his eyes. “At least you’re not in the priest outfit.”

He doesn’t know January’s awake, otherwise he’d be making sippy eyes at her like always. I smile at him. “Whaddya think of the girl up close? Pretty scrawny, huh?”

“Have you gone blind? She’s stunning.”

I want to turn and see January’s reaction so bad, but I keep my eyes on Basher. “You get the tarp?”

He takes the wad of clear plastic from under his arm. “Where does Adriano want it this time? Because last time—”

“Bobby?”

The tarp falls to the ground. Turning on my heel, it’s hard to see who looks more horrified, him or her.

“You’re... awake,” Basher says in a strangled voice.

“Yes. What are you doing here?”

Basher doesn’t answer, just stares at her like her pussy invented cold fusion.

I clap my hands. “We’re losing traction here. Tits, your precious algebra tutor shouldn’t have been teaching you math

any more than I should have been taking your confession. Basher, she's been awake the whole time, sucks to be you."

January looks like she's going to pass out. Surely, she can't be far from it. How many rugs can someone get pulled out from under them in one day?

"Bobby..." she whispers.

"It was his idea to tutor you," I say, because I'm a prick.

Basher shoves me, but he can't deny it. It *was* his idea. We needed someone in her school, and he had the master's in computer science, so he bought some slacks and registered with the New York Board of Education. We laughed about it at the time. Then he actually started teaching Miss Priss quadratic equations and everything got a lot less funny.

Bobby presses a hand to his heart like he's Romeo or something. "January, I mean it. I'm so sorry."

I elbow his side. "Hey Basher, remember what she said about you in the confession box?"

January claps her hands to her mouth. She's already learned it's pointless to try and stop me. She braces herself for impact instead. Maybe she's not so stupid after all. "You should have heard her go on about you, Bash. 'He's so nice, I hang around the library asking him about axels and shit just to see if he'll talk to me.'"

Basher's face is scarlet and he's looking anywhere but at January.

"I wanted to know if she was rubbing her virgin kitty thinking about you. But they don't let you ask questions when you're the priest."

Tears splash down January's cheeks and into her tits. I could rub my dick through those tears. Make her taste them.

"How long have you been watching me?" she whispers.

"Years," I say. "How do you think I know what your Zia Teresa looks like?"

Heavy footsteps pound down the stairs behind me. Adriano in a green Henley, heavy canvas pants, and boots. Looking, as always, like he shops exclusively at the military surplus store. I raise a hand. “Evening, brother.”

He ignores me, looking at Basher. “Tarp?”

“Here.” Basher bends and collects the plastic sheet.

There’s a strangled sound from January but Adriano doesn’t seem to notice. “Where’s Eli?”

“Still on his way,” I say. “You ready?”

He doesn’t reply. Adriano’s never been one for talking. At school, he was everyone’s pick for ‘most likely to shave his head, climb a cell tower and start gunning down strangers.’

January is looking at him like he’s Frankenstein come back to life. Which isn’t far from the truth. Adri’s not bad-looking, but he got cut in Bolivia. Now there’s a silvery scar from his right eye down his cheek. It doesn’t do his ‘serial killer’ vibe any favors. But even before the scar, he scared the shit out of girls. I used to have to give them an ounce of weed before they’d agree to fuck us both.

Adriano points to the bodyguard piled in the corner like firewood. “Awake?”

“Nope,” I say. “The girl is, though.”

Only then does Adri turn to take in the slumped figure of January Whitehall.

She stares back at him as though she’s going to puke. “You’re the janitor from my dance studio.”

Adriano’s lip curls, revealing his gold incisor. “Is that right?”

I laugh. “January confessed about you too, Adri. She felt bad about your fucked up face. She was too scared to say hello. It’s probably the tats.”

Adriano looks down at his hands, covered in mementos to hate and revenge. “You feel sorry for me, girl?”

“No!” she squeaks, but there’s an unmistakable softness in her voice. Pity is something we can sense like blood. We exploit it in others; we conceal it in ourselves.

Adriano takes a step toward her. “You talked about my scars?”

“N-No.”

I laugh. That’s the thing about Adriano. No matter who you are, he’s fucking terrifying, which means you can always count on him to liven things up. It would be something to watch him fuck her. That does it for me sometimes, watching ugly and pretty get crushed together. And God how precious January would cry getting fucked by Adriano Rossi.

“Adriano,” Basher warns. “We’re waiting for Eli, remember?”

“Eli’s taken long enough.”

“Have I?”

I sigh. Say what you will about Morelli, the prick knows how to make an entrance. He glares down at us from the top of the stairs in his tight white shirt and charcoal three-piece suit. His gaze finds January. “Miss Whitehall, you’re awake.”

January still looks terrified, but her eyes are feverishly bright as she takes in Morelli’s stupid mug. He smiles at her, and she looks like she’s going to swoon. I roll my eyes. Morelli has this effect on women. He’s pretty as a picture and the extra years in Naples gave him an accent that makes American pussy cream itself. I have to keep him away from the clubs on busy nights or the girls get distracted, and the bottom line goes way down.

Morelli comes down the stairs just slow enough to piss me off, adjusting his sleeves so his platinum cuff links glint like morse code in the fire light. January can’t tear her eyes off him, which is exactly what Eli wants. He reaches the landing and gives her one of his ‘come suck my cock’ smiles. “Miss Whitehall, my name is Elliot Velluto Morelli. It’s a pleasure to have you in my house.”

Her lip twitches. I bet some inborn politeness is trying to make her say *'thank you for kidnapping me at my wedding.'*

Morelli stares coldly at her. "I'm speaking to you."

"H-Hello, Mr. Morelli."

"Better. You've obviously already met my associates." He waves a hand toward Adri. "This is Adriano Rossi."

Again, silence, but now the girl is visibly shaking. Morelli snaps his fingers. "Greet Adriano, Miss Whitehall."

"Hello, Adriano."

"Good girl." Morelli turns to me. "This is Domenico Valente—"

"Doc," I snarl. "You're not my fucking mother."

"Domenico Valente who we call Doc," Morelli finishes irritably. "He played the part of your priest today."

January's green eyes fill with tears, probably remembering her pathetic confessions—staying up too late on school nights, being jealous of her friends for going to the movies. I wave at her. She says nothing.

Morelli sighs. "Miss Whitehall, I was told you were polite. Do I need to teach you manners?"

She looks at Basher in a wordless plea for help.

"Do not look at him," Morelli says in a silky voice. "Look at Domenico and greet him."

January addresses my chin. "Hello, Domenico."

I grin. "I've changed my mind. She can call me that all day."

Morelli puts a hand on Basher's shoulder. "And this is—"

"Bobby," Basher interjects. "Just Bobby."

Morelli pauses. Usually when people interrupt him, he has Adri break their fingers, but he loves Basher, treats him like a

baby brother. He gives him a small nod. “Fine. Miss Whitehall, this is Bobby. Sometimes we call him Basher.”

January tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Good evening, Bobby.”

Basher goes bright red. He thinks an anglicized name makes him her type. He’s deluded. She doesn’t have a type. She’s a pretty little girl who doesn’t know her asshole from her elbow. The irony is, the only one with an Anglo name is Morelli. His dad called him ‘Elliot’ after a business partner. Word is, when the epidural wore off and Morelli’s mom saw the birth certificate, she went for his eyes.

A current is passing between January and Basher. She’s still screaming at him to rescue her. Makes sense. She’s spent the most time with him and now that we’re all together, she trusts him the most. It’s high time someone took a shit on that.

I whistle. “Hey, Whitehall. Did you know we call Bobby ‘Basher’ because his real name’s Roberto Bassilotta?”

January’s eyebrows pull together.

“Also, his parents farmed pigs in Ohio and his Nonno fought for Mussolini.”

Adriano lets out a snort of laughter. Basher looks like I stomped on his puppy. I shoot him a wink. “Sorry, Bash, but you need to have more pride in your heritage.”

“*Puttaniere psicotico,*” Morelli mutters. *Psychotic whoremonger.* He flicks a finger at January, who’s risen to her knees. “You. Get back on the floor.”

She obeys, lowering herself down onto her ass. “Mr. Morelli, can I ask why I’m here?”

“You’re questioning me?”

He says it as though it’s a throwaway line, but the undercurrent zaps her. “No. Not at all, I just...”

He walks toward her, studying her face, her body. He’s fussy, Morelli. His taste in pussy is more expensive than his

taste in clothes. And unlike the three of us, this is the first time he's seen January up close. Unless you count her sliding around the van unconscious.

He takes her chin and turns her face this way and that. "Why did you have security guards, *bella*?"

January seems dazed by his attention and his touch. "To... keep me safe?"

"No. Lie back on my carpet."

January's eyes scan the room for an escape that isn't going to come. Finally they land on Bobby. He jolts like an electric shock's gone through him, but he doesn't move. He's not stupid. Even in his crushed out little heart, he knows January might come out of this evening a corpse. It would be revenge for him as much as any of us, but he looks fucking miserable all the same.

January's gaze drifts back to Eli. "Mr. Morelli—"

"Is there a reason why you're not doing what you're told?"

She recoils and I'm sure she's going to break—scream or jump to her feet and try to run. But then she lies back like a snow angel on the carpet. I head to the side table and pull out a chair, ready for the show. Adriano posts himself by the fire and Basher stays near Morelli, as though he still might be able to stop what's about to happen.

Morelli studies the girl before him. "Since you're determined to be helpful, Bobby, pull Miss Whitehall's hem to her thighs."

Basher's mouth twists. I can practically taste his dilemma. He wants to protect January. He wants to obey his boss. He wants to see January's body. He hesitates, before kneeling at her side, turning his face away as he tugs up the lace of her gown. I lean forward as January's long legs are exposed.

She lets out a soft whine. The sound heats me through like whiskey. For years I've run strip clubs and pussy palaces,

handled thousands of gorgeous women, but none have had this one's palpable innocence.

I want to ruin her.

"Move away," Morelli says.

Basher retreats, his face shadowed. He's angry, but I'm pretty sure he's hard behind his chinos too. How could he not be after finally laying hands on the girl he's panted after for years?

Morelli steps between January's legs. "Are you going to misbehave?"

She shakes her head, making her long hair rush against the carpet.

"Good." He nudges her legs wider with the tip of his shoe. "Open."

January squeezes her eyes shut, but she obeys, spreading her thighs.

"Good girl." He presses his wingtip to her pussy and she lets out an involuntary moan.

I grin, shifting in my chair as I adjust my swollen cock. I wish I hadn't worn jeans.

"This..." Morelli says, stroking his shoe against her. "*This* is why you had bodyguards."

She screws her eyes up tighter, her cheeks flushing crimson. Across the room, Adriano growls. I know exactly how he feels. It would be one thing if she was scared, but she's scared *and* turned on. We can all see it.

Morelli slowly rubs his shoe against her cunt. "I'll tell you why you've come to us, *bella*. You were promised to a man my brothers and I have an unresolved conflict with."

January's eyes snap open and I can see her straining to concentrate on something that isn't her virgin pussy being rubbed. I laugh. "Does that feel nice, Tesorina? Are you getting wet?"

Her head rolls across the carpet. “Leave me alone!”

Basher lets out a shocked laugh and Morelli smiles. “Doesn’t like you, does she, Doc?”

I scowl. “She liked me fine when I was her priest.”

January wriggles back from Morelli. “Mr. Parker *isn’t* a bad man.”

Morelli’s smile fades. He presses his shoe a little harder against her. “What are you basing that on?”

Her lip quivers. “He knew my father.”

“Ah, your beloved daddy. Not to be insensitive, but your father died when you were eight. Your stepmother engineered your engagement to Zachery Parker against his wishes.”

Adriano spits into the fire.

“My mom wouldn’t do that.”

I snort. Her stepmother is a stone-cold bitch. If she wanted a smoke, she’d have sold January’s pussy for half a pack of cigarettes. Girls like January can never see that, though. They believe in happy families and forever love no matter how much evidence there is to the contrary.

“Mr. Parker and mom arranged a marriage for the benefit of both our families, but that doesn’t make him a bad person.”

Morelli smirks, working his wingtip a little faster between her legs. “I appreciate your loyalty, Miss Whitehall, but do not speak to me about Zachery Parker. The four of us have known him much longer than you have.”

January’s eyes are glazed. She looks like she’s about to come right on his shoe.

“Doesn’t that feel good, *bella?*”

She shakes her head as though she can wish this all away. I picture her little cunt swollen, tingling. Excitement mixing with panic and fear. Across the room, I hear Bobby swallow.

“I asked you a question, Miss Whitehall. Doesn’t that feel good?”

Her gaze moves from Morelli, to Basher, to Adri, to me. I’d give a lot of money to know what she’s thinking and exactly how tingly those thoughts are making her.

“You little liar.” Morelli removes his shoe from between her legs. “Here are the facts. You’ve been taken as an act of war. You are now the property of Velvet House. Mine and my business partners.”

January stares unseeingly at Morelli. “Are... Are you going to kill me?”

Adri gives a low chuckle. Morelli smiles. “You have no rights here. You are not a guest, you are our prisoner. If you do what you’re told and act as a woman should, then no harm will come to you. If you don’t behave, Miss Whitehall, then yes, we will kill you.”

Tears burst from her eyes like a broken dam. We watch her cry. Basher looks like he wants to hug her. Adri is disgusted—he can’t stand women’s tears—but Morelli just seems bored. “Stop crying.”

January sobs harder, her little shoulders shaking.

Morelli kneels beside her, cupping her cheek with a gentle hand. She looks up and hope flares in her eyes. The handsome man is being nice to her. Morelli traces a thumb over her upper lip. “My scared little girl...”

January’s mouth quivers so sweetly, I wish I had a cigarette.

Morelli stares into her hypnotized face, and then he slaps her. The sound snaps around the room like a firework.

“You will not manipulate us,” he says quietly. “You will not control us with tears. You’ll do what you’re told, or you’ll suffer. Understood?”

January raises a trembling hand to her face. “Yes, Mr. Morelli.”

“Good girl,” he says, and a smile curls the corner of his mouth.

He likes her. Fucking hell. I want Weepy Big Tits to myself. I’ve already got Basher sniffing around, I don’t need Morelli throwing his hat in the ring too.

“People will be looking for me,” January whispers. “The police. Mr. Parker...”

Morelli turns his back on her and points to Adriano. “Wake up the bodyguard.”

Adri yanks him up by his shirt collar and smacks him in the face. Cooper yelps, his eyelids flicking open. A scream slices through the room as January struggles to her feet. “Let go of him, please?”

“Doc, take care of her,” Morelli says, walking away.

I stride forward, pulling her back against my body.

“Don’t kill Kurt,” she gasps. “Please.”

I clap a hand over her mouth and the feel of her lips against my palm sends another hum through me.

Adriano drops Cooper onto all fours. He kneels, sputtering like a busted engine.

“Good evening, Kurt,” Morelli says as though the two of them are old friends.

Cooper’s face contracts. “You...?”

“Me. Welcome to Velvet House. You won’t be staying long.”

Cooper tries to scramble to his feet, but Adri puts a boot in his back.

January screams again into my hand. The sound is muffled but Cooper still hears her. His bloody face goes rigid. “January?” He looks at Morelli. “You took her.”

“We did.”

“Look, you can have her. You can do whatever you like, just let me go.”

January sags in my arms. Poor little Tesorina. Betrayed by the man who’s protected her half her life. Even I didn’t see that coming. I haul her upright. “It’s okay, baby. He’ll pay for saying that.”

But the little brat shakes her head. “Nuuuh. Pleaghs?”

I press my hand harder to her lips.

Morelli smiles at Cooper. “We expected security to be weakened by the handover, but you and your partner were an embarrassment. Drunk in broad daylight. And why were you hanging around the back of the cathedral? I assume you were calling your dealer?”

Cooper’s expression is pleading. “Mr. Morelli, you can have her. You can—”

Adri kicks him in the side. He collapses onto the carpet, spitting blood.

Morelli raises a furious hand. “Christ, Adriano! Where’s the tarp?”

“Shit. Here.” Basher rushes forward with the plastic wrap.

“*Jesu Cristo*. What’s the point now?” Morelli says, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You’re supposed to lay it out beforehand.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“You think this is funny, Valente?”

“Obviously.” I take my hand off January’s mouth. “What about you, Tits? Do you think this is funny?”

“Please! *Please* don’t kill Kurt.”

“Thank you, Janie,” Cooper slurs, dripping blood. “Thank you!”

Adriano kicks him again, and there’s an audible crack of ribs.

“Nice one,” I say.

January gives a yipping little scream. “Mr. Morelli, please let Kurt go!”

Eli frowns. “*Bella*, this man was assigned to protect you and not only did he fail miserably, he just betrayed you. He doesn’t deserve to live.”

“But you can’t kill him!”

I lower my mouth to January’s ear. “What do I get if I help you? Will you blow me in front of your bodyguard while everyone else watches?”

She squirms and I tighten my grip around her.

Morelli clucks his tongue. “Doc, stop teasing her. Basher, get the plastic under Cooper before the carpet becomes even more fucked. Adriano, kill this idiot.”

“What about me?” I ask Morelli. “Why can’t I kill Cooper?”

“Because I’m not staying up all night, watching you flay this moron. I need some fucking sleep.”

“Killjoy.”

January lets out an ear-splitting scream. Adri looks murderous. If there’s one thing he hates more than women crying, it’s women shrieking. I clap a hand over her mouth. “Sorry about that.”

Adriano shakes his head and turns to Morelli. “Make Basher do it.”

“Fuck off,” Basher says at once. “You fucking do it.”

Morelli holds up a hand. “Why Bobby?”

Adriano jerks his head at January. Morelli looks from her to Basher, who’s too slow to get the look of righteous horror off his face.

Morelli inclines his head. “Bobby, kill the bodyguard.”

All the color rushes from Basher's face. He glances at January. "Can she go in the other room?"

"No." Morelli reaches into his waistband and hands him his Walther PPS. "Now."

"But—"

His nostrils flare. "Think of your mother. Your sisters. This is everything. Ten years of planning. *Don't* fail us."

Basher's face hardens. He's a cute kid. A nice guy. But that's not all he is and no one struggles with that more than him. He gives January one last look and then his shoulders slump. "Fine."

She struggles against me as Bobby approaches Cooper, her ass rubbing against my jeans. I press into her, and she bites me. Hard.

"Ow," I say, shaking my palm. "Little bitch!"

"You're evil," January spits. "Evil, horrible men!"

I press my hand back over her mouth. "You think we mind being evil, Tesorina? You think we care?"

Morelli pulls a handkerchief from his jacket. "You don't know what you're talking about, Miss Whitehall. You've been sheltered your whole life. Told what's right and wrong. Your morals are like your pussy. Completely untested. You've never had to make a choice. Doc, take your hand away."

The moment I do, January screams and Morelli shoves the cloth between her lips. She gives a noise of muffled outrage, and he slaps her again.

"Remember what I said, Miss Whitehall. Behave yourself and live or disobey and die." He turns to Basher. "Kill him."

Basher presses the gun to Cooper's head. The plastic contains the spray and the body jerks twice before going still.

January slumps in my arms. I'm pretty sure she's passed out.

“So that’s done,” I say. “Can we eat? I’m fucking starving.”

Morelli sweeps a hand through his model-perfect hair. “Not yet. Set up a camera and put a chair into the middle of the room. Time to show Parker what we’ve done.”



CHAPTER FOUR

Adriano Rossi

CALM FOLLOWS THE death of the bodyguard. The girl lies passed out on the floor, while Doc and I set up the room and Basher methodically mops up brain splatter. He won't look at me. I don't care. It was the right decision. Whatever Basher thought was happening, it isn't. The girl doesn't belong to him, and she never will. I've done him a favor.

"Where the fuck did we get this ring light?" Doc asks, adjusting the tripod.

Eli looks up from his seat by the fire. "Why?"

"Because it's for teen girls who do makeup videos."

"That doesn't mean it won't work."

Doc glares at him. "Would it kill you to help us?"

"You've got everything under control."

"You're a lazy fuck, Morelli."

Eli sits in a chair by the fire doing clean-up of his own: contacting our NYPD rats, confirming no one tied us to what happened at the cathedral. But Doc knows that. He just likes to take swipes.

The pearls on the girl's wedding dress and the diamonds in her hair keep catching the light. Fucking ridiculous, her getting married. She couldn't get through a sleepover without calling her whore of a stepmother to take her home. I don't want to look at her, but she keeps catching the light too—milk-pale skin and long lashes. She sets my blood boiling when usually

it moves like mud. I want her gone. Wrapped in the same plastic sheet as Cooper and thrown into the freezing Atlantic.

“Zia?” She shifts on the floor, swaying herself up onto her palms. “Zia?”

Her voice is so soft. Fluttery. I turn away from her. “Girl’s awake.”

Eli stands. “Good. Miss Whitehall, how are you feeling?”

She doesn’t answer. Her gaze falls on Cooper’s body and the color drains from her face. Doc abandons the tripod and bounces over to her. “Are you gonna puke? Because your only options are down your dress or on your former bodyguard.”

Her delicate throat contracts. “Could I please have some water?”

“Of course.” Eli gestures to Basher. “Bobby, get Miss Whitehall some water.”

Basher heads to the wooden bar and returns with a crystal tumbler full of water. She could smash it and try to cut us, or slash her wrists, but all the little girl does is sip her drink. She’s only half-finished before Morelli takes the tumbler from her. She leaves a red lipstick mark on the rim. The sight of it makes my cock ache.

“Now, Miss Whitehall, we must discuss business.”

“W-What kind of business?”

Eli raises her glass, drinking from the place her lips stained. The girl’s face goes as red as her lipstick. Typical. Eli Morelli’s need to know he can seduce any woman in his path is pathologic. But it doesn’t matter. She doesn’t belong to him, either. I clear my throat.

Eli glances at me, amused. “Forgive me. We have business with Zachery Parker. Business you will help us with.”

Her eyes are so clear you can read them like a book—all fear and guilt and hope. It was like that when she danced too, you could feel her feelings. Her joy, her sorrow.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Take off your dress.”

The room fills with a silence cold enough to cut skin.

“Please,” she whispers. “Please, Mr. Morelli?”

Eli holds out the tumbler. “Bobby?”

Basher steps forward to take the glass. His face is blank and I’m glad. If he looked the way he did before, I’d force him to do the honors again. But maybe he’d like that. He usually does, even if he won’t admit it.

Eli smiles down at the girl. “You remember what I told you before your bodyguard was killed?”

She bows her head.

“Then you know better than to refuse me. Take off your dress.”

She looks up, all trembling lips and watering eyes. “Mr. Morelli... I *can't*.”

“Have it your way. Doc?”

Grinning, Doc pulls his revolver from the back of his jeans. “Get in front of the camera, and strip.”

Her pleading eyes dart around the entrance hall.

“January Joy Whitehall, I will blow your brains out and Bobby will be the only one to mourn you.”

She looks to Basher, his face skull-like in the flickering firelight. Her gaze falls on me. Those eyes like big green worlds asking if it’s true if she could die tonight. At least she’s asking the right person.

Doc presses the barrel to her head and I feel the sensation against my own skull, a cold ring of steel. “Last warning, Tesorina. I’ll waste you, then I’ll fuck your corpse. Stand up.”

She blanches but doesn’t get to her feet. There’s a backbone in this girl. We didn’t see that coming. Maybe I

should have. I watched her dance a thousand times, repetition and strength and control.

Eli walks back to his chair by the fire. “Hit her.”

Doc lowers the gun and backhands her. The girl’s head snaps sideways.

She touches her cheek. “You’re a beast.”

Doc laughs. “Take off your dress and I’ll show you how much.”

“Never.”

He slaps her again but this time and this time, she glares at him. “You’re *insane*.”

Doc shakes out his hand. “Get your tits out and stop wasting my time.”

“No!”

I cross the room to Eli. “We should kill her.”

“We brought her here for a reason.”

Doc drags the girl toward the chair in front of the camera. Her hands slapping at his arms. “Let me go!”

Give her a little longer and she’ll be spitting and scratching. I grit my teeth. “If you’re determined to do this, I can control her.”

“How?”

I pull the platinum bracelet from my pocket. “Read the name.”

Eli squints at the little heart charm. “Where did you get this?”

“Stopped her while she was running out of the church.”

Eli smiles. “Beautiful work. Go take over.”

The girl is slumped on the chair. Doc scowls when he sees me coming. “Give me five more minutes.”

“No. Move.”

I drop the bracelet in the girl’s lap. She picks it up with her long, elegant fingers and the fire in her eyes vanishes. “Margot? You’ve got her too?”

I shake my head. “Just the bracelet. Your sister’s alive, but she doesn’t have to be. Your choice.”

The girl’s face shifts. It’s an expression I’ve seen a million times. Revulsion. But my blood is thick and steady. Let her hate me. It doesn’t matter. I return the bracelet to my pocket. “What’ll it be?”

Her hand lifts to her left breast, cupping it lightly.

Doc sniggers. “Gonna give us a show, Tesorina?”

Color flares in her cheeks but she ignores him, letting go and lifting her hands to her veil. Eli clicks his tongue. “Leave that, Miss Whitehall. The dress.”

She reaches behind herself for her zipper. The sound of it coming down is like a tongue along my cock. Her fingers fumble and she looks up at the ceiling. “It’s stuck.”

“Would you like some assistance?” Eli asks. He sounds gentle. Deferential. That’s how he is with women. Letting them think everything will be easy.

She hesitates. “Yes, please?”

Eli smiles. “Ah, *bella*, it’s so charming when you’re polite. Turn around.”

She trembles as his fingers brush her porcelain skin.

Doc’s teeth are bared as his gaze flicks from her face to her chest and back again. He wants her tied to his bedhead so he can cut her, fuck her, starve her into savageness.

The wonder that vanished from Basher’s puppy dog eyes when he killed Cooper is back. He’d carry the girl to bed and fuck her gently, make her believe she’d found a man who’d treat her that way for the rest of her life—believe it himself for a while.

Eli caresses the girl's waist. He's measuring her. For all his soft words, his goal is always possession. To reduce a girl to an equivalent weight in gold. When he does, he puts a collar on her neck and parades her around until he gets bored. Then she either accepts a few tokens and leaves or exits his company via a more permeant route. These men, my brothers, are idiots, all of them, but it's not their fault. To them, the possibilities of this girl are endless. To me, they point to the same forked road—kill her or suffer. And I won't let that happen. I'll end this before things get more fucked up.

Eli's hands rise to the stuck zipper. A short tug and the fastening slithers down, exposing her back. It's pale and delicate and utterly unblemished. My fingers twitch as I imagine my tattoo gun kissing that flawless canvas.

Doc lets out a low whistle and the girl clutches the loose folds of the dress to her body. Four hundred thousand dollars of Venetian lace and pearls. We won't destroy it. When she's dead, we can fence it to some gangster's girlfriend who thinks she's royalty.

“Miss Whitehall. Let go,” Eli whispers.

The dress falls in slow motion like an avalanche and then January Whitehall is standing in her wedding lingerie and heels, her long veil still fixed to her hair. Her body is sleek and well-muscled. Her underwear is sluttier than I expected. Her big tits spill out of a tiny corset and there's barely a scrap of lace between her legs.

Bobby makes a squashed cat sound and coughs into his fist to cover it.

Ell gives her a cold smile. I can practically see the numbers whirring in his head, the girl's value rising higher.

January wraps her arms around herself and tilts her head so the veil falls across her shoulder. It's even more obscene than if she stood there naked. Doc catches my eye and winks. I remember him as a teenager, setting his sights on some Manhattan princess no one thought he could have. Seducing

her like someone paid him to do it. The girl needs to die before this gets messy.

Eli gestures to the chair in front of the camera. “Please take a seat.”

She obeys—probably welcoming the barest cover it provides from hungry eyes.

“Thank you. Bobby, camera?”

“It’s recording.”

“Then who should do the honors?” Eli asks.

I frown. “Why not you?”

“I need to talk.”

“You can’t talk and fuck at the same time?”

The girl lets out a pitiful moan we all ignore.

“It will look better if it’s simultaneous,” Eli considers Basher. “No, not you.”

Doc points to his chest. “Me?”

“You already kissed her you *pezzo di merda*.” *Piece of shit.*

“Fine. Then it should be who Parker wants to see the least. The gargoyle.”

Eli turns to me. “Do you want to do it?”

That heat again, boiling through my veins. Setting my muscles twitching. “Whatever works.”

“Fine. Use the Walther.”

I stride to the table by the fire and pick up the gun. Basher practically lunges for me. “Not that one.”

I raise the weapon, ready to crack it over his head but he waves his hands. “I don’t wanna stop you. There’s blood on it.”

I look down. The barrel is flecked with Cooper’s gore. “Huh.”

I turn to the girl, disgust etched into every line of her pretty, childish face. My chest tightens. For years I've watched her from a distance, but this is hatred at close range. "You still want me to use it?" I ask Eli.

He grins. "You're a sick man. No. Use yours."

I hand Bobby the Walther and unholster my Glock. "You'll do the talking?"

Eli checks his hair in a nearby mirror. "Of course. Let's go."

The girl goes still as I approach. Fixed like a bunny in headlights.

"Open your mouth."

She presses her full lips together. They're so plush it's as if they were designed by a man who spent years perfecting the art. I reach out to pinch her nostrils but before I do, she complies. I stare into the expanse of her mouth and my cock stiffens against my leg. It's not a slow acceleration, I go from detached to hard as if I was sunk into a woman and I imagine fucking the girl's face while the others watch. Coming down her virgin throat.

Instead, I shove the gun in her mouth.

Her arms spring up, pushing against me. I grasp her shoulder and pin her to the chair one-handed. She claws at me, but her slaps and scratches are like kisses on my arms. I shove the barrel deeper. She screams and the revolver catches the sound and gargles it. I pump, but only slightly. The way I would if it was my cock between her teeth.

"Good," Eli says behind me, his voice thick as honey.

"The bitch needs to calm down or she'll choke for real," Doc says. "Show her, Adri."

I release the girl's shoulder and clasp her neck. It's so slender, it's like gripping a swan. "Stop screaming and suck."

She moans around the barrel. I tighten the fingers at her throat. “You want me to make it my dick?”

“Nnnghh!”

Doc laughs. “Bad luck, big guy.”

I ignore him and look right into the girl’s eyes. “You wanna lose your virginity to a pistol?”

“Nnnngggghh.”

I bend to her ear. “You’ll get the barrel first. But keep fussing and I’ll try for the handle.”

A small gasp and the pressure on the gun slackens. Her head bobs back and forth, drawing on the barrel with loud, sloppy pulls. She has no idea what she’s doing, but at least she’s doing it. I look at Eli. “You ready?”

“I am,” he says, amused. “Good work.”

“Yeah, not bad,” Doc says. “Don’t worry, Tesorina. You can’t actually suck-start a gun.”

The girl makes a garbled sound. I glance at Basher. He looks slightly sick, but he can’t take his eyes off her. Whatever he’s feeling, he’ll be beating off about it later.

I thrust the gun deeper into her throat, and she swallows obediently. Looking across, I see Doc palming his cock through his jeans. He grins. “I’ll jack off if you do.”

“Wait your turn.” Eli steps in front of the camera. “Good evening, Parker.”

The amusement goes out of the room like a blown bulb. I twist the gun in the girl’s mouth and she slurps like a porn star. I hope Parker sees it. Hope it burns like battery acid.

“As you can see, we have your fiancée.” Morelli runs a section of the girl’s hair through his fingers. “You’ve kept January Whitehall to yourself since she was a little girl. But she’s ours now.”

Doc laughs, the sound more anticipation than genuine amusement.

Eli drops the strands of hair. “We won’t fuck her, not at first. But we’ll keep you informed of our progress. Little updates, as we help her become a woman.”

I push the gun deeper again. She chokes a little, but she keeps going. She is stronger than I thought she was. “Good,” I tell her. “Good Pryntsesa.”

An icy insect crawls up my neck. I didn’t mean to say that but surely no one heard me. Eli is still talking to Parker; the girl is still sucking and gagging.

“... this is only the beginning,” Eli says to the camera. “If you’re a smart man, you’ll eat your gun. But you’re not a smart man, Parker. So, enjoy the show.”

“That’s enough,” Eli says. “Bobby, stop recording.”

I pull the gun from the girl’s mouth and her lips smack together. She looks at me and for a second, it’s with something other than terror. My gut drops. Pryntsesa. Maybe she did hear me. Then she slides onto the floor, crying in big racking sobs. “I want to go home! I want to go home!”

I wipe the barrel on my T-shirt. “We done?”

“We’re done,” Eli agrees. “Bobby, take the footage, edit it together and send it. Miss Whitehall, if you can stop crying, you can have a suite upstairs. Clean clothes. A big bed to sleep in.”

“I want to go home!”

“She’s too far gone,” Doc says. “She won’t stop whining now.”

My Glock is still in my hand. One bullet between the eyes, faster than heaven. The girl never got to dance for an audience. Adulthood is just another stage she’ll never perform on.

Eli walks to the wall and presses the intercom. “Gretzky? We’re finished. Bring Harvey and Sal and a cleaning kit. I

want the girl in the basement and the entrance hall cleared. Now.”

The basement. The little cage Morelli built to keep people we’re not ready to kill yet.

“I want all of you in the dining room at midnight.” Eli heads to the stairs, his mood clearly soured. Bobby follows with the camera.

Doc and I stand in front of the fire and watch Gretzky carry the girl from the room, her limbs swaying like a dead deer. When they’re gone, Doc slaps a palm on my shoulder. “Hey, Adri, what’s ‘Pryntsesa’ mean?”

The icy insect picks at the base of my skull.

“Oh, I remember. It’s Ukrainian for ‘I’ve fallen for teen pussy. How am I gonna surrender my way out of this one?’”

Rage flares in me like propane. I grab his T-shirt and wind the collar around my fist. “I want her dead.”

“Because that would make the feelings go away, wouldn’t it?”

I want to kill him, but I force my hand to unclench. There’s no point in fighting Doc. He eats anger and drinks frustration. I turn and head for the staircase.

“You owe me a new T-shirt, fuckstain.”

I glance back. “I’ll pay you in advice. That pussy’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Whatever you say, *Pryntsesa*.” Doc’s laughter follows me out the entrance hall.



CHAPTER FIVE

Elliot Morelli

JANUARY WHITEHALL. WHEN you first see her, you think ‘yes, that’s a pretty girl.’ But the longer you look, the more the simplicity slides away to reveal a woman shaped by angels. Her skin isn’t smooth, it’s flawless. Her face isn’t lovely, it’s that of a goddess stepping off a seashell. Her body isn’t decent, it’s big-titted, long-legged perfection. The horniest fifteen-year-olds wouldn’t have the balls to dream it up. Soon she’s so beautiful it almost hurts. Then it *does* hurt. That sparking need to touch her. To make her yours. I have always had control. Always been able to wait for what I need.

Tonight, I offered Miss Whitehall a deal—stand and she could live in my house. Instead, she lay on the floor sobbing for home. I wanted to scoop her up and carry her to the east wing anyway.

“You gonna eat or what?” Doc asks.

I ignore him. He and Adriano are vacuuming up Japanese takeout, but I have no appetite. I can think about January Whitehall. Her round ass, her flat stomach, her gorgeous little face. If only she’d gotten up... but time in the basement will do her good. If she was to be mine, she’ll have to learn to behave properly. No tears. No tantrums.

Doc gestures at my Karaage chicken with his chopsticks. “Can I have that?”

I scowl, pulling the plastic container closer to myself. I can’t believe he gave the girl her first kiss. He must have

forced her into it. Domenico wouldn't know subtlety if he woke up to it sucking his cock. January Whitehall will kiss me of her own accord. I'll coax her into the palm of my hand before I take her innocence.

It was not our original plan to kidnap her. We were going to plant a bullet in her head and try to get as much of her brains on Parker as possible. But after years of surveillance, killing her began to seem wasteful. Like smashing a glass case to seize a five-star dessert. You might prevent the true owner from enjoying it, but you ruin it all the same. We wanted the dessert—if only to taste it before tossing it on the ground.

It was a risk, of course, the Whitehalls are a powerful New York family. But January is a relatively insignificant member. The youngest daughter of a third son. Her unimportance is the only reason Parker was able to buy her hand in the first place. It was worth the risk to abduct her. There would be bad blood, but the Whitehalls wouldn't go to war for one teenage girl. While no single act could ever erase what Parker has done, I thought watching his fiancée get tag-teamed by the men coming to kill him was a promising start.

Tonight I walked into my entrance hall, and I was ready to give her to Doc and Basher to play with, then Adriano to kill. Until I saw her.

For centuries, my mother's family has dealt in precious stones. January Whitehall is *una perla rara*. A once in a lifetime gem. Identifying her potential is the only intelligent thing Parker has ever done.

When I rubbed my wingtip between her legs, I expected to see fear, but when my shoe brushed her panties, Miss Whitehall's eyes went wide and her nipples turned to stone under that ridiculous gown. Her shame was as delicious as her arousal.

I'm going to humiliate her with her own desires. Watch her grind herself on my cock, crying while she comes all over me.

“You sure you're going to eat the chicken?”

I glare at Doc. The table around him is a mess. Loose paper, scraps of wire, tablets, discarded scalpels, and textbooks. The polished oak floorboards are caked with dirt, and the side tables are covered in an inch of dust. This house is more than two hundred years old and in less than five, my brothers have turned it into a truck stop restroom. My Nonno's houses were always immaculate, not a fingerprint on a mirror or a speck of dust on the mantelpiece. If he saw this place... "This place is a fucking mess."

Doc shoves another dumpling in his mouth. "Why are you bitching at us about it? Hire a cleaner."

"I did. She saw your workroom and ran away."

Doc smirks. "Oh, yeah. So, hire someone else."

"While we're keeping the daughter of one of New York's most prestigious families in our basement?"

"Well, if you're too paranoid, we can't have a clean house, can we?"

"We have a live-in staff of five. One of them—"

Doc points his chopsticks at me. "You wanna tell the boys to stop making us money and surveilling the people trying to kill us so they can sponge the carpet, be my fuckin' guest. Personally, I'm gonna live with the mess."

I pick up my chopsticks and dig into my karaage chicken. Domenico Valente is as disrespectful now as he was at sixteen. Worse. He used to be at least a *little* afraid of what would happen if he ran his mouth to the wrong person. Bullets would bounce off his arrogance now. Before I can tell him so, Bobby strides into the room. "I've sent the file. Parker's already seen it."

I lower my chopsticks. "He's watched the footage?"

"A couple of times."

I feel a sweet, almost giddy sense of release, and smiles spread across my brother's faces, even Adriano's. I stand and walk to the bar to collect the bottle of grappa I brought from

my wing. It was distilled by my Bisnonno and I've been saving it since I turned eighteen. It's surreal to crack the seal and smell the sharp-sweet liquor. I pour triple measures and bring the tumblers over.

"Congratulations," I say, raising my glass. "May all our plans succeed, and our lost ones be avenged."

We drink and for a moment no one speaks. We're all lost in our own world. No matter how much time passes, the memories of what led us here never fade. When you're young, things have a freshness you can't reclaim. Your first taste of wine. The first time you know a girl will let you kiss her. The first time a man raises a gun to you and your blood turns to ice.

These days you could strap me to the side of a train, and I wouldn't feel that bright, all-consuming fear. A good thing. But there's something about the old days, the four of us running wild through the boroughs, hatching our first schemes, convinced we were kings. Now my brothers and I *are* kings, but we've fought for every inch of our sovereignty with blood. We're tired, and we don't laugh like we used to.

The hell the four of us went through as teenagers lives untouched in our souls, though the pain has long since turned to hatred. Sometimes I marvel at what it's made us capable of. As a young man I vowed never to kill unless it was necessary. Bobby and Doc wanted to use their intelligence to change the world for the better. Adriano planned to dedicate his strength to the military. To defend those who couldn't help themselves. Now we're terrifying a beautiful young virgin and it feels like justice. I could almost wonder if in trying to harm Parker we've become some version of him. That we're no better than he is.

But I won't think that. Until Velvet House is avenged for what we suffered, I can't lose sight of our goal.

Parker is the one who united us under one banner of loss and rage. It's because of him we became what we are today

and before we can change or grow or move on, we need our revenge. We're *owed* our revenge.

My first loyalty is to the men who wept alongside me. The brotherhood we've forged with blood and agony. And no matter how much it might weigh on me, other souls will not be taken into consideration until our satisfaction is complete. No matter how beautiful they may be.

Bobby comes to my side of the table. "Can I have a word?"

"Of course."

We take our grappa into the hallway. Bobby and I both have dark hair and brown eyes, but no one ever mistakes us for siblings. He is rough-looking with olive skin and thick brows. Common, my Nonna would say, but handsome and smarter than anyone I knew until I met Doc.

"Problem with Cooper?" I ask.

"Nope. He's with Harvey and Sal. He'll be in the Atlantic by morning. It's just..." He gazes at a point beyond my shoulder. "Adriano shouldn't have made me kill him in front of her."

My hand tightens around my tumbler. For months Doc warned me Bobby was in love with January, but I took him for a loudmouth asshole. This is a complication I don't need, especially now that *I* want the girl.

"I made you kill Cooper and it was the right decision."

"You could have told Adri—"

"But I didn't." I squeeze Basher's shoulder. "Let's go eat."

He hesitates. "What's going to happen to January?"

Even the way he says her name is a warning. Soft and protective. "We'll discuss it later. Right now, we're celebrating."

Bobby looks like he wants to say something else, but I turn and walk back to the dining room. Doc bangs his empty

grappa glass on the table. “Reload.”

I pour him more liquor and top up my own glass. Bobby takes his seat to my right, pulling mushroom ramen toward himself. He sneaks his vegetarian meals in the order last, as though we might not notice his diminishing appetite for flesh. We, who know him better than anyone.

Doc’s eyes are wild as he raises his glass. “A toast.”

Adriano, Basher, and I lift our glasses.

“To pissing in Parker’s face and stealing his bride. Salut.”

I grin. “Salut.”

Bobby taps a hand on the table. “Gretzky’s been listening in at Parker’s place. He killed three of his men after he got home from the cathedral.”

“He’s doing our job for us,” Doc says gleefully.

I say nothing. Parker’s blind rage will only last a short time. He’ll compose himself and come after us.

“Have any of the families called to account for the scene at the cathedral?” I ask.

Bobby shakes his head. “No one’s reached out yet.”

“They will and when they do, we’ll give one answer. We’re enacting revenge against Parker. Anyone who stands to lose money from the situation can have a cut of whatever we claim from his estate. The rest can look the other way.”

Adriano sucks up ramen noodles. “And if they don’t want a cut? If they want retribution for the inconvenience?”

“We tell them to choose a side. Parker or Velvet House.”

Doc smiles dreamily. He’d love a crime family to pick a fight with us. If I gave the word, he’d Jonestown every branch of the New York famiglia. But I’m a businessman. I don’t kill for pleasure. I kill when it’s necessary and when it benefits me. Parker is the only exception. I built Velvet House with one eye

on that animal. To collect enough wealth and power that when the time came to ruin him, we would endure.

I pour us all another round. “Get drunk tonight. Tomorrow, the real work starts.”

Doc drains his grappa. “January Whitehall.”

Basher’s face falls. Even Adriano looks up from his ramen. Trust Doc to mention the elephant in the room in the most disruptive way possible.

“What about her?” I ask.

“I want her. On her back. On her knees. On my face. The fucking works.” He looks around the table. “This is me staking a claim and you bastards better respect it.”

“That’s going to be a problem,” I say lightly. “Because I want her.”

Doc’s eyes narrow. “You said the rest of us could have her.”

“True. But now I’ve seen her, my opinion has changed.”

Adriano returns to eating like nothing has happened, but Bobby looks like he’s about to be sick. Velvet House doesn’t have a traditional family structure. The rules are the ones we made ourselves. But I am the boss and my brothers know it. Which means if I want Miss Whitehall, she’s mine.

Doc lets out a long sigh. “Fine. We can share her.”

“You don’t share. You can barely let other people choose music in the car—”

“That’s not—”

“Besides,” I say loudly. “I want Miss Whitehall as my mistress, which means she’ll have official standing in my household. She won’t be passed around Velvet House like a whore.”

“A mistress?” Bobby asks. “But you’re not married.”

“Not yet, but once this Parker business is done, I’ll get engaged.”

Doc laughs. “To that watch guy’s daughter? You said she smelled like asparagus.”

I press my fingertips into my temples. It is a miracle I have not killed this man. Of all the benefits of getting married, not being in daily proximity to Doc is top of the list. Smart as he is, perceptive as he can be, he’s an utter lunatic. Without Adriano’s protection and my money, he’d have been in Bayview Correctional years ago.

“It doesn’t matter who I marry. The point is I’ll be married by the summer. Keep your calendars clear.”

“So what?” Doc asks. “You get married and kick us all out of the house?”

“What do you think our future holds? My wife and children eating dinner with us every night? The four of us living in a frat house forever?”

“You could not get married.”

“I’m almost thirty-four. I need heirs.”

Doc rocks back in his chair. “So where will January be while you’re out shopping for a wife?”

“My mistress will not be your plaything while I’m away. I’ll send her somewhere else.”

“Seems like a waste of pussy,” Doc mutters. He clears his throat. “I have a better idea. She should come work at Dreams.”

Bobby chokes on his noodles. “As a stripper?”

“No, as a fucking bouncer. Of course, as a stripper.”

“What’s your justification for that?”

Doc shrugs. “She’s hot. We can make money off her. And she’s had all those dance lessons. Plus, how’s Parker gonna feel when we send him vids of her working a pole?”

A valid point. The man spent a fortune in private security keeping boys from touching January's arm in homeroom. He might have an aneurysm watching her give out lap dances, which would be funny.

Doc lowers his chair, his eyes on mine. "I'm thinking long-term. Security at the club's airtight. Parker'd have more luck abducting her out of The Hague. And if anyone threatens her in there, they're asking for trouble with Danil Yamlihanov. Half the pole koalas are sucking off his boys."

I smile. "You're making more sense than usual."

"Just imagine it," Doc says with a grin. "Baby Whitehall, shaking her tits for strangers. She'll be fucking humiliated."

"And you'll have access to her whenever you want. If she's in your clubs, she's as good as yours."

Doc shrugs. "I'm not gonna apologize for wanting to destroy her pussy."

Bobby makes a noise of disgust and Doc winks at him. "Don't be a prude, Basher. You've had plenty of fun at Dreams and you can stop by whenever you want. I'll give you half-off on a dance."

"Fuck you, asshole."

"Bobby, what do you think we should do with her?" I say, cutting off whatever inane retort Doc was about to respond with. "You know the girl. What do you think will work?"

Bobby winds his chopsticks through his noodles. "I..."

"Yes?"

He shakes his head. "I dunno."

"Bobby," I say gently. "You have a right to talk, and I have a responsibility to listen."

He screws up his face like he's trying not to vomit. "I... guess. I guess I wanna marry her."

Doc bursts out laughing. Adriano snorts. I bite the inside of my cheek, so I don't join them. "Bobby..."

He scowls. "Laugh all you want. What's gonna piss Parker off more than knowing his fiancée married someone else?"

"Me fucking her in front of fifty Russians?" Doc suggests.

Bobby's gaze locks on mine. "I care about her. I'll look after her. And we'll start trying for a baby right away."

Doc keeps right on laughing, but I can see where Bobby's coming from. It *would* be humiliating to send Parker pictures of his fiancée heavy with another man's child. If I made January my mistress, I wouldn't get her pregnant. As sweet as it would be to see my child swelling that perfect body, I don't need illegitimate children draining my bank account and compromising my lineage.

Perhaps January *is* better suited to Bobby. And if I gave her to him, maybe he wouldn't be too mad if I had her a few times first.

Doc seems to be thinking along the same lines. "You can marry her, Basher. But the second your back's turned, I'll be coming up the stairs to fuck up the paternity tests."

Bobby snorts. "You think I'll be living here once we're married?"

"What are you gonna do? Drag her back to Ohio? Get her to help you with the pigs?"

"Valente," Bobby says calmly. "You could grease every pole in Dreams with your personality. You're a scumbag, and the day January wants to fuck you is the day I buy a fallout shelter because the fuckin' world's ending."

I look to Adriano. He's working his way down a second bowl of ramen. An outsider would think he was ignoring us. "Adri, you weigh in."

He shakes his head.

“Don’t be like that. You helped bring her here. What do you want to do?”

“I think,” he says, chewing slowly, “we put her down.”

There’s a beat.

“The fuck, Rossi?” Doc says. “*Always* with the unfettered fucking murder.”

Bobby points a finger at Adriano. “Do not touch her.”

I hold up a hand. “I asked his opinion. He gave it. He’s as entitled to discuss killing her as either of you are your plans.”

“Fuck that,” Doc snarls. “The girl’s useless as a corpse. Why can’t we at least make money off her?”

“Well? Adriano?” I ask.

“Because she’s a whining bitch.”

Bobby’s jaw tightens.

“She *is* fairly whiny,” Doc concedes.

Adriano wipes his face with the back of his hand. “She’ll make a terrible wife, a useless stripper, and a worse prisoner.”

“So we kill her?” I ask. “How is that helpful?”

“It’s helpful because it’s practical. We only took the girl to break Parker. And all your bullshit ideas—having her strip, keeping her as a whore, getting her pregnant—you think any of that will have the same effect as me cutting out her heart and sending it to him?”

No one answers because no one can. All of us return to our food. When I’m finished, I look around the table. Bobby is moodily spooning up ramen and letting it splash into the container. Doc has his head down, clearly scheming, and there’s a hard glint in Adriano’s eyes. Tonight was supposed to be a celebration. Instead, we sit here, entirely divided. It’s my fault. I didn’t intend to take the girl for myself. I’m no stranger to pampered princesses and rarely in the mood to play the dutiful prince. Yet I can’t let the others have her. I know from

watching fallen bosses that to assume a prize wanted by everyone in your inner circle is to invite distrust. I will make her mine, but it has to look democratic.

The solution comes to me, bright as a bulb. “We should speak to her about this.”

Everyone looks up.

“You mean tell January what each of us wants for her?” Bobby asks.

“Yes.”

Adriano scowls. “You’ll let the girl choose?”

“We’re in a gridlock and it would be useful to understand what she wants.” And January almost came on my dress shoes. There’s no way she won’t choose me.

“I like it,” Doc says.

I look to Bobby and he nods.

“So, we’re in agreement? Tonight, we drink, tomorrow we talk to January.”

Doc smirks. “How’s Adriano gonna pitch her on getting murdered?”

“He doesn’t have to talk to her.”

“I want to,” Adriano says.

“You will not kill her without my permission.”

His green eyes look poisonous and for a second, I think he’s going to tell me to go fuck myself, but then he inclines his head. “Fine.”

I’m far from reassured but I turn to the others. “I’ll talk to her first.”

“Why?” Doc demands.

I point to the Velluto crest on the wall.

“Fine. But I’m second.”

“Third,” Bobby says, a flush working its way down his neck.

“Then we have a consensus.” I pour out more grappa. “Cards?”

We call downstairs for cigars and brandy. Doc takes over the sound system playing the kind of jolting acid house that sets your teeth on edge. We talk, tell jokes, go over the interesting parts of the abduction and speculate on whether Parker is slitting his own wrists. Doc robs us blind, as he does whenever we play cards. The tension between us melts away and we laugh together, the way we did when we were boys.

And yet there’s another figure hovering by our table, watching silently in her wedding lingerie. I glimpse her in the moments between beats, between hands, between swigs of brandy and puffs of smoke. I feel her there and wonder if she’s sleeping or crying in her cage beneath Velvet House.



CHAPTER SIX

January Whitehall

THIS IS WORSE than a nightmare. Nightmares end and this goes on and on and on. What kind of people have a basement cell in their house? Or was it made for me? It's hard to know which idea is scarier.

I lie on the single bed with the limp pillow over my face, waiting for something to happen. My stomach gurgles non-stop. In the corner of the cage is a small, walled-off bathroom with a toilet and sink but no shower. I can drink from the tap, but there's no food. I think it's close to three days since I've eaten. I take out Zia Teresa's St. Christopher and run my fingers around the edges.

When I woke on soft red carpet in a beautiful house, I thought I'd been rescued. Seeing Doc's awful smirk, my hopes died a second time.

Domenico Valente.

A poetic name for a terrifying man. The priest's vestments hid his neck tattoos and his lean, powerful body. In a sleeveless T-shirt and black jeans, he reminded me of an arctic wolf. I remember what 'Tesorina' means now. Treasure. He's mocking me. I don't know much about people, but I know when they hate me for being a Whitehall. *Lurida squaldrina*, he called me. *Filthy whore*.

But I'm not a whore. I'd never kissed anyone until him. I recall the way he pressed his lips onto mine and heat goes skittering through me like flame across oil.

“I didn’t like it,” I tell the cell. “He had a knife. He *slapped me.*”

No one answers.

I don’t like bad boys. That was Giuseppina. I crossed the street when I heard loud voices or saw tattoos. I like nice boys. Boys like...

Roberto Bassilotta.

In my senior year, I needed help with Algebra. I’ve always been terrible at math, but mom wouldn’t let me drop it. My teacher said Bobby was the best tutor in the tri-state area, so mom arranged a trial session. Quinn was so jealous.

“I almost flunked math on purpose just to qualify for his help. You wait, he looks *just* like he’s in a boy band.”

I thought Quinn was exaggerating but when I met Bobby in the library, I almost laughed. He had soulful brown eyes, big shoulders, and slightly stick-out ears. He was handsome in the friendliest possible way and I felt silly for liking that.

Bobby had worksheets arranged on the desk beside him, but before I could say ‘hello’ Kurt moved the sheets to the other side of the table. “Miss Whitehall will sit here.”

I was so mortified, but Bobby smiled like it was totally normal to have pushy bodyguards. “No problem, January. Take a seat and tell me where you’re having the most trouble with math.”

We met three times a week after that, sitting opposite each other, going over my homework and practice exams.

“Don’t call yourself stupid,” he would say when I got frustrated. “You’re not stupid, you’re learning.”

“Learning how stupid I am,” I’d say, and he’d laugh.

He wore a rotation of dark blue sweaters and shirts. They always clung to his muscular chest, and he pushed up the sleeves so I could see his strong forearms. I used to fantasize about touching them. I knew if mom found out I had a crush

on Bobby, she'd stop our tutoring sessions, so I never talked about him. The only time I ever said his name was during my confessions to Domenico.

Doc must have loved hearing my pathetic little fantasies and telling Bobby everything I said.

I press the pillow harder into my face trying to smother away the shame. He must see me as such a child. A crushed-out schoolgirl telling her priest about her math tutor. So embarrassing.

Why do you care? a sharp voice in my head demands. *He killed Kurt.*

But it's hard to hold that knowledge in my brain. It doesn't feel real. Not real the way Bobby coming down the stairs was real. He was wearing a shirt I'd seen a million times at Trinity Grammar and all I could think was *'Oh my God, Bobby will save me!'*

But he looked different. At school he was always a little awkward, here he was agile and confident. And when he looked at me, his expression was hard.

Somewhere inside the basement, I hear water dripping. *Plink. Plink. Plink.* It's lucky I'm not the kind of person who gets stressed out by background noise. Mom would go crazy down here. Is she with the police? Or are she and Mr. Parker trying to handle this privately? I hope not. The men upstairs would tear anyone they'd send after me apart. Especially...

Adriano Rossi.

Ridiculously tall and even more tattooed than Doc. His light brown hair is so thick, it looks almost greasy. Long on top and shaved around the sides. He has a short scrubby beard and a proud nose all twisted from being broken. A gold tooth flashes when he talks. And those eyes, those holographic green eyes. I should have recognized him at the cathedral. He was always waiting in reception at my ballet studio, staring so intently that for once I was glad Kurt and Theodore were with

me. And when I started my lessons, he'd watch me dance through the windows of our classroom.

"He's a pervert," Nadia told anyone who would listen. "He's taking underwear out of lockers when we're not looking."

I used to think she was silly because he didn't watch in a gross way, staring at our legs and breasts. His eyes followed the movement, the way you're supposed to, and I felt bad for him because maybe he just liked ballet. Which proves what an idiot I am. I can still taste the barrel of the gun. See the bear-like shape of him above me, pumping it into my mouth. If someone takes my life in this house, it will be Adriano Rossi.

Unless it's the last one.

Elliot Morelli.

Even as I lie trapped in the dark, my insides glow at the thought of him. Eli Morelli ordered Kurt's death. He made Adriano put the gun in my mouth. He slapped me in the face. It shouldn't matter that he's handsome. I recall the feel of his shoe between my legs. The way he looked as he rubbed me. "Doesn't that feel nice?"

A fever breaks across my body. I refuse to touch the place where he violated me, but I know if I did, I'd be soaking. What is wrong with me?

I know the Morelli name. Their family is as prominent in New York as the Whitehalls. But I haven't heard of an 'Eli' or an 'Elliot.' That doesn't mean much. Mom doesn't like the Morellis. I think there's bad blood between our families. But if Eli is a Morelli, why is he a criminal? I'm not naïve, I know when the law prevents my uncles from doing what they like, they go around it, but abducting me and killing my bodyguard isn't bribing a city councilor to get a new skyscraper built.

"You are the property of Velvet House," Eli said as he stroked his shoe against me. But what is Velvet House? A gang? A business? He introduced himself as Elliot *Velluto*

Morelli. Velluto means ‘Velvet’ in Italian. Whatever Velvet House is, he named it after himself.

A yawn stretches my jaw painfully wide and my vision swims. I want to stay awake for whatever happens next, but I’m so, so tired. I push Zia’s medallion back into my bra and let my eyes close.

“*Bella.*”

Someone is shaking my shoulder. “Zia?”

“No, *bella.*”

I blink. My bedroom is cold. Strangely shaped. The truth rushes in like light under a door. Not my bedroom. Not my house. I’m kidnapped and a man is leaning over me, his smile like something out of a song.

“Mr. Morelli?”

“Yes.” He examines me and his dark eyes gleam like amber in the lamplight. God he’s pretty. I feel like I should apologize, though I have no idea what for. “Good morning...? Or good evening?”

He doesn’t smile. “How are you feeling, Miss Whitehall?”

I’m exhausted. My face is grubby with old makeup and I’m worried I smell. And even though I know it’s not true, it feels like at any moment, mom could come in and explode because I have a boy in my room. “I feel fine.”

He smiles. His shirt is bright white, and the collar is open. I imagine burying my face in his golden chest.

“I’m glad to hear it, *bella.*”

I wish he wouldn’t call me that. I know he’s not saying I’m beautiful. That it’s an Italian pet name like ‘sweetheart.’ But the way it comes out in his accented voice sends butterflies fluttering through me.

Eli frowns, regal-looking lines appearing on his forehead. “How old are you?”

I gnaw my lower lip. Why is he being so polite? Last night he struck me and acted like he hated me. Is he trying to find out more information to hurt Mr. Parker? “I turned eighteen last month.”

“That’s very young to be engaged.”

“It, um, was an arrangement?”

Why am I saying it like it’s a question?

Eli takes my left hand and examines my engagement ring. His touch sends shivers up my arm. His skin is soft, but I can feel the strength in his fingers. He could hurt me if he wanted to. He has.

He pulls the ring from my finger and holds it up to the lamplight. “This diamond, *bella*. It’s very...” He gestures at me, demanding an answer.

“Big?” I suggest.

“Vulgar.”

“Oh.” The stone is four carats, so it wasn’t cheap, but it does kind of look like a crystal microwave. Eli tucks the ring into his breast pocket. My stomach drops, but I know better than to ask for it back. What is he going to do with it? The obvious answer is ‘sell it’ but he doesn’t seem like someone who needs money.

Eli smiles. His teeth are perfect. “Domenico tells me you speak Italian.”

“I... Yes.”

“Wonderful. It’s not every day you meet an American girl who speaks Italian. *Sei mai stata in Italia?*” *Have you been to Italy?*

I hesitate. Zia Teresa and I only spoke Italian when my mom was away and it’s easier to understand what people are saying than talk.

“No... *Non songa mai stata in Italia,*” I venture.

He nods. “Almost. *Non sono mai stata.*”

“Sorry,” I whisper. “My Zia Teresa emigrated in the ’60s and never learned modern Italian. She speaks dialect. So do I, I guess.”

“I see.” Eli shifts closer and I smell lavender cologne, fresh and aching lovely. I wish I could have a shower.

“I have something for you, Miss Whitehall,” he says.

“A change of clothes?”

He laughs. “Depending on how you receive my proposal, yes. And I might rethink my offer of yesterday and let you come upstairs. Would you like to sleep in a nice four-poster bed in a room with windows?”

The thought of escaping the cage makes my heart lift. “What would you like to give me?”

He looks me up and down. “All kinds of things, *bella.*”

My cheeks burn. I’m always doing this, setting people up to make jokes at my expense. In middle school, Ryan Wingfield said, ‘If I told you that you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me?’ and I said yes. Everyone died laughing at me.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I’m kind of clueless.”

“You’re adorable. Here.” Eli pulls something from his suit pocket. A small red apple. He holds it out to me. “Eat.”

I take the apple as fast as I can without snatching. I already feel my teeth sinking into the skin between my teeth, the sweet juice crushing onto my tongue. But when the apple touches my lips, I pause. What if it’s poisoned? I lower it to my lap.

Eli raises a brow. “You’re not hungry?”

“I... Not right now.”

“You’re refusing me?”

My mouth goes dry. It’s stupid to decline something from this man, even if it’s poison. I give him my best silly smile.

“Eating in front of people makes me nervous.”

“Ah.” A small smile curves his beautiful mouth. He takes my chin in his hand and my stomach turns over. “Would you like a gift, *bella*?”

“What about the apple?”

“That was a treat. This...” He reaches into his other pocket and pulls out a necklace. “... is a gift.”

It’s a short collar of diamonds set with fiery red stones. Even in the lamplight, it glitters like pirate treasure.

“It’s so beautiful! Are they garnets?”

Eli brushes a finger over the center stone. “Rubies. My mother’s family, the Vellutos, have a passion for rubies.”

“Oh.”

“This...” He sways the necklace so that it shimmers. “... belonged to my mama. When she passed, it became mine.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He frowns. “You’re sorry?”

“That your mom died. That’s really sad.”

A look passes over his handsome features. Then he blinks and it’s as though nothing happened. “As soon as I saw you, I thought of this necklace. Your red lips and pale skin. Nothing would bring out the beauty of these stones more.”

“I... um, thank you?”

He smiles, but his eyes are all business. “Will you wear it for me?”

A rippling warmth spreads through my body. I ignore it, pulling the pillow into my chest. “Not if it’s so important to your family. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I say what’s right.” His free hand caresses my wrist. “I’ll have a dress made for you. Black velvet with a slit up the side.

You'll be naked beneath it, my rubies at your throat, and every man who sees you will wish me dead."

He sounds pleased by the idea.

I can see it too. Us. Me in the velvet dress, my hair loose around my shoulders. Eli in a tuxedo, his arm at my waist. We're attending an event, the kind I used to go to with my mom, only this time I won't be hustled away at midnight. I'd be free to dance and drink and explore.

Eli's hand brushes my side, and I pull away. "I don't want... um..."

"You don't want my necklace? Or you don't want me?"

The weight of his questions rolls through my mind. I think I might want him but I don't want *this*. And why are we even talking about the future when I'm locked in his basement? "I thought I was here to punish Mr. Parker."

He smiles as if I'm missing something obvious. "You don't need to know the reason you're here, *bella*. You don't need to know anything at all."

I want that to be true almost as much as I want to put on his necklace and be whatever he wants me to be. But that's so pathetic. I look into his eyes. "Maybe. But I want to know."

"Why? You're a sweet little virgin and I've come offering rubies. Isn't that enough?"

I try to say no but he's already kissing me. I let him, warmth running from his lips to mine. My heart swells inside my chest. He's different from Doc. Softer and more complete. He groans into my mouth and the knowledge this perfect man wants me, sets my skin ablaze. I kiss him back, shame and sweetness battling inside me until Eli pulls away, rubbing a thumb over my lower lip. "Yes. You're everything a woman should be. You will be mine."

There's a rushing sound in my ears. "I'm already engaged."

He smiles "No, you're not."

“Mr. Parker—”

“Will soon be dead. After we’ve wrung enough misery out of him.” He says it as though commenting on the weather.

“But you can’t kill Mr. Parker!”

Eli’s face contracts into a familiar expression. I’m annoying him, but I can’t act like this makes sense. “Why do you all hate Mr. Parker so much?”

He looks at me like I’m a child wanting to know where the sun goes at night. He sighs. “He did wrong by the four of us a long time ago. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

“Um...” That’s not anything I couldn’t have guessed. In fact, it would be weirder if Mr. Parker *didn’t* do something to make them hate him. “What did he do?”

His face hardens. “Ask another question.”

“Okay...” I cast my mind around for something I want to know. “Are you in the mafia?”

His lips press together. “If you ask that again, I will be forced to strike you. I’m a businessman. I have professional interests.”

He sounds so disgusted, tears prickle at the corners of my eyes. “Sorry, Mr. Morelli.”

“Ah, *bella*, do not cry.” Eli throws an arm around my shoulders. I give in and collapse into his chest.

“It will be done,” he mutters into my hair. “I will keep you.”

I pull away. “You mean... marry me?”

For a second, he stares at me, and then he laughs. A rich, genuine laugh I haven’t heard before.

“Sorry,” I say again, wanting to disappear. “I shouldn’t have... Sorry.”

“Miss Whitehall, don’t take this as a slight on your beauty, but the two of us are not a match.”

I feel my face burn. If he's not attracted to me, why was he kissing me? "What do you mean?"

Eli picks up his necklace from my blankets. It must have slid there while we were kissing.

"It means, I can trace my bloodline back to the House of Savoy. You are from a wealthy family, but I would be marrying beneath my name."

"Oh." I look at the dark ceiling. It's not every day you're told you're not important enough to marry. Especially after everything with Mr. Parker.

He runs a finger along my jawline. "Do not mistake me, *bella*. You are a precious and beautiful thing and I intend to keep you as my own. We would have an arrangement."

My mind goes to designer handbags and tropical holidays. "You mean like a sugar baby?"

That gets another surprised burst of laughter out of Eli. "How does a girl whose internet use was monitored by her ex-fiancé know what a sugar baby is?"

I don't know what's stranger. Hearing him say 'ex-fiancé' as though it's all settled, or that he thinks Mr. Parker was spying on me. But of course he does, *he* was spying on me. Him and Bobby and Doc and Adriano.

"I'm waiting for an answer, Miss Whitehall?"

I swallow. "A girl at my school was on a sugar baby website. My friends and I talked about it sometimes."

"Ah. Well I suppose no amount of surveillance could stop teenage girls gossiping."

"Does that mean you *do* want me as your sugar baby?"

He looks amused. "You'd be my lover."

The word sends a shiver through me. "Oh."

"You'd have your own apartment. Your own car, your own money. We would see each other often. Go to dinner and to

parties and on holidays. Everyone would know you were mine.”

“And... what would I do when I don't see you?”

“Whatever you feel like, *bella*.”

The scary thing is I already know what I would do. The same stuff I planned when I was going to be Mr. Parker's wife. I would cook, exercise, dance, watch true crime documentaries, hang out with Margot and Zia Teresa...

Zia Teresa. Her lined face appears in my mind as clearly as if I was looking at her. Zia disliked Italian men. “Arrogant,” she said whenever some dark-haired boy whizzed past in a sportscar. “Mama's boys, every last one and that doesn't make them sweet. It makes them come home at four in the morning stinking of alcohol and another woman's perfume and lying through their teeth. You'd be better off married to a kitchen sink.”

I always thought she was being silly, but none of her daughters married Italians. What would Zia Teresa say about Eli Morelli?

“Look at this swaggering peacock, walking around like he's the king of the world. He's a criminale! You have a little think, January. Why is this mascalzone following you around offering rubies? What do you have that he wants?”

I look across at Eli. “Why would you give me a necklace that's so important to your family?”

He turns his head to one side, as though trying to see where the question came from. “Because you will look beautiful in it.”

“I think maybe you're not giving it to me. I think maybe it's a loan.”

“A loan for what?”

“My body.”

He rubs his jaw, but doesn't say anything.

“I don’t think I should belong to you.” The words fall from my lips before I can stop them.

He tucks the necklace back into his pocket with slow deliberate movements. “Is this about Doc? Would you prefer some tattooed *coglione* to be the first man to take you to bed?”

I remember my first kiss, that violent clash of mouths. “No. I just don’t think I should be... um, seeing anyone right now.”

It’s such a stupid thing to say that I expect him to laugh again, but he just nods and moves closer to me on the bed. “What do they call a man who pays a sugar baby?”

I blink. “A sugar d—”

Before I can get the word out, he pulls me across his thighs. I struggle but he pins my hands together at the small of my back. He tugs my underwear down, exposing my backside. “I’m waiting, Miss Whitehall. A sugar what?”

My brain is numb, fifty thousand thoughts playing at a million volumes. “A sugar...”

His hand strikes my ass, making me cry out. “Yes?”

“... daddy,” I gasp, my skin burning.

A huff of laughter. “Yes. A sugar daddy.” He smacks me harder, the sensation like white fire across my cheeks.

“Did your father spank you when you were a little girl?”

I shake my head.

“That’s not surprising. You need a man to teach you how to behave.”

He smacks me again. I picture myself thrown over his lap with my wedding panties pulled down and heat pools between my legs. I look over my shoulder at him and a crazy part of me wishes he was my husband. That I had walked down the aisle yesterday and found Elliot Morelli at the end of it. My chest goes tight. “Please?”

“Please what?”

“Please let me go.”

For a second, I think he won't, then I'm rolling off his lap, crashing onto the floor. Eli adjusts his cuffs as I crawl into a seated position.

“You will be mine,” he says, calmly. “But you're not ready. You need time to understand your place in this world.”

With a savage smile he reaches down and slides his hand into my corset, his fingers toying with my nipple.

I make a sound I've never heard before. A slutty sort of squeak.

Eli's smile fades. “I'll fuck your virgin cunt until you're melting in my bed, Miss Whitehall. Remember that.”

His fingers bite down on my nipple and then he releases me, leaving through my cage door and vanishing into the darkness.



CHAPTER SEVEN

January Whitehall

I EAT ELI'S apple a few seconds after he leaves. I'm too hungry to care if it's poisoned. I wish I could say it was delicious, but I didn't taste a thing. My brain was fully occupied with his offer: '*You will be mine.*'

His proposal isn't so different from the deal my mother made with Mr. Parker. In fact, this one is more personal. Mr. Parker didn't want my body the way Eli does. He just wanted a Whitehall bride to make headway in New York society.

I'm not supposed to know why Mr. Parker wanted me. Mom never said. But when I was thirteen, I asked Zia Teresa why Mr. Parker was allowed to sit next to me when he came to dinner.

"Because he is," she told me.

"But no other boys are allowed to sit near me. If they even try, Kurt takes out his gun."

Zia avoided my gaze. "You ask too many questions, *bella*. A habit you should try to break."

I accepted her decision the way I accepted everything that happened to me but she knew if she didn't tell me the truth, no one would. Two days later she pulled me into my ensuite and ran the shower and bath at the same time.

"What are you doing, Zia?"

"Shh!" She drew me close, her voice barely audible over the pounding water. "You want to know why Mr. Parker sits

beside you?”

I nodded.

“Mr. Parker is a billionaire. I don’t know what he does, your stepmother says it’s computers or something. Anyway, he met your father at a party we hosted for the mayor of New York. Mr. Parker and your father became friends. He was having trouble making connections. Your father told him he was ‘new money’ and he would have to wait to gain the kind of reputation he wanted.”

“Was he angry?”

“Very. A month later he came back to the house and demanded to marry into your family.”

My eyes went wide. I was only eight when daddy died, so I must have been a baby when they were having these talks. “Mr. Parker wanted to marry me?”

“He wanted to marry your sister. Margot was fifteen, there would have been less time to wait—no, don’t make noise, *bella*.”

Zia pressed a hand over my pleading mouth, suppressing my moan of horror. Her eyes were fixed on mine. “Be quiet and let me finish. Your father didn’t refuse Mr. Parker. But he didn’t encourage him either. But then he died, God rest his soul.” Zia whipped a quick sign of the cross.

“But Mr. Parker came back?” I pressed.

“He did, *bella*. He waited a year, then returned to negotiate with your stepmother. She offered Margot’s hand in marriage, but Mr. Parker said she didn’t have the right attitude for a wife. He knew Margot had just been suspended from school. I almost dropped the tray of roast potatoes I was carrying when he suggested you instead. I expected your stepmother to tell him to *di andare a fanculo* but she ordered me to bring you into the dining room. You probably don’t remember. You were very young.”

She looks at me hopefully and I shake my head. “I don’t remember.”

“Good.” Zia shudders. “I woke you up and carried you to the dining room. I was hoping you would wet yourself in front of him. That you would fall down or beg for a glass of milk. I even pinched you, trying to make you cry, but when I put you down in front of Mr. Parker, you answered all his questions like a little lady in your nightdress and I saw there was nothing I could do. He liked you. Your mother agreed to the marriage that night.”

I could have asked why, but I already knew. Money.

The Whitehalls are seen as ultra, mega wealthy, but we’re a large family and our fortune is spread between dozens.

“Asset rich,” my Uncle Titus once said at a Christmas party. “But cash poor. That’s half the Whitehall dregs these days.”

Mom would sooner die than admit it, but we were once those dregs. After daddy died there was no one to work or negotiate our yearly share of the family fortune. We stopped going to our vacation homes. Zia Teresa became not just my nanny, but a cook and housekeeper. Mom and Harris constantly argued about his Audi, mom telling him he’d have to pay for gas and repairs out of his trust fund.

After mom promised me to Mr. Parker, everything changed. One minute mom was screaming we needed to sell our house in Big Bear, the next she had a silver Bugatti and there were four hundred people at my ninth birthday party. I didn’t have to ask where the money was coming from. When I was ten, I heard mom asking our accountant “Is Zachery’s quarterly payment here yet?” I just didn’t know why he was giving us money. And then I did.

I don’t blame mom. She was alone with three houses and four children to take care of. She had a responsibility to look after our family and so did I. At least Mr. Parker wanted to

make me a part of his family. All Eli Morelli offered was a ruby necklace on loan and a few nice outings.

And to be touched by him...

I shove the thought away. He kidnapped me, had my bodyguard killed, and locked me in this basement.

I get up and clean myself as best I can. I wash with water from the bathroom sink and rinse my wedding lingerie, leaving it on the towel rail to dry. I wrap the thin blanket around myself and return to the bed, putting my St. Christopher next to the lamp. My stomach rumbles. If I could only escape with Eli's necklace. I'd pawn it then go straight to the nearest deli and eat everything behind the counter. Then I'd book a hotel and take a bath. Call Zia and say, "I'm coming home!"

And then Mr. Parker would find me. And we would be getting married again.

My chest tightens. "Don't," I tell myself. "You would rather be his wife than stuck here."

A clattering scrape makes me jump. Extra light floods into the basement and footsteps clang on the metal stairs.

"Hello?" I call out, trying to sound strong. "Who is it?"

"What's up, Tesorina?"

My heart sinks as Doc emerges from the shadows. He's still barefoot and in ripped black jeans, but his T-shirt has changed. It's another sleeveless one that shows off his tattooed ribs. He must be very proud of the sides of his body. I wrap the blanket tighter around myself. "Hello, Mr. Valente."

"Oh, so well-mannered." He grips the bars of my cage and tilts himself backward. "You ready to chew through your own arm or what?"

I watch him swing himself back and forth. He's so manic, like if at any moment he'll do a backflip or walk on the ceiling. I move right up against the wall. "You never answered my question. Are you really a doctor?"

He grins. “I might be. Does that turn you on?”

I ignore the question. “What kind of doctor?”

“A gynecologist.”

I frown. “What’s a gynecologist?”

He stares at me for a moment then throws his head back and laughs. The sound bounces around the basement, and it’s like a hundred blond Elvises are laughing at me.

My face burns. This isn’t a new situation for me. Whatever a gynecologist is, I’m sure it’s dirty. I wait for Doc to stop laughing. Eventually, he shakes his head and sighs. “Ah... You’re worth every penny it costs to keep you down here, Tesorina.”

“How much can one apple and a little water cost?”

“Don’t go asking questions. It’ll get you killed. Anyway, I didn’t come down here to talk money. I’ve got something for you.”

I remember Eli’s rubies. Somehow, I don’t think Doc’s brought me jewelry. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out an orange packet of Reece’s Pieces. “You want?”

Reece’s aren’t my favorite, but my mouth waters at the thought of peanut butter and chocolate. “Yes please.”

“What’ll you give me for it?”

I feel like a TV camera is zooming out, showing me exactly how bizarre this is. I was supposed to be married and now I’m considering begging for candy in a basement. “I... I don’t know. Just, please?”

With a look that says I’ve ruined his fun, he tosses the package through the bars, landing it in my lap. I pick up the candy. It’s warm and probably half melted from Doc’s body heat.

“It’s sealed, Tits. Untampered.”

I don't know if that's true but just like with the apple, I'm too hungry to care. I tear the packet open and pour the chocolate into my mouth. I chew and swallow it before licking every trace from my teeth and cheeks, avoiding Doc's gaze.

"Want more?" he asks.

Agreeing would be playing into his hands, and even though I'm starving, I don't want to give him that. I look at him, taking in his thick blond hair and bright blue eyes. "You're very fair for an Italian."

He returns to pulling himself back and forth on the bars like he's doing vertical push-ups. I try not to stare at his arms.

"I might not be Italian. I could just speak it."

"Okay."

"You don't believe me?"

I shake my head. It's in the way he moves. That swagger as though the world is secretly his and he's waiting for everyone else to notice.

"I'm northern," Doc says finally. "My mom's family came from Milan. Dad from Vercelli. Or that's what mom said, I never met the prick."

He gives me a look, as though daring me to ask about his absent father. "What about the others? Where are they from?"

"Basher's from Dovadola, the Morellis are from Naples and Adri's a mixed bag. Roman dad. Ukrainian mom."

For some reason, I can picture Adriano's mother, green-eyed and pretty. You can see her in him. The beauty mixed in with that swarthy, scarred face.

"You pissed Morelli off, asking if he's a mafioso." Doc smirks at me as though we planned this together.

"I wasn't trying to be rude."

"Morelli's Nonno on his mom's side was mobbed up. The old guy wanted to give Eli the empire when he died, but he

couldn't."

"Why?"

"Can't pass a dynasty down the maternal line. Not when you've got a son. Morelli's cousin Giovanni's a dipshit, but he's blood, so whaddya gonna do?"

I think of my stepmom. Her Bugatti. Her Chanel suits. Offering Margot to Mr. Parker and settling on me. *Whaddya gonna do?*

"So Eli is a Morelli, like the New York Morelli family?"

Doc gives me a sly smile. "Yeah, but he's not a big dick player where they're concerned. His old man's the third son."

Just like me.

So even if he's Italian royalty on his mother's side, Eli Morelli is just a third son's son. Maybe that's why he called his business Velvet House, he's leaning into his mother's fancier name.

I feel Doc watching me like he can taste my thoughts. "Not as goofy as you come off, huh?"

"I'm not goofy. I just wasn't very good at school."

"You got that right. You don't have the grades to shill essential oils, but you still got into Fine Arts at Columbia."

I look down at my lap. I never should have gotten into Columbia, but mom and Mr. Parker wanted me to go to college. They said it would make me a more accomplished wife.

"I don't want to get a degree."

"And you think that makes it better? Pushing out someone who did want to be there?"

"I didn't have a choice!"

Doc and I glare at each other, and I half expect him to leave. He jumps off the bars and there's a jangle of keys. "Coming in, Tits."

My cell seems infinitely smaller with Doc pacing inside. I can smell him, that sharp boozy cologne, fresh soap, and clean skin.

He pauses. “You done being a virgin?”

I say nothing. If this is his pitch, it’s awful. At least Eli brought rubies.

“... because if you are done being a virgin, we can wrap it up right here, right now.”

I picture him on top of me, all that wiry aggression forced down onto my body, and my pussy flutters to life. How long does it take to get Stockholm syndrome?

“What? You want Morelli to bust you open with his golden dick instead?”

Eli asked me the same thing about Doc. Maybe they have some kind of problem with each other? That could come in handy, although I don’t see how.

Doc clicks his fingers. “Hey, I’m talking to you.”

“Why would I sleep with any of you? You’re holding me *hostage*.”

Doc’s eyes narrow. “Do you want nice baby Bobby to get in first?”

“No, I said I don’t want *any* of you.”

He swaggers closer to the bed, lip curled in a sneer. “If Basher’s the one you want, that’s okay with me. I’m happy to play second string. In fact, I prefer it.”

My brain melts a little. He can’t be telling the truth. Guys don’t like it when you’ve slept with anyone, even I know that.

“Or maybe it’s not Bobby,” Doc says slowly. “Maybe you want it to be Adri?”

I pull my knees into my chest. “Go away.”

“I heard your confession, remember?” He clasps his hands to his chest. “I should be kinder to the man who cleans my

dance studios. I should say hello to him even though I'm so scared."

He gives a loud echoing laugh. "Did you imagine him following you down some dark hallway and making you sit on his big, tattooed cock?"

I want to grab Doc by his pretty blond hair and scream in his face. But if I touch him, he'll be free to touch me, and then I really might lose my virginity in this basement. I think of Zia Teresa. She saved me from Eli. How would she deal with Doc? The answer is obvious. But I don't have a spatula to hit him with.

"Hello? Earth to virgin?"

I meet Doc's eyes and channel every ounce of my inner, disapproving Zia. "Domenico, if I have to be trapped in here, could you maybe, *maybe*, not be so gross?"

He snorts. "You didn't answer my question, *January*. You wanna get fucked by a tattooed murderer?"

"Do you mean Adriano? Or you?"

He smirks. "That's pretty good, Tesorina. Live and you might develop a personality after all. But enough fucking around. You want to die?"

"Excuse me?"

He drops onto the end of the bed, making the thin mattress bounce. A swatch of his thick hair falls into his eyes. It's not fair that someone so insane should be so good-looking. Eli is gorgeous but he's also elegant and can pretend to be nice. Everything about Doc says he'd kill you for dropping a coffee cup.

"Have you realized you're never gonna see your family again?"

All the air rushes out of my lungs. I've avoided thinking about what might happen to me because I thought it meant dying. But Doc's right. Even if I can leave the basement, why

would they let me go home and risk telling everyone who abducted me?

A warmth falls on my hand and Doc pushes his fingers through mine. I should pull away, but the feel of another person's touch is too nice to refuse.

"You need to let this all sink in," he says roughly. "But once it does and you're ready to leave the basement, I think you should come dance in my clubs."

"I... what clubs?"

He raises his blond brows.

"Strip clubs?" I ask, my heart sinking.

"Yeah. Good money. Safe as fuck."

I imagine Doc surrounded by beautiful naked women and prickly feelings mix into my panic. I bet he sleeps with the dancers. I bet he flirts with them all psychotically. I bet they like it.

"I'll put you in white lingerie just like your wedding shit. Get you some angel wings and tell the clients you're a virgin. They'll go fucking crazy."

I listen with the same disbelief as when Anita told me I could model. I can't be a stripper. I've never worn a miniskirt before. And will I even be a virgin by the time I leave this cage?

Doc reads my mind. "I don't know if I should fuck you or not. The smart thing would be to keep you pure. Let you work the pole, then auction you off. That way we'd pay for your kidnapping four times over."

I try to pull my hand from him, but Doc holds me fast.

"Tempting," he mutters. "Too fucking tempting. I've never been into virgins, but you..."

Without warning, he kisses me. Hard. My brain blurs as our mouths move together with far too much familiarity. The fluttering in my pussy becomes a throb.

Doc releases me. “You’re just a horny little hand grenade, aren’t you?”

“You’re disgusting.”

His teeth flash in the semi-darkness. “You’re like one of those Disney Channel girls, kept squeaky clean for way too long.”

His hand slides across my shoulders, making my skin spark. “I think the pendulum’s ready to swing the other way, don’t you?”

I open my mouth and he cuts me off with another kiss. This one is deeper, his tongue flashing expertly over mine as he shoves the blanket down, exposing my breasts. He palms them, rubbing roughly. “Fuck you’ve got great tits.”

“No...”

“Yes. Now, shhh.” He moves closer, his lips brushing my cheek. “I know you, Tesorina. Better than you know yourself. You want freedom.”

I struggle sideways. “I do *not*—”

“You were jealous of your friends for going on dates. Jealous of your sister for wearing clothes not made by grandmas. You wanted to be them so badly it cut you up inside.”

My protests die in my throat. I confessed to him. He already knows my darkest secrets.

He cups my breast, pressing them together. “Pretty little January stuck at home, engaged to some limp-dick old man. Never getting to have fun. Never going out. It was so fucking unfair, wasn’t it, Tesorina?”

His words scratch some long-hidden itch in my brain. It feels good to hear someone say it out loud.

Doc rubs his stubble against my cheek. “Give yourself to me and you can do whatever you want. Wear whatever you

want. You can get on stage and watch men bankrupt themselves just to look at you. Wouldn't that be fun?"

I swallow. "If I did what you wanted, I'd still be trapped. I'd belong to you."

Doc grips my arms, lifting me onto his lap. "You don't want to be mine?"

We're practically nose to nose and I'm topless. Bottomless, if he decides to tug away the last of the blanket. I stare at him, breathing hard. He gives me a strange look. Is he about to tell me I'm beautiful? That he's fallen for me?

Doc frowns. "I'm not the jealous type. You can fuck whoever you want. Experiment. As long as you're bringing in money, I don't give a shit."

I flinch. Does he really mean that? I try to imagine sleeping with people from his clubs. The men who pay me. My stomach drops to my feet. "I don't want that."

"Liar." Doc bends forward and captures one of my nipples in his mouth. Wet heat pulses through me and I throw my head back.

"See," he says, releasing my nipple. "Do the Catholic schoolgirl thing all you want, but you're aching."

"No, I—"

"Spare me. I'm not Morelli." He turns us onto the bed, his body arching over mine like a tattooed cage. I screw up my eyes and try to ignore the glow between my legs.

"Tell me you don't want me?"

It should be easy. Just four little words. But I've never been a good liar and as much as I hate this man, the words won't come.

Doc's hands return to my breasts, and he lowers his mouth to my other nipple, drawing on it and making my whole body jerk.

"Doc!"

His tongue circles my sensitive peak. "Say my real name."

"D-Domenico." He sucks me until I see stars. "Please don't do this."

He grinds his hips into mine and I can feel the hard length of him behind his jeans. "It's okay, Tesorina, I'll make it gentle. It's been a long time since I took someone's cherry, but I can do it again."

I hate him. I hate the thought of him with other virgins. I grab his hair and pull as hard as I can.

He looks up at me mildly. "Ow...?"

"You can't sleep with me. Eli promised... he wants..."

Doc's eyes go dark. "Morelli can go fuck himself."

Before I can say anything, his tattooed arm is between my legs, fingers brushing at my thighs. His hands are practiced, surer than sure. I hold my breath as he feels my wetness and grins from ear to ear. "You're soaking, Tesorina."

I screw my eyes shut. "Domenico."

"Yeah, say my fucking name." He runs a thumb over my waxed outer lips, and a moan escapes me.

Doc lets out a low laugh. "You want to get fiddled, baby? You want to come?"

He makes it sound revolting, cheap, and ugly. The way I'll be if I let him do this. I push his chest. "I don't want this."

"Oh yeah, what do you want?"

"I want to go home!" It bursts out of me, tearful and pathetic, and something in me shifts. "Get off me! I want to go home!"

Doc bares his teeth and I'm sure he's going to slap me. Then the pressure on my lower body vanishes. He stands beside me, looming over the bed. "You're pathetic."

I yank the blanket up, covering myself. "I want to go home."

“Home to what? Being trapped and controlled? Having your mom cash checks on your pussy?”

My chest contracts. “Don’t talk about my mom!”

“You mean your pimp?”

“Shut up!”

He gives a mean jagged laugh. “If some trailer park bitch did what she did, the cops’d throw her in jail. Your mom sells you to the highest bidder and the Governor comes to the wedding.”

Tears burn in my eyes. There’s nothing nice about these truths. Nothing exhilarating. They’re ugly and even though I want to, I can’t dispute them.

“When are you gonna get it, moron? You were already for sale. Now you don’t have to sit around crying about it. You’ve got a choice.”

“By working for you?” I sob.

Doc thumps a fist into his chest. “Yes! Freedom. Money. Self-respect. Whoever you want to fuck whenever you want to fuck them.”

My stomach churns so hard I almost throw up. Has it really come to this? All my ballet lessons and bodyguards. My wedding plans and my acceptance into Columbia. Is my only real chance for freedom to be Eli’s sugar baby or a stripper? My gaze falls on the tiny gold pendant on my dresser. Protection for whenever you journey from home. I meet Doc’s gaze. “No. I won’t work for you.”

“Because you’re a weak little girl?”

I move so fast I don’t feel myself do it. One minute I’m on the bed, the next I have a finger in Doc’s face. “Because you don’t deserve me!”

He takes a step back. I move with him, pressing my finger into his chest. “Maybe my mom sold me. Maybe I was always going to be someone’s property, but at least Mr. Parker was

respectful! At least Eli tried to make being with him sound nice! You come down here with Reece's Pieces, telling me you couldn't care less who I sleep with and that I'm stupid and you expect me to want to be with you?"

Doc grabs my finger and reels me in like a fish. "I could make you want it. I could make you so desperate you'd fuck me on the cathedral altar in front of your whole family."

My bravery vanishes in the blink of an eye. "What do you ___"

His hand closes around my throat. "You want me to show you? Take the choice right out of your hands?"

I sense a genuine question and while I have no idea how he could take my choice away, the last thing I want is less choice. I shake my head.

"Fine." Doc releases my throat and heads for the cage door, pulling his keys from his pocket. "You've got three options. You can strip in my clubs, you can eat a bullet, or you can get sold to the Bratva. Know what that is?"

"No."

He shoves the key in the lock and wrenches it open. "Russian mafia. You'll earn on your back. Get fucked two dozen times a day. Come on so many strangers' cocks you won't walk a block without seeing someone who's railed you."

He moves through the cage door and slams the bars between us. My heart shrinks in my chest. Despite everything, I don't want to be alone again. I put my arms through the cage. "Doc?"

He doesn't look back. There's still a card I can play. Maybe the only one I have left. "Who's Alessia Valente?"

He stops, his whole body tensing. Instantly I know I've made a mistake. "Sorry, I didn't—"

A hand grabs me through the bars, pulling me into the cold metal. The blanket falls to my feet and I'm naked. The point of Doc's butterfly knife is at my throat.

“How,” he rasps, “the fuck do you know that name?”

I try not to scream. “You said it to Mr. Parker at the cathedral. And your last name’s Valente so I thought Alessia might be your mom or your sister?”

Doc doesn’t move. “You have no idea. None. Because you’re a stupid bitch with no sense. Isn’t that right?”

I nod frantically.

“So let me help you out.” He runs the flat of the blade along my cheek. “Say my sister’s name again and I’ll cut you from ear to ear then fuck you with the knife.”

His eyes are hollow points of light. Headlamps in the dark. You could disappear into them without a trace. He’s telling the truth. He could cut me. He could kill me without a second thought.

“I won’t say it again,” I tell him. “I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry.”

He pushes me backward and I fall to the ground, relief blaring through me. Doc’s cheeks hollow and something wet runs down my face.

“Oh my God, you spat on me!”

For a moment we stare at each other and it’s crazy, but I want to laugh. I’m pretty sure Doc does too.

“Sorry,” I say in a rush. “Doc, I mean it. I’m sorry.”

His face works furiously but he turns, storming away without another word.

I lie motionless on the ground. I was right. Alessia is his sister.



CHAPTER EIGHT

January Whitehall

“**G**ET UP,” A voice barks, and I jerk awake. I cried for so long after Doc left that I must have dozed off.

“I said, get up.” I jump to my feet like I’m in the army and turn to the voice. It’s a man I haven’t seen before. He must be at least sixty with a grey mustache and unfriendly expression.

He throws a cloth bag through the bars. “Put this on.”

I don’t move.

“Do it or you won’t get to wash.”

Wash? Like take a shower? I grab the bag off the floor and ram it over my head. Even if he’s lying, I’m willing to take the risk if it means feeling clean again.

I hear the cage unlock. The man takes my elbow and guides me forward. I’m unsteady on my feet, but his touch is light as if he doesn’t really want to come near me. His directions are clipped as he leads me up flights of stairs and around corners.

“You’ve got fifteen minutes,” he finally says, dropping his hold and pulling the bag from my head.

“What—” I say, but he’s already closing the door behind him.

I blink, readjusting my eyes to the bright lights of the room before letting out a shaky laugh. He was telling the truth. I’m standing in a beautiful white marble bathroom. There are stacks of fluffy towels, shelves heaving with body wash and

shampoo and moisturizer, and toothbrushes still in their packaging.

I grab a strawberry body wash and a coconut shampoo and conditioner and strip out of my underwear in a second, practically running into the big rainforest shower. I let the hot water pound on me for minutes before scrubbing myself with a loofa. The thick white bubbles slide over my skin and it's like a religious experience.

Mindful of the time limit, I finish quickly and step out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel, feeling five pounds lighter.

Beside the towels is a small pile of clothes. A pink T-shirt, white cotton shorts, white socks, and pink panties. A little girlie but much better than what I expected—I'm sure Doc would want me in a dog collar and a leather thong or something.

I brush my teeth, moisturize my face, comb my hair, and roll deodorant under my arms in a state of rapture. After being trapped in the dark, I'm beginning to feel almost normal again. The clothes fit snugly but there's no bra or pockets for me to put my St. Christopher in and you can see my nipples through the T-shirt. I pull the socks on and look around for shoes. I knock on the inside of the door. "Hi, are there any shoes?"

"No."

"Oh, but my socks will be ruined on the floor?"

An irritated grunt. "Are you dressed?"

"Yes."

"Then put the bag back on your head."

I do it, and hold my St. Christopher in my fist. The door unlocks and the man takes my arm again. When he next takes off the bag we're in a small room, empty except for a table and chair. On the table is a bowl of tomato soup and a grilled cheese. My heart leaps. "Is that for me?"

"Yes. Sit."

“Thank you! Thank you so much! Mr...?”

He looks at me with his flinty grey eyes. “Gretzky.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gretzky.”

I eat fast, burning the roof of my mouth, but I don’t care. In seconds the plate and bowl are empty.

Mr. Gretzky scowls. “Done?”

I nod. “Everything was delicious.”

“I didn’t make the food.” He hands me back the bag.

I hesitate. “Does anyone want to see me? Mr. Morelli, maybe?”

“No.”

With a sigh I lower the bag onto my head. Mr. Gretzky leads me back down the house until I hear the now-familiar creak of the basement door. My chest hollows out. It’ll be better to be clean and fed in my cage but it’s so lonely in the dark. Maybe that’s Eli and Doc’s plan? To melt my sense of perspective and force me to choose one of their proposals out of sheer boredom.

Or they’ve forgotten about me.

“Lift your feet so you don’t hit the grate,” Mr. Gretzky says.

I do as I’m told before I pull the bag off my head. “Thank you for helping me—Ahhh!”

Bobby rises from my bed, his hands up. “Sorry! Sorry, January, I didn’t mean to scare you!”

He’s wearing chinos and a navy sweater with the sleeves pushed up. He looks like a TV boyfriend. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

The basement door slams. Mr. Gretzky must have left. Which means Bobby and I are alone.

He moves to one side, gesturing at the bed. “Come sit down.”

Unsure what else to do, I sit, tucking my feet underneath me. I’m super aware of my damp hair and scrubbed face, my nipples brushing against my T-shirt. I fold my arms across my chest. “Um, so why are you here?”

Bobby scrubs a hand through his short hair. “Do you feel better after your shower?”

“Yeah totally.”

“That’s... good.”

He’s not acting cool and confident anymore. He’s more like he was when he was tutoring me, nice but awkward. I try not to smile. Bobby’s not insanely beautiful like Eli, or dangerously pretty like Doc. He’s more practical. More American. The kind of guy who sends roses on Valentine’s Day and your family likes—if your family was normal.

“So, I uh...” He gestures to my side table. “Got you some stuff.”

I turn. Beside the lamp is a small bunch of pink flowers in a plastic cup and a thin gold necklace.

“I saw you’ve got that St. Christopher. I thought you might wanna put it on a chain.”

I throw my arms around Bobby’s neck. “Oh my God, thank you, thank you, *thank you!*”

He makes a strangled sound but his arms close around me. His sweater is cashmere and I rub my face against it, inhaling his sweet, wood smoke scent. Bobby’s so strong, he’s so—

Cold expands in my core as I remember him approaching Kurt, his face steady and sure. The man holding me raised the gun that killed my bodyguard. I saw it. Saw Kurt lying on the ground, gaping red where his face used to be.

I push myself away. “I... um...”

Bobby's jaw sets, his brown eyes fixing on me. "Give me your St. Christopher. I'll put it on the chain."

I open my fist and stare at the little gold circle. A part of me wants to give it to him, but a much bigger part of me wishes he hadn't killed Kurt. As lovely as it would be to wear the medallion around my neck, I can't have Zia Theresa's precious St. Christopher attached to something so compromised.

"Or not," Bobby says, his face bright red.

"I'm sorry Bobby, I just—wait, what are you doing?"

He drops to one knee in front of me. "January, I need to say something. I want you out of this basement. I want you safe and happy again."

There's a throb in his voice, as though my pain has been hurting him too.

"Can I talk to my Zia Teresa or my mom?"

"Not yet. But we can make other arrangements."

"What kind of arrangements?"

He reaches out a hand to mine. Sparks tingle up my arm and as much as I want to pull away, I don't.

"JJ." His soulful brown eyes lock on mine. "You're the most incredible woman I've ever met."

My heart slams against my chest. "But I don't know how to do anything. I don't know what seven times nine is."

"That doesn't matter. I waited my whole life to find someone like you."

My head is pounding. I want so much to ask what he means if he's saying what I think he is, but this isn't the Trinity Grammar library. And in a corner of my mind, Kurt is begging for his life as Bobby walks toward him, holding Eli's gun.

I imagine Zia Teresa smoking under the rangehood of my stepmom's oven. *Wake up, bella. You're being lied to again.*

I look down at my clean, tight shorts. "Did you make it so I could go upstairs and wash and eat?"

"I... yeah."

"How come you didn't take me yourself? You got Mr. Gretzky to do it?"

I try to sound sweet, non-threatening, but Bobby's eyes narrow. "I'm not trying to manipulate you."

"Of course not," I say. But I know he is. He wanted me to be clean and comfortable, but he didn't want to bag my head and steer me around Velvet House like a crash test dummy. He still wants me to see him as a sweet, gentle guy. My math tutor. My high school crush. The thought is more painful than Eli's threats, Adriano's gun in my mouth, Doc's knife against my neck.

"January? What's wrong?"

I pick up my pillow and hug it to my chest. "Um, like, everything?"

The corner of his mouth kicks up. "Yeah, I guess that's about right, but we can make things better."

I look away. Part of me wants to tell him anything is better than being locked in a basement, but I don't want to waste Bobby's niceness by making him mad. "Thank you for letting me wash and giving me food."

"JJ... I'm still the guy who taught you trigonometry."

I know what he really means. You can still like me. I'm still safe. But one thing might not be true and the other definitely isn't.

"I know."

There's a long painful silence.

“How did you even become my math tutor?” I ask, needing to say something.

“It wasn’t too hard. I’ve got a master’s degree in computer science.”

“Oh.” I assumed he’d blackmailed his way into Trinity Grammar, like Doc posing as the priest or Adriano pretending to be a janitor. But then again Bobby did tutor people with math. People who weren’t me. “Do you... work in computer science?”

“Velvet provides surveillance services. I run our operations. They’re some of the best in the country.”

I hear a note of pride in his voice and my stomach knots. “Surveillance services for criminals?”

He traces his tongue over his lower lip. “Yes. But also, corporations and hotels and families like yours.”

“Like mine?”

“Wealthy people with a lot of assets.” He shifts on his knee. “I know the impression we must have given you, but Velvet House isn’t a gang. It’s a business.”

“I don’t think a lot of businesses kill people on their carpet. Or kidnap brides.”

He lets out a slow breath. “There are some complicated sides. But what’s happening with you, it isn’t standard practice. Parker is... different.”

It’s so strange to hear him say Mr. Parker’s name. I thought my math tutor and the man I was supposed to marry were separate parts of my life. Turns out they were actually joined long before I showed up.

“How does Mr. Parker fit into your business?”

Bobby’s face shifts. He becomes the man who killed Kurt again. I wriggle backward. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. But take my word for it. Parker isn’t who you think he is. He’s dangerous.”

I picture Mr. Parker's round face and baby blue eyes. "I've seen more dangerous cavoodles being walked through Central Park."

Bobby doesn't smile. "He's a bad man. Take it from me."

"But he's always been so nice!"

Bobby surges to his feet, his face tight. "He was biding his time until you married him. How can you not see that?"

"Mr. Parker had plenty of time to be mean to me, but he never even touched me."

A low growl rumbles in Bobby's chest. "I never touched you either."

"You weren't supposed to be my husband."

Bobby's jaw juts out. "So you wanted to marry him? You wanted his filthy hands all over your body?"

"No, but I wanted to do right by my family. And I *didn't* want to be locked in a cage."

Bright red spreads down Bobby's cheeks and into his neck like melted raspberry gelato. "You're right. But that's what I'm here to talk to you about—the other arrangements. You'll need to stay here for a while longer. But once this has blown over, I think it could be a good idea, if you want, and *you* think it's a good idea for us, for you and me. For us... Not that there's any pressure. There's no pressure. It's up to you, JJ..."

His words sound like anagrams. Like there's a message in there but I can't figure out what it is without a roll of paper and tri-color pens. "Bobby, what are you saying?"

He clears his throat, so red I can almost feel the heat coming off him. "We can get married. For your protection."

Somewhere in the basement, water drips.

I want to ask if he's joking, but I'm pretty sure he'll die of embarrassment. "Um, how will being married protect me from Mr. Parker? Aren't you guys planning to kill him?"

“I... yeah.” Bobby’s gaze slides sideways. “It’s more of a... future type... thing.”

I get it. He doesn’t mean ‘protect me’ from Mr. Parker. He means ‘protect me’ from his friends. From stripping and becoming a sugar baby and whatever Adriano Rossi wants to do to me. I gnaw at my thumbnail.

“January?”

I can’t meet his eyes. “Yeah?”

Bobby drops back onto his knee. Getting the news out seems to have relieved some of his internal pressure. “I know this is a lot to take, but it wouldn’t be a marriage like you had with Parker. I don’t want to control you. Once you’re under my protection, you can do whatever you like.”

Except go home. And I can’t imagine Doc, the man who just held a knife to my throat, letting me go skipping into the sunset with Bobby. “Will the others... um, be okay with us getting married?”

“They won’t like it. But if it’s what you choose, I’ll put my foot down and they’ll have to respect it.”

I believe him. My heart jolts. Could I marry Bobby? It would be better than stripping or being sold to the Russian Mafia. But even as I consider what saying yes would mean, my insides twist. I’m trapped behind dirty glass. I can only see pieces of what’s happening or why. I want to wipe it clean and see the whole thing. “I thought I wasn’t fancy enough to marry?”

“That’s Eli. I’m no Italian prince. You’ll be punching a few belts below your weight with me.”

There’s a smile in his voice. Without thinking I look right into Bobby’s face and his loveliness overwhelms me. His brown eyes are welcoming, and I imagine walking down the aisle toward him. Sleeping in his big, muscly arms. My mind tries to dream up what he looks like naked, and I turn away.

Bobby takes my hand again, folding it in his. “Just because I’m not a Velluto doesn’t mean I can’t take care of you. What I do pays better than Wall Street. You can have everything you had at your mom’s house. More.”

The gooshy romantic feelings vanish. “Is that what you think of me? That I’m a gold digger who wants diamond spoons and Amex black cards?”

“No! I just want you to know the world is open to you. That if you marry me, I’ll work my ass off to make your life beautiful. I’ll buy us a house anywhere you like, and you can go to college or start your own business or dance or take singing lessons or just... be my wife.”

Bobby sounds exactly the way I wanted a man to sound when he talked about marrying me. He even looks exactly the way I dreamed my husband might look. But from the corner of my mind, Zia Teresa speaks. *If you marry this man, you’ll be a murderers’ wife.*

“... and we can get a dog or a cat or—”

I lean forward and press a finger to Bobby’s lips. “Are you asking me to marry you or are you *saying* that’s what’s going to happen?”

His eyes widen. “I’m asking. I’d never... I’m *asking*, January.”

“Then my answer is no.”

Bobby’s face falls. “Is this because you want to be with Eli?”

Oh my God, not this again. “No.”

His mouth becomes a hard line. “Doc?”

I tear my hand from his. “What is your problem? You and the others all asking, ‘Is it him instead of me?’ I don’t want any of you! Why is that so hard to understand? I just want to go back to the way things were!”

Bobby’s mouth softens. “JJ...”

“Only my family calls me JJ! You can’t call me JJ!”

He stands, his jaw working. He wants to be kind and soft, but I can feel his anger burning beneath the surface. “You can’t go back. And you don’t want to. You don’t want to be Parker’s wife.”

“How do you know? You won’t even tell me what he did to make you angry.”

Bobby shakes his hands in frustration. “Okay,” he says. “When did your dancing lessons start?”

“I... when I was little?”

“When you were nine,” Bobby corrects. “Because Parker has a thing for ballerinas.”

“How do you...?”

“I run professional surveillance for a living. Parker made you start dancing and he’s the reason you weren’t allowed to give it up when you were in high school.”

My stomach swoops. When I was fifteen, my ballet instructor, Madame Blanchet, told me it was time to consider dance styles ‘more suited to my figure.’ I wasn’t too heartbroken. I was already a head taller and two cup sizes bigger than every girl in my class. But when I took Madame Blanchet’s letter to my mom, she threw it in the trash. “You’re staying at New York Academy. It’s important for young women to have poise.”

I shake my head like a dog trying to get rid of water. “*Mom* wanted me to be a ballerina.”

“And what about your weight? Did your mom want you to weigh exactly one hundred and twenty-one pounds?”

Every muscle in my body goes stiff.

“Again, Parker. He wanted you that way.”

The room starts spinning. I try to find Bobby in the blur of lamplight. “Mom weighed me. She changed my food if I wasn’t at one-hundred-and-twenty-one.”

“And did she do that with your sister? Or just you?”

A million terrifying thoughts zap through me and then everything blows out. My mind goes blank, my body slumps onto the covers, heavy as cement.

An arm wraps around my shoulders. Bobby, engulfing me in cashmere and his sweet smoky smell. He presses his mouth to my hair. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. You deserved better.”

Energy surges back through me and I turn and half climb into his lap. Bobby goes stiff as a board “JJ... baby... what are you doing?”

“I just need to be closer. Is that okay?”

He twists his knees away. “Ah, maybe not right now...”

For a second, I’m stung, then I see it. The thick ridge along his hip. “You’ve got a... I gave you a...?”

Bobby’s face is scarlet. “Sorry, you’re just so beautiful and ___”

I move without thinking, shifting myself fully onto his lap. Bobby makes a noise of protest but when I kiss him, he kisses me back.

It isn’t like with Doc or Eli. It isn’t like anything I’ve ever felt. It’s golden and delicate as a spring morning. A first kiss. A real first kiss. The start of something precious.

We break apart, grinning like idiots. Bobby presses his forehead to mine. “I can’t tell you how long I wanted to do that.”

“Me too. I never thought...”

“I know.”

We kiss again, slower this time, and the feel of Bobby pressed against my shorts makes heat lick between my thighs.

“JJ.” Bobby’s hands are on my hips and he grinds against me. “You’re so gorgeous.”

It's wrong, rocking against Bobby's erection. Even wronger than Doc sucking my nipples. Doc made me feel trapped, forced to feel things. Being with Bobby is a choice. But I don't stop and neither does he. He's rougher than I thought he would be and I like it. We kiss until I'm out of breath. Until everything between my legs is tight and soaking.

Bobby's hands brush the bottom of my T-shirt. "Can I?"

I swallow. "I don't know. I'm so confused."

"That's okay." Bobby ducks his head. "You know when I knew I had feelings for you?"

I beam at him like a dork. "Tell me?"

"It was hearing you sing Rex Orange County. That 'Loving is Easy' song. You were smiling and tapping your feet and I just..." He presses a hand to his heart. "Melted."

I laugh, embarrassed and delighted. "I can do better songs."

"Impossible." He kisses my cheek. "I don't want to rush you, but if we get married, I can make everything right."

The glow in my chest evaporates. "Bobby..."

"I know. I know it's a lot of pressure, but we can make it work." His face is earnest and boyish. I open my mouth to ask how old he is exactly and then the thought clicks, as though it was always there. "Bobby? Did you hear me sing Rex Orange County at school?"

His dark eyes flick to the left and then back again. "Yeah."

The taste of cheese and tomato rise in my mouth. "I never sang at school, even to myself. I would have been too embarrassed."

He doesn't say anything but a blush creeps down his neck again. I slide off Bobby's lap and walk to the side of the cage, as far away as I can get. "You were spying on me, weren't you? At home or at my singing lessons or somewhere?"

He lowers his head. "I'm sorry."

“I guess you are really good at surveillance.”

He huffs out a humorless laugh.

“And you’ve killed other people, haven’t you? Kurt wasn’t the first.”

“No.”

I nod, feeling calmer than I should. “I think maybe you should go.”

“Yeah.” Bobby gets to his feet and walks away slowly as though trying to think of some reason to stay. I’m thinking hard too, but there’s nothing there. The basement door swings open and then he’s gone, just like the other two.

His gold chain is still sitting on my dresser. I don’t check if it’s fine enough to hold the medallion. I don’t touch it at all.



CHAPTER NINE

January Whitehall

PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS thought I was stupid. I'm the baby of my family. I couldn't say 'spaghetti' properly until I was twelve. My grades have always been terrible, and I believed *everything* people told me. Santa's real. Swallowed gum stays inside you for seven years. Storks deliver babies. Margot and Lachlan made sure kids were never mean to me, but they still laughed when I didn't know what a 'sausage party' was or what '420' meant. I read the wrong parts of the book out loud in English class. Bradley Fox made up a song about me in seventh grade. I still know all the words.

*January White,
Can't read or write.
She's too dumb to play,
And eats dirt all day.*

People have always thought I'm stupid, but after Bobby left my cage, I *felt* stupid. Bone-deep, soul-piercingly stupid.

I don't have to question what Bobby told me. Mr. Parker is a bad man. The truth is like a spotlight, shining on years of evidence. Mr. Parker watching me carefully while I ate. Mr. Parker always asking about ballet. Mr. Parker begging mom to watch my classes. But more than that, I remember the fearful look in Zia Teresa's eyes when she saw me in my wedding dress. Her St. Christopher medallion. A last-ditch attempt to protect me from an impossible situation.

I don't know if Mr. Parker is a bad man the way the four men in this house are bad men. But he's not who I thought he was. The marriage I imagined having with him, friendly and respectful if not romantic, was a fantasy. He made me do ballet. He controlled my weight through mom. Who knows what else he wanted to do?

I am exactly what Doc told me I was when I first woke up in this house. A stupid girl who can't see what's in front of her face.

Bobby's visit drains the life out of me. I climb back into bed and doze until Mr. Gretzky appears again, banging on my cage door. "Do you want to wash and eat?"

I don't want to go anywhere but I know I'll feel better once I've had some food. "Sure."

He throws me the cloth bag and I cover my face and allow Mr. Gretzky to lead me back upstairs to the bathroom. I have another shower and try not to think about the look on Bobby's face when I told him I can't be his wife.

There's a new outfit beside the shower, a red sundress and black leather flats. Shoes that are barely shoes. What do they think I'd do with sneakers? Hit Mr. Gretzky on the head and try to escape? And where are these outfits coming from? Did Eli do a clothing haul when I got here or something?

The dress feels too small. It isn't but my breasts are pushing over of the top and the waist is tight. I half expect Mr. Gretzky to tell me to change back into my T-shirt and shorts, but he barely looks at me before throwing the bag over my head and leading me to the food room. Scrambled eggs and buttered toast are waiting for me. At home I was never allowed bread unless Mom was away and even then, Zia Teresa bought expensive sourdough. My toast is plain old sandwich bread. The kind that comes in a bag. It's incredible.

"Who cooks my food?" I ask Mr. Gretzky. "Can I thank them?"

He ignores me. Five minutes later I'm back in the cage. A week ago, if you'd told me my biggest issue with being kidnapped would be the boredom, I would have said you were crazy. But it is. With nothing to do, my problems cluster around me like mean birds, pecking and squawking.

"Zia," I whisper. "Please help?"

I'm scared she won't answer, that her voice has abandoned me like everything else, but then it comes.

Get up, bella.

I get to my feet, feeling clumsy and overexposed in my red dress. "What should I do?"

What do you usually do when you're bored?

I smile. I know exactly what to do. I'm amazed I didn't think of it before.

It takes twenty minutes to run through my warm-up scales and then I sing. I sing Adele. I sing The Beatles. I sing Kate Bush. I sing Edith Piaf. I sing sitting down. I sing pacing the cage. I sing until my voice goes husky and then I keep going. As the hours pass, the sensation of being watched grows stronger, but I don't care.

Singing is easier than talking. I find strength in the repetition of it, the rise and fall of my voice. The pull of my abdomen. The emotions you can pour into lyrics and behind them. Singing is the easiest way to be me.

Eventually my voice gives out, but it's okay. I already know what to do next. I take off my flat shoes and practice ballet. There isn't enough room to dance but using the cage bars as a handrail, I move from position to position, humming Swan Lake. Soon my skin is glowing, and my mind is blissfully empty. When bad thoughts push in, I push them back, re-focusing on the positions. Mr. Parker might have forced me into it, and I might have the wrong body and be stupid, but ballet has made me strong. I'm going to dance every day I'm down here.

I'm practicing dégagé combinations when the basement door bangs open. I freeze in place, one hand on the bars holding me prisoner. It's not Mr. Gretzky. The silhouette in the doorway is too large.

A thrill runs down my spine. I know who it is. The only person I want to see even less than I want to be held in captivity. Boots pound on the metal stairs and the basement door melts back into darkness. His voice scrapes out from the shadows. "Keep going."

I freeze. I didn't realize I'd stopped dancing. I try to start again but my legs are melting into the floor, and I can taste my own teeth.

He moves closer to my bubble of light, poison green eyes shining.

"Hello, Mr. Rossi," I say.

His footsteps are slow and heavy. "Keep. Dancing."

I move jerkily into fifth position, raising my hands over my head. Adriano comes forward, materializing out of nothing. He's so much bigger than the others. His head reaches the basement ceiling. I think of the half-bull man we studied in Greek Mythology. The one who killed people for fun. I lower my arms into demi-seconde and see the gun strapped to his side. My skin goes ice cold. I hold the pose out of pure muscle memory, my insides trembling. I want to collapse.

Zia! I scream in my mind. *Zia!*

The voice comes again, slow and calm. *Dance, bella. Just keep moving.*

I do little girl positions. First, second, plié, pirouette.

Seconds scrape past like hours, my arms and legs vibrating with fear. *Please just go away, please just let me live,* I repeat to myself.

I cycle through the same poses until my legs are shaking. He knows I can do more, but he doesn't say anything, just

watches until my body goes rubbery and I collapse to my knees.

“Did I say you could stop?”

I try desperately not to cry. “No.”

“Look at me.”

I lift my gaze to his. Adriano’s scar gleams in the lamplight, silver against his olive cheek. He must have got it in a fight but all I can picture is him deep in a forest battling a bear. Him, shirtless and holding a sword, and the bear with a snowy muzzle, swiping at his face. The animal gets a single slash before Adriano seizes his throat, tearing it open with his teeth.

“Mr. Rossi, is there something you want to ask...?”

A beat. “You think something about you interests me?”

The words come before I can think. “My dancing.”

“Your dancing?”

I shake my head, tears prickling at my eyes. “You... watch me dance. You always have.”

Adriano’s huge, tattooed hand drifts toward his gun and he eases it from its holster. My insides flicker like water and I fight not to scream.

He takes a step toward the bars, swallowing the ground between us. “I watch you dance?”

“Yes. I mean no. Never.”

He points the barrel at me. “You think *anything* about you is interesting?”

“No, of course not.”

“You’re right. The most interesting thing you could do for me is die.”

“No.” The whisper forces its way past my lips. I press my trembling hands to my mouth. The gun hole stares at me.

“No?” Adriano repeats. “You don’t want to die?”

Death is so close I can taste it, cold metal with an edge of relief—the taste of *his* gun in my mouth. I screw my eyes shut and say goodbye to Zia Teresa and Margot, to Lachlan and Penelope and—

“Kneel.”

I open my eyes. “P-Pardon?”

“Get up on your knees.”

Adrenaline pulses through me like rusty nails. Is this what executioners make you do? I push myself into a kneeling position and try not to stare at his heavy canvas pants. There is something besides killing me that could be done while I’m on my knees. Is that what he wants? I don’t know what to hope for.

“Open your mouth.”

My jaw drops before my soul can protest.

Adriano’s lips twist. “You little whore.” His tattooed hand moves to his zipper and my heart thumps so hard I taste blood. I’m going to see a man for the first time. Taste him. Unless I pass out before it even starts and then he shoots me.

Cold drops into my cleavage. Adriano is rubbing the gun barrel against my breasts.

“The others think you’re innocent.” His voice rumbles in the dark, deep and inhuman. What was the bull-man from Greek Mythology called?

The gun comes back up my collarbone, the metal warmed from my body heat. My jaw is aching from being open and my tongue feels furry with fear. I don’t want to give him a blowjob, but I wish anything else was happening.

“Are you a good little whore?”

Should I agree? Disagree? I decide to go with the truth.
“No?”

He presses the barrel hard against my temple. “Did I tell you to close your mouth?”

I’m petrified, but I still know that was a dirty trick. My breath catches and though I want to beg I know it won’t work. Nothing will. I let my jaw hang.

He grips the side of my neck. “That’s it, little whore. Now suck.”

A split second of panic before he slides his gun into my mouth. I try to pull away, but his big hand claps the back of my head, holding me in place.

“I said ‘suck.’”

Whimpering, I close my lips around the barrel tasting the now familiar oil and metal. I move back and forth, tears leaking from my eyes. I feel a hot surge of unreality and know I’m going to pass out. Maybe Adriano knows it too because he fists my hair. “Suck harder. Tight and fast.”

It isn’t like last time. Last time I was in a chair with Adriano above me. He was shoving the gun into my mouth while I tried to keep my teeth out of the way. It was violent. Forced. Almost staged. This is different. I’m on my knees and Adriano’s pumping the gun slowly, working it in and out of my mouth. It feels more like doing *that* than sucking a gun. My eyes lock on his canvas pants. The front is thick and distorted. He has a... but he’s making me suck his gun instead. Doc was right. He is a big freak. I sputter a laugh against the barrel. Adriano’s hand tightens in my hair. “Something funny?”

My insides swoop. I suck the gun deeper making myself gag.

He smiles, his lips twisting to reveal his gold tooth. “Use your tongue on the underside.”

I flick my tongue against the metal and his smile grows wider. “Good girl.”

How does he know? He can't feel it. Or maybe he can. Maybe he's some kind of cyborg.

He moves his free hand from my head and rubs a palm across his zipper. I imagine him hard and thick as a python and an unwelcome burr goes through me like static.

Some girls like that, Doc whispers in my mind. *Some girls want to be fucked by a big freak.*

But not me. I can't want that. Because if I did want to sleep with Adriano, it would mean I'm broken inside. A shattered doll.

He grips my chin through the bars. "I want you gone, little whore."

I choke, accidentally biting down on the gun. Adriano glares at me. "Do better."

I open my mouth wide and try to suck softly.

"That's it." He smooths a hand through my sweaty hair. "Did you already know I want to kill you?"

Yes. I knew it when he first pushed Eli's gun into my throat. The hatred in his eyes said he was dying to shoot me and pile my body on top of Kurt's.

"All those times you thought I was watching you dance, I was wishing I could choke you to death."

I sputter. Spit spills from my lips, down my chin.

Adriano sneers. "You're drooling on yourself like a toothless old woman."

I tighten my lips around the barrel and try to swallow the spit but more dribbles out and I feel it reach my chest.

"You're a disgusting little girl, aren't you?"

I nod, tears leaking from my eyes.

He jerks his head at the basement door. "I've watched you manipulate them. Try to win them over with your crying and pretty smiles. You're pathetic."

The gun goes deeper, and I choke.

Adriano's gold tooth flashes at me. "Keep going."

My jaw aches, but I suck faster, wanting to be good. To please him. It occurs to me that if he really was forcing himself into my mouth, I'd act the same way. A bolt of sick heat goes through me. Do I wish it was his cock? Do I want him to want me even as he does this?

Adriano's hand moves from my hair to my neck, his fingers locking around my throat. "If you try blowing Bobby, or Eli or Doc, if you try and get what you want out of them by being a little whore, I'll kill you before their cum is halfway down your throat."

Light pops in front of my eyes but still, I keep sucking.

"Got that?"

I moan around the barrel.

"The fuck was that?"

"Erg Ungersturghhh."

"Good. Squeeze your tits."

I hesitate.

"Put your fucking hands on your tits and play with them or I'll blow your head apart."

Minotaur.

The word spits out of the back of my brain as I cup my breasts through my dress. Minotaur. The cursed son of a goddess and a bull, charging around a dark maze and killing for fun. I suck hard, suck until my cheeks are scraped and my mouth is full of cuts and blood and my brain is a white blur.

"You're almost done," Adriano snarls. "Make my Glock come in your mouth."

Does he mean he's going to shoot me? Fear fuzzes my mind but my mouth keeps moving, sucking, and swallowing.

"Enough."

He's barely got the word out before I'm pushed backward and I crumple on the floor.

"You're an embarrassment." Adriano wipes his gun on his pants and returns it to the holster. "You try to con your way out of here, I'll do worse than kill you. You'll find yourself in a dirty hole, pissing into a bucket. I've got a tattoo machine. I'll mark you up. Your face. Your tits. I'll put my name all over you. Pierce your nipples, cut your skin and then, if you're lucky, I'll kill you."

I gag, tasting bile and cheese and eggs. Adriano smiles like it's the sweetest thing he's ever seen.

"You want to know why you're still alive? Because my brothers want your pussy. But as soon as they're done with you, I'll end your life and I won't bother fucking you first."

I nod, but I can see the front of his pants is still swollen. He doesn't think I'm ugly. Or if he does, he still liked doing that to me.

"You think I want your worthless cunt?" He says it so quietly he might be talking to himself.

"No," I whisper.

He presses his face between the bars, his eyes cold as outer space. "Let's be clear, little girl. You're not worth raping."

The words ring in my mind like broken bells, shattering my insides. I'm too scared to cry, too hurt to breathe.

He turns his back on me. "Enjoy the last days of your life, Pryntsesa."

I lie in the dark, listening to the water drip from the ceiling. I count three thousand nine hundred and thirty-three drops.

Money.

Freedom.

Marriage.

Death.

These are the four choices my future holds. The only paths
I can hope to walk.



CHAPTER TEN

Elliot Morelli

THE TRUTH OF being a boss means waking up every morning to maintain a thousand-part machine that despite constant upkeep is one mistake from exploding. I should be happy. I should be fucking ecstatic. Everything following the cathedral has gone perfectly. Minimal underworld complaints, minimal police interference, enough journalists greased to keep a pretty debutante's disappearance out of the news. I expected trouble from the outside—Parker's supporters, rival families, the Whitehalls funneling money into ex-Mossad agents. Instead, the chaos is coming from inside Velvet House.

I thought January would break like a wave on the shore. She was to be a pleasurable inconvenience. A way to torment Parker before we ended him in fair retribution for what he did to us seventeen years ago. But every day I hold the girl in my basement, she becomes a larger thorn in my side.

She should be begging to leave the cage by any means necessary but she's eating and sleeping well and her moods are stable. Meanwhile, my brothers, the men I need focused and in fighting form, are tearing each other apart. Day and night they argue about what to do with January Whitehall. Twice, Adriano physically separated Bobby and Doc. Three times Bobby's headed Adriano away from the basement, sure—as I am—he was planning to kill the girl. And on four separate occasions, Adriano has hauled Doc away from the security monitors where he's passed out drunk, watching her. The last time he had a lit cigarette between his fingers. The fucking idiot could have burned Velvet House to the ground.

It's enough to drive a man insane. But if I mention how irrational and idiotic they're being, all I hear is that I'm pissed January didn't choose me. Which I am. If the little brat had taken my rubies and agreed to be my mistress, we wouldn't be in this mess.

I never should have given her a choice. Doing so rendered her off limits, while we awaited her decision—a decision she'll never make. We abducted January to send Parker footage of her getting passed between the four of us like a bachelor party hooker. Now none of us knows how to proceed. Not when what we desire is in complete conflict. Who has the right to get what they want? The four of us have never competed over anything more serious than poker, let alone a girl. But now we are. And I fear what each of us is capable of.

Ten days after January arrived, I find my friends in the dining room, a live feed of her cage playing on a nearby screen.

“Even if she decides to marry you,” Doc is telling Bobby. “I'll fuck it up.”

Bobby lays his hands on the table. “If she chooses to marry me, you have to back off. It's what we all agreed.”

Doc blows into the barrel of the revolver he's cleaning. “I didn't agree to shit. I want to fuck her. And I get what I want.”

Bobby's eyes narrow. “Not this time.”

Adriano lifts his gaze from his phone. “I can make it so no one has her.”

Doc points the gun at him. “You stamp out that pussy before I've had a taste, you'll get a knife through the ear.”

I clear my throat. “Nice to see this is still going on.”

My friends don't even glance at me.

“You screwed up everything between me and January,” Bobby tells Adriano. “If it wasn't for you making me kill her bodyguard—”

“You’re not the little whore’s math tutor,” Adriano snarls. “You wanna delude yourself, that’s your business. But you’re not pretending in front of me.”

My gaze falls on the monitor. January is sitting on her bed in a white dress, her hair loose around her shoulders. She’s grown thinner in the days since she arrived, but it’s only sharpened her beauty. Her mouth opens in a red ‘O’ and I realize she’s singing. I watch her croon with her eyes closed and it seems to me she is drawing strength from us like a flower absorbing sunshine.

“I should have killed her at the altar,” Adriano says. “Slit her throat in front of her family.”

Doc slaps the clip into his revolver. “Bullshit.”

“What did you say?”

“I said bullshit,” Doc spins the colt on his finger like a gunslinger. “You want to stick your cock in her. Maybe you want to do it *while* you kill her, but don’t act like you’re above it. Even once we had enough info from her studio, you were back there every week. Watching her.”

Adriano lunges across the table and Doc pulls away laughing. “What? You gonna kill me like your little Pryntsesa?”

Adriano stands, shoving his chair back. Doc will be lucky to come away whole from this one. And the two of them are the oldest friends of the four of us, neighbors from when they were six or seven.

A memory comes to me. Mama breaking up a fight between my brother Kit and I on Christmas morning. We were wrestling over a water pistol, and she snatched it away and slapped both of us. “*I hope you’re happy. Now, no one gets to have it.*”

I know what I have to do. Truthfully, a part of me has known since I left the basement with my necklace still in my pocket.

Adriano advances on Doc, his massive hands balled into fists. Doc throws the revolver onto the table and takes out his butterfly knife, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Bobby hovers like a nervous cop, unsure who to hurt or protect.

I move to stand between them. “That’s enough.”

Doc shows his teeth. “Can we have *one* fistfight around here?”

“You’re holding a knife,” I snarl. “But shut your fucking mouth and listen to me.”

To Doc’s credit, he doesn’t respond. I take a step backward so I can see all three of my brothers. “I hope you’re happy,” I tell them, looking from face to sulking face. “Now, no one gets to have it.”

Doc frowns. “The fuck are you talking about, Morelli?”

“This January Whitehall situation. It ends. Tonight.”

“What do you mean?” Bobby asks, going white.

“I’m sending her away. And you know why? Because you egotistical bastards don’t know how to compromise.”

Doc points his knife at me. “*I* don’t know how to compromise?”

“Put that away, you blond asshole. I haven’t forgotten about you almost burning us alive.”

Doc shakes his head, but I can tell he’s trying not to grin.

I expect further argument, but the stinging silence says the others understand what I’m doing. Maybe even hoped for it. The relief of a decision made, and a problem solved.

“Sit down,” I say. “I’ll get us all drinks and we can talk.”

As they take their seats I head to the bar and open a bottle of Bowmore. By the time I’m finished pouring drinks, the fight’s forgotten and they’re already discussing a married bouncer who got one of Doc’s strippers pregnant. Doc found him threatening the girl in the ladies’ bathroom.

“I gave her five grand, told her to go back to Dallas, but it’s not over. The prick’ll get at her again. He knows where her parents live.”

“Is this Revesby?” Adriano asks. “The Latvian?”

“That’s the one.”

“He fucked up a drop last year. Seems like the asshole’s more valuable dead than alive.”

“Yeah, but he’s with Enzo’s crew. We don’t need the drama.”

Bobby pulls out his phone and checks something. “He’s got a few days off next week. Marco could take him to Atlantic City. Accidental overdose.”

“Could work,” Doc muses. “He’s coked to the eyeballs most days. I could mix him a bad batch.”

As my brothers hammer out the details of dispatching this useless man, I grow more convinced of my own plan. For almost two decades the four of us have solved problems and respected each other’s opinions. We’ve built something that’s equal to any of the old families. It will not be compromised by one little virgin.

I take my seat at the head of the table. “As soon as we can arrange a passport, the girl goes to Naples. My cousin Gio will find her a place in his house.”

Doc downs half his scotch. “So, you’re gonna let your cousin earn on her after all our hard work?”

“She won’t be whoring. She’s a pretty girl from a rich family and she speaks Italian. She can be married to one of his caporegime.”

Doc’s mouth opens, but Bobby speaks first. “You’ll force January to marry someone else?”

“No. Gio will. But that’s none of your business. You offered her your hand and she didn’t take it.”

Bobby’s eyes go dark. “You—”

“Stop. Roberto, we’re family. Are you going to burn that down for a girl you barely know?”

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand better than you do. You’re in love with her and you want her to be your wife. She doesn’t want to be your wife. So you want to keep her around until she changes her mind. I say she goes to Italy before she completely fucks up your head.”

His hand tightens on his glass. “She’s our responsibility. You can’t just get rid of her because she’s not doing what you wanted.”

Doc raps the table. “I want to say something.”

I glare at him.

“I want to say something to Bobby,” he clarifies, turning to him. “I love you.”

Bobby’s eyes nearly fall out of his head. “What?”

“I love you,” Doc says lightly. “I always have, but you can’t be stupid about January. If she wanted to marry you, she’d have said yes. She’s that kind of girl.”

Bobby’s expression doesn’t change but his shoulders slump. “She’s scared. She just needs time.”

“You’re wrong. More time and Adri’ll kill her.”

Bobby looks at Adriano, who shrugs.

“I might.”

Bobby gives a humourless laugh. “So, we send January to a foreign country to be forced into marriage?”

Doc shakes his head. “You want to marry for love, Bash. You’re never gonna be happy with a wife you backed into it. So let this girl go. She’s not the one.”

Bobby looks to me, his oldest friend. I raise my scotch. “He’s right for once. She’s not the girl you marry.”

He makes a helpless sound somewhere between a laugh and a groan. “All our plans, years of surveillance, and nothing good has come of it. We’re just going to let her go.”

I swirl the liquor around my glass. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that.”

“What do you mean?” Doc says.

I choose my words carefully. Just because this situation has a silver lining, I can’t have anyone thinking they’re going to get their way. “I said we send the girl to Italy. I didn’t say what condition her pussy has to be in when she gets there.”

Adriano lifts his nose like a predator scenting blood.

“Hang on,” Bobby says. “Your cousin, if we tell him January’s a virgin and she doesn’t bleed...”

“Most girls don’t bleed,” Doc snaps. “Not if you can get them wet. Someone was gonna have to tell January to shove a needle in her finger on her wedding night. I’m happy for that to be me.”

“But the risk—”

“Are we Velvet House?” I ask Bobby. “Or some weak collection of assholes? I want to fuck Parker’s fiancée. And I don’t give a shit if we send some mafioso a wife who’s been screwed a couple of times. They should be grateful they’re getting Miss Whitehall for longer than I do.”

Doc’s eyes widen in mock surprise. “Elliot, that might be the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

I scowl. He knows I hate being called Elliot. I look to Bobby, expecting revulsion, but the corner of his mouth has kicked up. I can almost see the wheels in his mind turning. *If I can’t marry her, at least it’ll be something.*

Across from him, Adriano flicks his glass, making the crystal chime. “Who gets to go first?”

A new tension crackles through the room.

Bobby looks me dead in the eyes. “You pulling rank again?”

I could. It’s tempting. I turn to the monitors. Miss Whitehall is still singing in her white dress. She looks like an angel. I could tie her to my bed, lick her little cunt and take her as a man should. Keep her a few hours, then hand her over, soaking and fuck-drunk and thoroughly broken in. Then let the others do what they will, knowing I was her first.

But it won’t work. Resentment is already brewing in my brothers and resentment breeds incompetence. If I claim Miss Whitehall’s virginity, getting rid of her won’t help. I’d still be the captain of a ship falling apart under pressure.

I shrug in as bored a manner as possible. “No. I don’t need to go first.”

Bobby sits up straighter. “Then how?”

He’s got me there. I have no idea. And I need one fast before more petty bickering breaks out.

Doc snaps his fingers. “What if she still gets to decide?”

“She’s had ten fucking days to decide,” Adriano growls.

“Ah, but she won’t be deciding on her own. We’d be giving her a little help.”

I stare at Doc. “Do you mean...?”

“I do.” Doc grins. “Gimmie an hour and I’ll knock some up.”

Orchard.

The reason we’re all here. If I close my eyes, I can still see Doc swaggering up to my school gate, hair tucked behind his ears like Kurt Cobain. The girls at Trinity weren’t supposed to like a lowlife like him, but whenever he showed up selling, he walked away with a dozen numbers. Adriano was there too, glaring over Doc’s shoulder. Two years older and already hitched to a psycho with more brains than sense. They ran everything alone. No cartels, no bosses, just the pills Doc

mixed in his basement and Adriano kicking the shit out of anyone trying to steal from them.

“You need money to expand,” I told Doc. “And you need leadership. Someone with the foresight to protect you.”

I was an arrogant shit. They did need a leader, but to think that at seventeen *I* was that leader... Ridiculous. I take a deep swallow of scotch.

“Fine,” I tell Doc. “Mix it up. We’ll give it to her.”

“Eli...” Bobby’s face is tight. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

I could command him upstairs. Tell him to go pray a rosary without us if it’ll make him feel better. But I know Bobby. As a teenager, Doc got Adriano laid by giving girls free weed. I got Bobby laid by inviting our classmates back to my father’s Manhattan apartment. The leggy, dark-haired girls Bobby could barely speak in front of. They’d show up all shy, saying they only wanted to watch a movie and a few hours later they’d be getting fucked at both ends and screaming for more. Bobby always went to church afterward, but he never told me to stop. He’s scared of his dark side. Scared of what he likes. But I know how to push him into happiness.

“You want to be with January,” I remind him. “You want her as badly as any of us do. Maybe more.”

“Then can you see why I have a problem with this?”

I smile. “You’re supposed to. That’s the point. None of us get what we want. All our plans with January Whitehall end tonight. And believe me, twenty years from now you’ll regret not having her more than you’ll regret joining in.”

Bobby lets out a long, slow breath, and I can tell his resistance is waning.

Doc claps him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Bash. You’ll feel better about all this shit once you give the girl a good old-fashioned fucking. So where should we dose her? In the cage? See who she tries to fuck through the bars?”

I shake my head. January's shown too much cheek in her cage already. I want her rattled. Off balance. "We'll bring her to the sitting room. Put her in lingerie in front of the fire and watch the show."

"Fuck yeah," Doc grins around at us. "Ten grand says she begs me to break her open."

Bobby downs the rest of his scotch. "We'll see."

I laugh, mostly in relief that he's accepting our plan.

"What do you mean, 'we'll see?'" Doc demands.

"January had a crush on me before all of this started. You give her Orchard, and you think she won't come for me?"

Doc scoffs. "I've kissed her."

"I've kissed her," Bobby shoots back. "And unlike you, she wanted me to."

This time my laughter is real. "Sorry to tell you both, but Miss Whitehall can barely look at me without blushing. She's as good as mine."

"We'll fucking see," Doc mutters.

"What about you?" I ask Adriano. "Are you in?"

He shrugs, but there's a smile playing on his lips.

Doc points his drink at Adriano. "You'll get fucked by climate change before you get fucked by January Whitehall. She's terrified of you."

Adriano's smile gets a little wider.

"He thinks that'll help," Bobby says shrewdly. "Don't you?"

"Maybe..." Adriano says. "Wouldn't be the first girl to try to fuck her way out of dying."

"Do we want to put money on it?" I ask the table.

Doc narrows his eyes. "What kind of money?"

“What you said. Ten grand. Unless you think you won’t win?”

Doc scowls. “Fine.”

“Fine,” Bobby says.

Adriano grunts which I take as a yes.

“Then it’s a deal. We give her Orchard and the first one to fuck her virgin pussy, wins.”

Everyone nods and relief pulses through me like novocaine. We’ll have a night of debauchery that Miss Whitehall will enjoy as much as we will, and then we’ll send her off on an Italian adventure. She’ll be married to some wealthy, well-connected man and it will be everything she was promised by her stepmother with the added benefit of not having to fuck Zachery Parker.

An image comes to me, January, barefoot in the water at Mappatella beach, her belly heavy with another man’s child. My chest pangs but I ignore it and return my attention to my brothers. “About tonight, we need some ground rules.”

Doc rolls his eyes. “You take the fun out of everything.”

“What rules?” Bobby asks.

“Rule one,” I say holding up a finger. “No one is allowed to touch her before she touches them.”

“That’s fair,” Doc admits.

“The second is no fighting. Any of you throw hands and *you’ll* get locked in the basement while I take Miss Whitehall upstairs and fuck her until she moans.”

“Also fair,” Doc says. “Anything else or can I go make Orchard now?”

“One second.” I raise my glass and wait for the others to do the same. When they’ve all followed suit, I smile. “To a problem solved.”

We drink as beneath us January Whitehall sings.
Oblivious, in her little white dress.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

January Whitehall

I FALL SILENT as I hear someone on the stairs. I ate and washed hours ago and I usually sleep before I see Mr. Gretzky again. But here he is. “What’s going on, Sir?”

“Get up, Miss Whitehall,” he says, unlocking the cage.

I stand. “Am I going to see Mr. Morelli and the others?”

Mr. Gretzky beckons me forward.

I must be seeing them. Maybe they’re bringing me upstairs to find out who I’ve chosen? Unless I’m out of time and they’re going to kill me and that’s why Mr. Gretzky hasn’t put the bag over my head. The idea should scare me, but aside from a souring in my mouth, I’m a little excited. After days that bleed together at least this is something new.

The bright downlights hurt my eyes as I walk into a wide hallway with walls that are half polished wood, half cream.

“This way.” Mr. Gretzky leads me past dusty China vases and statues on little wooden stands. On the cream parts of the walls hang oil paintings of cows and knights and pretty olive-skinned women. The thick carpet I’ve felt beneath my feet a dozen times is blood red. I don’t see or hear another soul as we make our way through an unending labyrinth of staircases and hallways. Velvet House is empty.

Eventually, Mr. Gretzky pauses at a wooden door with a gold handle. “Go inside. Wash and dress.”

I wait, but he doesn't give a time limit the way he usually does. "How long should I take?"

A pained expression crosses his face. "As long as you need."

Maybe I'm having dinner with the four of them? A last meal before Adriano strangles me with a long string or whatever it was in that movie Lachlan used to love. I open the door and walk into the familiar bathroom. Lingerie is waiting where my clothes usually are. A sparkly pink bra, matching thong and garter belt, black stockings, and a pair of shiny black pumps.

"Oh," I whisper. "Oh... *shit*."

I approach the lingerie with the tiniest of steps. I lift the panties. They're so small, they can't even be called underwear. "F-Fuck."

Thoughts twist through me like fire. Adriano might not murder me in lingerie, but I don't think my virginity isn't going to last the night.

Are they still going to make me choose between them? Who should I pick? I've had days to think about their offers and I still don't know. Eli will get bored of me in a month, and I obviously won't pick Adriano killing me. The smartest choice would be to marry Bobby, but he killed Kurt. If he did worse things once I was his wife, I'd only have myself to blame. Choosing Doc and working in his strip clubs seems like the easiest way to find or buy a phone and call my family. But it also seems like the fastest way to spend time with Doc who is the meanest *and* carries a knife *and* spat in my face—

There's a loud knock on the door. "Miss Whitehall. Shower."

I jump. "Yes, sorry."

My hands shake under the hot water. I don't want to lose my virginity. Without it, the force field against the men who brought me here will be gone. I won't be worth protecting.

And Adriano told me that once his brothers slept with me, he'd kill me.

Actually, he said once they're bored with me, he'd kill me. Maybe I can entertain them? But how am I supposed to entertain three dangerous men, one of whom owns strip clubs? I don't know anything about sex. And once the novelty of being my first is gone...

Then I can't lose my virginity. I'll just have to do whatever it takes to stay untouched.

Another knock on the door. "Get moving, Miss Whitehall."

I frown. For saying I could take all the time I needed, Mr. Gretzky seems impatient. I turn off the shower and wrap a big towel around myself. There are more things in the bathroom cabinet than usual, a tiny bottle of vanilla perfume, a row of Dior lipsticks, and a Yves Saint Laurent eye shadow palette.

I knock on the door. "Mr. Gretzky... am I supposed to put on makeup?"

There is a pause and I'm sure I hear him swear. "Yes, Miss Whitehall."

I feel bad for him. Whatever his normal job is, he really hates dealing with me. I learned a lot about that from Theodore and Kurt.

Kurt... I picture his body, blank-faced and bloody on the plastic tarp. Whatever happens, I will not lose my virginity to Bobby. It doesn't matter that Kurt was creepy and bad at his job and sold me out to Eli. He didn't deserve to die. But then I think of Bobby kissing me in my cage, his arms around me. I think of the way he looked at me when he talked about us living together. "Stop it," I tell myself. "Just stop."

I'm not very good at makeup. I wasn't allowed to wear any to school, and it was done for me when our family went to events. I also have no idea who I'm dressing up for and I'm sure they'd all like something different. Bobby definitely likes the 'girl next door' look. Doc would want glossy lips and

contouring. Eli seems like a guy who'd appreciate glamor—red lips, and fake lashes. Adriano...

I remember him staring at me through my cage, the lamplight carving shadows into his scarred face. *You're not worth raping.* The mascara I'm holding skitters out of my hand and onto the tiles.

"Miss Whitehall?"

"Coming," I yell, my voice much higher than usual.

I try for subtle, tiny dabs of foundation and peachy eye shadow like I had at my wedding. At the last minute, I add glossy lips and lots of mascara. I don't know if it looks good or like a little girl raided her mom's makeup bag, but you can tell I tried.

I walk over to the lingerie. I've been avoiding looking at it until now. I pull everything on with my back to the mirror. It takes ages to attach the straps hanging from the pink belt to my stockings. As soon as I get one on, another pops off.

Mr. Gretzky knocks on the door. "We need to get moving."

I manage to attach the last clip then glance at the mirror. My mouth falls open. I look... I don't know *how* I look. The bright pink bra and panties bring out the ivory notes of my skin. You can see my nipples through the sheer material and the line of my... down there. But it doesn't look tacky, it looks subtle and kind of pretty.

Whoever picked out the underwear has great taste.

I pile my hair onto my head and turn, studying the lines of my body. Grown-up. That's how I look. Grown-up and sexy. I shake my ass in the mirror and smile. What are the guys going to say when they...

I wince. What is wrong with me? This isn't a game. This is my life. What happens when I leave this room decides my future and I'm prancing around in my underwear like a moron. Doc's right. I'm like a Disney girl, rebelling against her stage mom. I release my hair and vow to stay focused.

My St. Christopher medallion is beside the sink. I pick it up, ready to slide it into my bra cup but realize everyone will be able to see it. I can't leave it here and I wouldn't put it on Bobby's chain even if I had it on me.

A hard rap on the door. "Miss Whitehall, we're done."

I look at the medallion and for a crazy second, I think about swallowing it. Then I shove it into the side of my bra. There's a risk whoever I'm meeting will see it and take it from me, but I'm not going anywhere without it. "Coming!"

I wrap my arms around my body to try and cover myself from Mr. Gretzky.

He barely glances at me. "About time." He grabs my elbow and leads me to another set of hardwood stairs.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trying not to trip in my heels.

"Sitting room."

My pulse jumps. Am I going to be touched or killed? Allowed to choose my future or given to someone for reasons I don't understand? Or am I wrong about everything? Am I about to be used and sent back to the basement?

We move through a dark set of double doors into a room where the only light is coming from a roaring fire. It splashes orange over leather couches. I see the backs of four men. One blond, one glossy black, one boyishly brown, one with shaved sides. My mouth dries over. They're all here.

The hand on my elbow tightens and Mr. Gretzky drags me toward the fire. I keep my eyes on the carpet as heat washes over my body.

"Good evening, Miss Whitehall," Eli drawls.

I know better than not to respond. "Good evening, Mr. Morelli."

"Look at us."

My head feels like it's made of concrete, but I meet his gaze. He and Adriano sit in winged armchairs, Doc and Bobby are at opposite ends of a couch. The air seems to thicken around me and my chest heaves as though I've been running.

Eli is wearing a dark blue suit and his pristine white shirt is open at his throat. He looks like a magazine spread. Why does he have to be a murderer?

He raises his tumbler to me. "We have news for you, *bella*. Your time at Velvet House is almost over."

My heart stops. "Are you going to kill me?"

He smiles indulgently. "No. But you've been in that basement long enough. We're sending you to Naples."

My legs wobble as if the floor beneath me is moving. "Naples?"

"Yes. My cousin Gio lives there. He can find you a job and a safe new home. Would you like that, *bella*?"

"Of course," I say automatically. What happened to my choices? Is this part of the plan to mess with Mr. Parker? Will any of them go with me? Or are they lying, and I really am about to be strangled with string after all?

I look across to Bobby. My insides squirm. He's wearing a black T-shirt and I can see a big tattoo inked into his right bicep. He looks different tonight. Older, I guess. I didn't know he had tattoos. God, why does *he* have to be a murderer?

Eli smiles. "Have you been missing Bobby? Were you hoping he'd come visit you again?"

I drop my gaze to my hands. I did think he would visit me again. I thought they all would, but aside from Mr. Gretzky, I've been alone for days.

Doc shifts on the couch. "She's disappointed, Morelli. She doesn't wanna leave."

I glance up at him. His blond hair is falling into his pretty blue eyes as usual. I remember his tattooed body arched over

me, his mouth drawing on my nipple and a surge rolls through my body. His lip curls and I'm sure I know what he's thinking. *Should have chosen me, Tesorina.*

Maybe I should have. Stripping can't be scarier than going to Italy alone to live with Eli's mafia cousins. Why does Doc have to be a murderer? And a psychopath? And a jerk?

"Don't be disappointed, *bella*," Eli says. "Just because you haven't chosen any of us, doesn't mean we're angry. We're ... Doc? How would you put it?"

Doc's eyes are bright and cold as a dying star. "Proud of you."

"Yes," Eli agrees. "Proud of you. In fact, *bella*, we're so proud of you, we'd like to give you a goodbye present."

My heart pounds so hard I'm sure it's about to come crashing through my ribs. "What... what kind of present?"

Adriano shifts in his chair. I refuse to look at him. Wherever I'm going, be it Naples or into the ground, at least he won't be there.

"On her knees," Eli says lazily, and Gretzky pushes my shoulder making me tumble to the floor.

Eli waves a hand at him. "Thank you, Gretzky, that will be all."

He leaves and then we're alone. The four of them and me. The only sound is the hiss and crackle of the fire. I look to Bobby for reassurance, but his face is set. My stomach tightens. Sex or death. I can't be here in my underwear for anything else. But surely, they won't make me... in front of the others. That would be gross. It would be wrong.

Eli clears his throat. "Domenico, show Miss Whitehall the Orchard."

Doc puts his glass on the table beside the couch and stands. His tattooed feet are bare, and his black jeans are ripped at the knees. He pulls something from his pocket, smirking as though this is all a big joke. "Know what this is?"

I look at his hand. It's a tiny plastic fish. The kind that has soy sauce in them at sushi places. Only the liquid in this one is clear. "Is it poison?"

Doc laughs. "I fucking wish."

Eli stretches his arms along the back of his chair. "Why would we poison you, *bella*? What a waste that would be."

"So, what is it...?"

Eli's eyes are liquid black in the firelight. He's trying to look relaxed, but his muscles are coiled, like a big cat about to pounce. "It's something that'll make you feel very excited about the idea of getting to know us better."

Heat licks up my neck and hands. I'm half certain the fire is spilling out of the grate all over me. I look at Doc and his smile is hard as diamonds. "What do you say, Tesorina? Want to get high?"

I stare at the fish. "Is it... MDMA?"

Eli and Doc laugh and even Bobby smiles.

"No, *bella*," Eli says. "It's something special. Something just for you."

I swallow, my throat contracting around a lump. "Is this so you can film me for Mr. Parker?"

From the darkest corner of the room, Adriano growls.

"Do not say that name in front of us," Eli says lightly. "Not if you want to go to Italy."

"I'm sorry."

Eli's face cracks into a handsome smile. "You're sweet, Miss Whitehall. Isn't she sweet, Bobby?"

"Yeah, she's sweet." Bobby drawls, and I wonder if he's drunk. He sounds drunk.

Doc takes a step toward me. "Morelli. Give the word."

"What's your rush, Domenico? *Bella*, would you like a drink?"

“Um, I’m okay.” One of my heels has slipped between my legs and I realize I’m leaning against it, rubbing myself on it. I make myself go still. “Could I maybe just go back to my cage, please?”

Doc’s hand shoots out, fastening around my neck. “That’s enough talking, Tits. Morelli, make the call.”

I sputter with indignation, but everyone ignores me.

“What do you think, Bobby?” Eli says in his slow, melodic voice. “Should we give her the Orchard?”

I look to Bobby, my eyes wide, pleading. He can still save me. Protect me.

He drains his drink. “Do it.”

My heart falls as Eli smiles. “Okay. Domenico, go ahead.”

Doc shoves the tip of the fish in his mouth and bites off the red cap. “Open up.”

I press my lips together and shake my head.

Doc’s thumb brushes my cheek. “Come on, baby. Don’t make me force your pretty jaw open.”

I can smell something coming from the capless little fish. Something sweet and weirdly familiar.

Doc looks at Eli. “Permission to hurt her?”

The scent grows stronger, and it clicks. Jolly Ranchers. That’s what it smells like. Green apple candy. ‘Orchard’, Eli called the drug. That must be why. Because it smells like apples. But what does it do?

“Tits,” Doc’s voice is irritable. “Here’s the deal. You wanna speak to your Zia Teresa?”

I gasp. “Seriously—”

He hooks a finger into my cheek and before I can blink, liquid splashes down my throat. I try to spit, to bite, to pull away, but it’s already gone. I’ve swallowed it. Doc removes his finger and tucks the empty fish into his pocket. “Done.”

Eli laughs. “Underhanded.”

“Effective.” Doc’s eyes glitter. “No going back, Tesorina.”

My mouth is slick with the sweetish aftermath of whatever was in the fish. “What... what’s going to happen to me?”

“That’s the fucking question, isn’t it?” Doc throws himself back onto the couch beside Bobby. “Shouldn’t be long.”

Eli drums his fingers against the arm of his chair. “Estimate?”

“Fifteen minutes. Maybe less. She hasn’t eaten for a while.”

All four sets of eyes turn to me. In the firelight, they seem like gods deciding my fate. I should probably do something, convince them not to do whatever it is they’re planning, but there’s a golden glow in my stomach and it’s spreading through my veins like honey. I feel good. I feel very, very good. And though it’s impossible, I’m almost sure I’ve felt this way before.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Elliot Morelli

JANUARY KEEPS REARRANGING herself. She crosses and uncrosses her legs as though trying to fold herself into the smallest possible piece. Her nipples are like hard candy beneath her sheer bra, and she keeps tossing her hair and arching her back. Doc's put on some Russian hardbass, and you can tell she's trying not to writhe to the beat.

She's adorable. When the Orchard hits her fully, she won't be able to keep her hands off her virgin pussy. Or she'll climb on my face and beg me to slide my tongue inside her. I'm feeling generous enough that I probably will.

"Mmm." January turns sideways, stretching out her long legs and we all glimpse the sheer pink material covering her cunt.

Bobby suppresses a groan. "How long?"

"Shut the fuck up," Doc mutters, his voice rough as if he were already inside her.

He's gone over this girl. This man who never puts his dick in the same stripper twice, has spent the last week ignoring his responsibilities to get drunk in front of the security monitors and watch January sing. It just proves I made the right choice to send her to Naples. Whatever happens, I will not entertain regrets.

The room is still heavy with the scent of sugary green apples. Doc doesn't know what makes Orchard smell that way. That's the problem with savants, they can't do the working

out. Not that anyone else can either. Seventeen years and God knows how much money I've put into research and we're no closer to answers.

January gives a soft moan. Her pupils have dilated.

"Fuck yes," Doc mutters. "Here we go."

All of us sit up straighter.

"What's happening to me?" she whimpers.

"What does it feel like?" I ask.

"Like... pink fire is running through me." She trails her hands up her arms and shivers. "Like electricity."

I smile. This demure little virgin is going to spread herself wide and we're going to plunder her body like the perfect fuckdoll she is. I turn to check the camera light is blinking. Even if we don't send this to Parker, I want a copy of it.

"Domenico..." The way she purrs his name makes my cock ache. "What is Orchard?"

Doc looks at me. "Should I tell her?"

I watch January rock back and forth like she's riding an invisible pony. "I don't see why not."

"Orchard is something I invented while I was mixing up pills."

January's pretty face is quizzical.

Doc gives a cackling laugh. "Here you are thinking I was some kind of pharmacist. I dealt drugs, Tesorina."

Her mouth falls open and Adriano snorts. She spares him a single glance before returning her gaze to Doc. "Oh..."

"Judging me?" He demands.

"No."

"Liar. Sorry I didn't come out of some millionaire's ballsack and I had to make my own way in the world."

January doesn't seem to be listening, just nibbling on her lower lip.

Doc's face softens. "Do you wanna know what's happening in your body, Tesorina?"

She releases her lip, trying to focus on his face. "Yes?"

"Your blood is thinning. Your heart is racing and your pussy is pulsing like a strobe light. You're thinking about how empty you are. About how nice it would feel to have something thick push inside you. Soon you won't be able to stop thinking about it. You'll feel so empty, you'll scream."

I adjust myself through my suit pants.

"No," January whispers. "I won't."

"It's not up to you, Tesorina. That's what Orchard does. Pretty soon you'll crawl over broken glass to taste my cock."

I laugh as she presses her face into her hands. "Don't worry, *bella*. It doesn't have to be Domenico. You can come here to me. No broken glass involved."

Doc shoots me a nasty look. "Fuck off, Morelli."

January's hands fall from her face and she lightly brushes her palms over her nipples. "Mr. Morelli?"

"Yes, *bella*?"

Color floods her cheeks and she squeezes her tits through her bra. "I... I feel strange."

"Come sit on my lap and talk to me about it."

"Fucks' sake..." Doc snarls. "Stop talking to her."

I raise my glass to the others. "Nice dealing with you, gentlemen. I'll expect the money on the dining table at breakfast."

"Bet's not over," Bobby says.

"Bet?" January looks from me to him. "What bet?"

I smile. “Thirty grand to whoever fucks you first. Now, come here and make it me.”

January’s gaze is on Bobby. “You’re not...?”

“You don’t think I would?” Bobby asks in a hard voice. “Or you’re hoping?”

Her face falls, the truth sinking in. Even her math tutor isn’t her savior anymore.

Doc cackles. “It’s fun when Basher stops pretending that he’s nice.”

Bobby ignores him and refills his scotch. He’s been drinking steadily since dinner and from the way he’s looking at her, still absently massaging her tits, he’s going to fuck her nine times before he’s had his fill.

“You’re all here...” January’s voice is a husky moan. “You can’t *all* be here.”

Doc smirks. “How else will we know who you want to fuck first?”

“But if you’re all here...?”

“It’s a good thing,” I tell her. “Once I’ve deflowered you, you’ll still be hungry. Then my brothers will step in and help.”

January realizes she’s touching herself and pins her hands to her sides. “Please don’t make me do that.”

“I won’t make you do anything, *bella*. You’ll be insatiable. Four men might not be enough.”

“No....” Her voice is a breathy moan. She sounds like she already has a tongue between her legs.

My cock is hard as a spike. How much longer will it be before I can take her?

Doc puts his drink on the carpet. “Do your nipples hurt, Tesorina? Do you want me to suck them again?”

Longing pierces January’s face like the sun through a cloud.

Doc smiles, the hard, intense smile that broke a hundred schoolgirl hearts. “Come here, baby. I’ll make it all better.”

She shifts on her heels and for a moment I freeze, sure she’s about to go to him. But then she whips her head from side to side. “No. I can’t... Not my first time. Not with... all of you.”

She’s not denying it’ll happen. She must already feel it. Already know it’s too late. When I rubbed my shoe against her pussy she wanted to be fucked then and there. But she’s been raised a good girl and it’s hard for her to admit she wants sex, even to herself. Now her first time will be with four men, and she’ll love every second of it even if she hates herself afterward. But then if she wanted to be with one man, she should have chosen me.

“Yes, with all of us,” I say. “But don’t worry, *bella*. When we parcel you off to Naples, I’ll tell my cousin you’re as pure as snow. Your future husband will—”

Doc shoots me a furious look. “Shut the fuck up, Morelli.”

He has a point. Why overload her pretty, overstimulated mind? I smile at January. “Focus on how you feel. Embrace it.”

She closes her eyes, her pouty lips parting in a silent plea.

I stare between her legs. A dark patch is spreading across the material. I can only imagine how soft and swollen her cunt is. I’ve taken Orchard, but the effect on men is a faint hum of what it does to women. A chromosomal thing, Doc thinks, but that’s another guess.

“Oh my gosssssh,” January whimpers, her palms working up and down her thighs.

She’s so beautiful, writhing golden in the firelight. A million perfect photographs in motion. But still she doesn’t come for any of us.

Doc rolls his head back along the couch. “Fucking hell this is taking forever.”

I clear my throat to make sure I don't sound like a gasping idiot. "She's stronger than I gave her credit for."

"We should have taken bets on how long she'll take to crack."

"There's still time." I check my watch. "A thousand says she doesn't last another five minutes."

Doc picks up his vodka and finishes it. "Eight. She's got nothing left in the tank. What about you, Basher?"

"Six."

I smile. "Always splitting the difference. Rossi?"

Adriano face is half-hidden in shadow. "Twenty minutes."

Doc snorts. "Twenty? Have you hit your head and forgotten how Orchard works?"

"She'll fight it with everything she has. And she has a lot."

I laugh. Doc going soft on a girl is one thing. But Adriano? "That almost sounds like a compliment. Are you changing your mind about the girl?"

A growl. "Twenty minutes."

"It's your money. So, it's settled, five minutes, six, eight and twenty. May the best man win."

"You won't win." January's eyes are still closed. She's shifted into a cross-legged yoga position, her hands resting on her stockinged knees.

"What was that, *bella*?"

"You won't win. None of you." Her voice is stronger the second time.

Doc laughs. "Tesorina, haven't you been listening? You won't be able to resist. No one can. You're going to get railed like a filthy whore."

Her eyes fly open, cool and clear as a forest lake. "I won't."

I study her. She's found some well of resistance inside herself. Fuck that. She can't go to Gio a defiant little brat. If it were just the two of us, I'd spank her backside raw. But we're not allowed to touch her. I'll need another way to discipline her.

"Okay, *bella*," I say. "A new deal. If you can resist the Orchard and keep your virginity, you can leave your cage."

Her mouth parts. "Really?"

"Really. You can move upstairs and sleep in a beautiful wing all by yourself."

"Eli..." Adriano warns.

I wave a hand at him. Her defeat will be all the more humbling this way. Getting fucked knowing she'll have to go back to her cage a horny, broken girl. "Do you agree, Miss Whitehall?"

"Yes," January says. "I can do it."

"Of course, you can." I pour myself more scotch. "Now close your eyes and try not to think about me bending you over this armchair and fucking you like the good little girl you are."

Her cheeks burn and she closes her eyes again.

"Just wait," Doc mutters. "Eight minutes."

"Five," I say.

But five minutes pass and January doesn't move. Another minute and Bobby loses the bet. Two minutes later so does Doc. Furious, he collects a bottle of JB from the bar and swigs from the neck. "This shouldn't be happening."

"Maybe the dose—"

"The dose would turn Mother Teresa into a porn star. There's nothing wrong with the dose. There's something wrong with *her*."

January sits serenely. A smile is curling the corners of her mouth.

Bobby presses a palm to the front of his jeans. “I can’t take this.”

I don’t say anything, but I have no idea what to do. Doc’s right, this isn’t supposed to be happening. We’ve tested Orchard dozens of times, mostly on girls from Doc’s clubs. With their consent we lock them in an observation room. When the drug hits, they pound on the two-way mirror, begging whoever’s watching to fuck them. All of them masturbate, some of them hump the corners of the table, they’re so desperate for stimulation. How is she not already on top of us? Or at least touching herself? But as we watch, her movements grow subtler. Quieter. She’s breathing rhythmically, her thick hair covering her breasts. She looks supernatural, kneeling peacefully in her lingerie like a little goddess.

“For fuck’s sake, this doesn’t make any sense.” Doc slurs.

She’s humiliating us. We were supposed to be controlling her, corrupting her. Reminding her there’s nothing she can refuse that we can’t take. Now we’re circled around her, staring at her. Worshiping her almost. This girl who declined to be my mistress, to work for Doc, to marry Bobby or to beg Adriano for her life. This girl...

Doc blows out a hard breath. “If she takes much longer, I’m jacking off.”

“Coming on her counts as touching,” I warn.

“Fucking fascist.”

“Why don’t we just touch her?” Bobby suggests. “Not a proper touch. Just, like, a massage or—”

“Fuck this,” Doc pulls his T-shirt over his head. “Hey, Tesorina? Over here.”

I expect her to ignore him, but her eyes widen as she takes in his bare chest.

“Yeah, you see this?” Doc runs a hand down his tattooed abdomen. “All yours. Come get it.”

“Idiota,” I mutter, but January’s tongue flashes out, wetting her swollen lips.

“Yeah, you like that, Tits? You wanna get fucked into a screaming mess?”

January’s expression is tortured. “Stop calling me that!”

“No.” Doc grips his cock through his jeans. “Come on, you know you want to.”

Her face goes scarlet. Is this going to work? Should I take my clothes off?

Doc undoes the top button of his jeans and Bobby recoils. “No getting it out near me!”

“Or me,” Adriano rumbles.

“Yeah, like you scumbags haven’t already seen it.” Doc pulls open his zipper and works himself into his palm. “Like it, Tesorina?”

January’s gaze is fixed, hypnotized. Has she seen a hard cock before? Is she imagining how it feels?

Doc pumps himself. “Yeah, nice and big, isn’t it? Wanna come sit on it?”

At the other end of the couch, Bobby drains his glass. “January?”

“Fuck off,” Doc snaps but he’s already lost January’s attention.

When she looks at Bobby, her green eyes mellow and I feel a rush of jealousy. She’s never looked at me like that. Never come close. All Bobby’s coolness has vanished. His cheeks are red as he swipes a hand across his mouth. “JJ, if you come here, I’ll... I’ll...”

“What?” Doc sneers. “You’ll stutter at her?”

“... I’ll lick your pussy.”

Silence greets the end of Bobby's sentence until Doc's laughter breaks it. "Smooth, man. Very cool."

January's face goes even redder, but she doesn't break eye contact with Bobby.

Looking mortified but determined, he leans forward. "January, I swear to God, you don't have to do anything to me. I won't take your virginity. I'll just take care of you. Touch you. I'll use my hands. My mouth."

Her lower lip trembles.

"I've dreamed about you for so long, JJ. I've fantasized about what you taste like. That's all I want, to lick you until you come."

I watch the idea of giving in flash across January's face.

"Don't listen to him, Tesorina," Doc calls. "The minute you let this nice guy asshole near you, your virginity's gone."

She frowns.

"Ignore him, JJ. He'll say anything he needs to win."

Doc laughs. "I will, Tesorina, because I'm a selfish prick and I don't lie about it. But what about Bobby? He lies about who *he* is. He pretended to be your friend then he wasted your bodyguard right in front of you, remember?"

January gasps.

"Jesus," I hiss. "Is that necessary?"

Bobby turns to Doc, fist raised. "Fucking—"

"Asshole? Sorry, Bash. All's fair in love and war."

Bobby opens his mouth, but I get in first. "Anyone who violates rule two is out."

Doc turns back to January and pats his thighs. "Come on, honey. I'll pound you like your pussy's the only thing keeping me alive."

Bobby swears under his breath. "January, Doc's killed about a million people, and I never meant to lie to you. I—"

“Just stop talking, please?” January looks like she’s about to faint.

“You idiots are both fucking this up,” I say.

Doc glares at me. “Let’s see you do better.”

“Fine.” I shift in my seat. “Miss Whitehall, *guardami*.”
Look at me.

January’s eyes find mine.

“*Brava bambina*,” I say. “*Stai andando così bene*.” *Good little girl. You’re doing so well.*

Doc laughs as he tucks his cock back into his jeans. “Breaking out the Italian, are you? We can all do that.”

I ignore him. January’s green eyes are already following me like I’m performing a magic trick.

“When you first saw me, you could barely look at me, *bella*.” I flick my right sleeve over. “That was appropriate. You’re a shy, respectful girl and you were engaged to another man.”

Her throat contracts. I’m going to clamp a hand around it while I make her ride me. I reach for my left sleeve. “But it’s not inappropriate for you to want me now. I can kiss you. Touch you. Look you right in the eyes while I slide my cock into your beautiful cunt.”

She lets out a helpless little whimper. “Mr. Morelli...”

“Yes, *bella*,” I say quietly. “I know it hurts. Come to me and I will take care of you like the precious little girl you are.”

She jerks forward and Bobby groans. “How is this happening?”

“Fucking forearms,” Doc mutters. “Women and shirts and fucking forearms.”

I keep rolling up my sleeve, nice and slow. “Come on, *bella*. Come to daddy and he’ll make everything better.”

She puts a nervous hand on the carpet then sits back, her face red with embarrassment. I hold her gaze and let her drink me in, knowing she can't resi—

A whistle cuts through the air, making all of us jump.

Adriano lowers his tattooed fingers from his mouth, ugly as one of Goya's demons.

Doc rubs his chest. "You scared me, you giant fuck."

Adriano doesn't acknowledge him. He and January are staring at each other, green eyes into green eyes. He points to the floor at his feet. "Here."

January cringes away.

I force myself to laugh, my heart still racing too hard. "Nice try, Rossi."

Adriano taps a boot against the carpet. "Now."

A split-second later January crawls toward him. She moves slowly, one hand after another like a great weight is tied to her legs. My stomach sinks.

Doc lets out a wild drunken laugh. "Fuck me, talk about a dark horse."

I grit my teeth. Adriano's greedy. If she chooses him, the rest of us are going to be waiting hours.

"*Bella?*" I prompt but she doesn't look my way.

"Still time to change your mind," Doc calls, but he's just glad she's giving in. He and Adriano go back a long time. He has the best chance at getting in on the action with him.

January is inches from Adriano. Even from this distance, I can see she's crying. Rossi won't like that. He likes causing pain, but he can't stand tears. His usual solution is to wrap a T-shirt around the girl's face then fuck her from behind. I imagine him gripping her pale hips in his tattooed hands. Manipulating her beautiful body with his scarred one. Sometimes I like seeing beautiful things get broken, but I

don't know if I'll be able to put my bitterness to one side and enjoy the show.

"January..." Bobby's voice is low, imploring. "January, he wants to kill you."

She freezes. Adriano makes a noise like an angry bull.

I bite back a laugh. *Yes. Ruin this, you clever little bastard.*

"If it weren't for us, he'd have killed you already," Bobby says so quietly his voice is barely audible over the music. "He's wanted you dead the moment he saw you. Don't let him win."

January sits back, her chest heaving.

"You fucking moron," Doc snaps. "We were *this* fucking close."

"All's fair in love and war."

"You'll pay for that, Bassilotta," Adriano says quietly.

I glare at him. "Do not threaten Bobby in front of me."

"Fuck this." Adriano gets to his feet, looking as unsteady as I feel.

"You leave, you can't come back," I remind him.

"It doesn't matter. She's done. No one wins."

January looks up at Adriano. "Sorry, Mr. Rossi."

He gives her a look of utter loathing. "Remember what I told you, Bambi."

I frown. "Bambi?"

Adriano turns his crazy green eyes on me. "The dead deer."

"Bambi's mom dies, you idiot," Doc mutters but his gaze is still locked on January. "How are you doing this, Tits?"

She smiles at him. "Maybe your drug isn't very good?"

I almost laugh but catch myself at the last second. Bobby can't hold back, he doubles over, cackling. Adriano leaves, his tread heavy even on the carpet. Doc stares mutinously into space. I know that mood, but before I can say anything, Doc paces to the nearby wall and puts his fist through it, plaster dust scattering the carpet. He storms out of the room slamming the door behind him.

"Idiot," I mutter, though I'm relieved he didn't take a swing at Bobby or throw one of the paintings in the fire.

"Does this mean I've won?" January's voice is small but steady.

Bobby looks at her and I see him realize he'll never get to touch her.

"Go," I tell him. "I'll deal with the girl. Get out of here."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I'll escort her to the east wing. Go."

He leaves the room as quickly as he can without running. Probably to fuck his fist somewhere.

January's fight with the Orchard has drained her. Curled up on the carpet, she seems smaller and even more delicate.

"The competition is over," I tell her. "You keep your virginity."

Her mouth puckers like a little rosebud. "Oh... I'm sorry, I guess."

"So am I, *bella*. I've never been a good loser. Come here a second. Sit with me."

She doesn't move. I roll my eyes. "I'm a man of my word. I won't touch you. Sit on Doc and Bobby's couch, if you like."

She still looks nervous, but she does as she's told, wrapping herself into a ball on the leather. I can smell the warm heaven of her cunt. I want to peel off her soaked panties, stuff them in her mouth then shove my cock deep inside her.

Instead, I head for the bar. If anything calls for a martini, it's this evening. I pour gin into the cocktail shaker. "Doc is too proud to ask, *bella*, so I will. How did you resist the Orchard?"

"Um, I think ballet, maybe. Learning how to hold uncomfortable positions for a really long time."

So, Parker is to blame for all of this. Fucking asshole. I remember the video recording. I'll have to make sure Bobby deletes the footage. I never want to relive this experience.

"Mr. Morelli...?"

I drop three ice cubes into the cocktail shaker. "Yes?"

Her cheeks burn red. "That wasn't the first time I've felt that way."

I smile. "Wet and horny?"

"No." She gnaws at her puffy lower lip. "I... I think I've been given Orchard before."

"That's impossible."

"It's true. When I was fifteen, I was at a ball, and I got... *sick* the exact same way."

I put down the cocktail shaker. Her expression is steady, her eyes clear. She's not lying. My stomach knots. "Parker. Was Parker there?"

"I... Yes."

In two strides I'm beside her, pulling her to her feet. "Bobby?"

"What?" A strained voice calls from down the hall. He's probably in the bathroom masturbating into the sink.

"Get Doc and Adriano and meet me in the east wing. We have a problem."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bobby Bassilotta

VELVET HOUSE ISN'T an easy place to navigate drunk. Brass busts and stupid vases lurch out of the darkness at me and I'm so full of booze and horniness and second-hand panic, it's like the place is on a tilt. I find Doc in the kitchen, an unlit cigarette between his teeth, pulling a six-pack from the fridge.

"We need to go to the east wing," I tell him.

He doesn't turn around. "No."

"Eli needs us."

Doc's back stiffens. The two of them are always sniping at each other, but Doc knows Eli doesn't overreact. He slams the fridge door shut. "I'm bringing the beers."

"Whatever. We need to get Adriano."

Doc takes the cigarette from his mouth and tucks it behind his ear. "He's gonna be pissed."

Adriano lives in the south wing. No one is allowed to go near his floor. Not even the cleaning ladies. Doc and I head there in silence and I try not to think about January. Her kissable mouth, her shiny hair. The way she looked at me when I talked about going down on her. She still wants me—to save her and to touch her. Tonight was a shitshow, but at least it proved that.

We arrive at Adriano's door. "What do you think he has in there?" Doc asks.

“Goat heads? A bunch of pictures connected with red string?”

Doc buzzes the intercom. “Lurch, get the fuck out here.”

“Do you have to call him that?”

“Fuck off, altar boy.”

Adriano opens the door shirtless. I’ve seen his bare chest a million times, but it always makes me kind of sick. There are bullet scars and cuts across his shoulders, ugly tattoos over everything else. He looks from Doc to me. “What?”

“Eli needs us in the east wing,’ I say.

“The girl?”

“Yeah.”

Adriano starts to close the door, but I shove my foot through it. “It’s important.”

“And if it’s not, you can kill her,” Doc adds. “And Morelli.”

There’s a pause.

“Lemme get a shirt.”

The east wing is where guests stay, not that we have many of those. It’s on the fourth floor and a bitch to get to. My cock strains against my jeans as the three of us make our way there. I can’t stop picturing January writhing on the carpet. She was so close to giving in.

“I need pussy,” Doc mutters. “I can’t fucking concentrate.”

I stay quiet, but I feel the same way. Only, the thought of being with anyone but January makes my stomach churn. I just want her. Why the fuck has everything turned out this way?

The outer door to the east wing is open. We head for the bedroom and find Eli in a velvet-backed chair beside the four-poster bed. January is asleep under the covers. My heart flips at the sight of her. She looks so tiny among all the pillows and

blankets. I want to climb in beside her and hold her close. Promise her everything will be okay.

Eli takes us in. “Thanks for coming.”

Doc takes the cigarette from behind his ear. “This better be good.”

“Smoke that in here and I’ll gut you,” Eli says lightly.

January gives a soft moan, turning her head from side to side.

“God she’s beautiful,” I say, because I’m drunk, and I can’t not say it.

Ell looks at me. “I didn’t bring you here to watch her sleep.”

He reaches across the bed, shaking January’s shoulder. “Wake up, *bella*. We need to talk to you.”

January’s eyes flutter open and she pulls the sheets to her nose. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t panic,” Eli says. “Tell them what you told me.”

January lowers the blanket. “I... um, I’ve been given that drug before.”

“No, you haven’t,” Doc mutters around his unlit cigarette.

“But... um?” She looks to Eli who raises a hand.

“Just keep going.”

“It was at a charity ball,” January whispers. “I went cold, then hot, and I couldn’t stop thinking about...” She breaks off, flushing scarlet.

“So, you got horny,” Doc snarls. “That’s not the same thing as having O.”

“Let her speak.” Eli lays a palm on the covers, where January’s thigh must be. “Finish, *bella*.”

For the millionth time, I wish I was Eli Morelli. It isn’t a new feeling, being jealous of him. But he could marry January

if he wanted and that burns.

“After the ball, I was sick for days,” she says. “I couldn’t get out of bed, and I kept—”

“Fucking yourself.” Doc looks at Eli. “This horny schoolgirl shit doesn’t mean anything.”

“Because you’re not listening,” Eli says testily. “January, who gave you a drink that night?”

“Mr. Parker.”

The cigarette tumbles from between Doc’s teeth. “What?”

“Mr. Parker,” she repeats. “He was sitting at my family’s table, but I’m not sure he was the one—”

“Shut the fuck up. What drink did he give you?”

“Um, a mocktail. It was blue with glittery syrup.”

“What did it taste like?”

“Sweet but, um, funny. I thought he’d maybe got a normal cocktail by mistake.”

My muscles go weak. *He drugged her.* I know what Parker is capable of, but he was supposed to leave her alone until he married her.

“Say the last part,” Eli orders. “What happened next?”

“I started to... feel the way I felt tonight.” January’s voice is barely a whisper. “Only it was worse.”

“Speak up,” Doc barks. “How was it worse?”

“I couldn’t concentrate. My head was spinning. I told Margot I needed to leave. I was trying to find somewhere private because...” She looks down at her hands and a twisted pang goes through me. Because she was trying to find somewhere to touch herself.

“Mr. Parker followed me. He said he knew a place where I could sit. He took me to a side room and gave me a glass of water. I remember because he was so careful not to touch me and I...” her voice cracks. “I... wanted him to touch me.”

My hands ball into fists. I want to kill Parker. Go back in time and murder him when I was seventeen. All this time planning and fucking around. Meanwhile, he stole our drug and used it on the girl I love.

“What happened next?” Doc asks. His voice is sharp, but I can hear something else creeping in at the edges. Fear or maybe just softness.

“I felt sick. I was so scared I was going to ruin my dress.”

“You mean you wanted to puke?”

She nods, her eyes huge in the semi-darkness.

“Did you?”

“No, my mom found us and got really angry. She and Mr. Parker went somewhere else, and then she came back and told me we were going home.”

“What happened when you got home?”

January looks away, gnawing her lower lip.

“I don’t give a shit how embarrassed you are, Tesorina. What happened next?”

She cringes and I shove Doc’s shoulder. “Watch how you talk to her.”

He rounds on me, eyes narrowed. “Or what?”

I square my shoulders. Doc’s vicious in a fight, and not above hair-pulling and groin-punching, but I’m bigger and he knows it. Adri’s always been his muscle. Question is would he step in if we fought now? I glance at Adriano, and he stares back, blank as a statue.

“Enough,” Eli says. “The two of you are acting like fools.”

“*Basher’s* acting like a fool,” Doc snarls. “Tell him to go pull his dick and come back with a clear head.”

“Go fuck your—”

“I touched myself,” January blurts out. “When I got home.”

Doc and I turn back to her. She's flushing. "I touched myself, then I threw up. I was up all night doing it."

The corner of Doc's mouth kicks up. "Puking or touching yourself?"

"Both." She shakes her head as though trying to dislodge the memories. "Zia Teresa wanted me to go to the hospital, but mom wouldn't let her take me. She said I had food poisoning. I was so scared because all the while they were talking by my bed, I couldn't stop... you know." Her eyes grow bright with tears. "... I was under the covers, and I don't think they saw me, but it was humiliating. I didn't know what was happening."

I tense my arm, ready to punch Doc for laughing, but for once he looks as horrified as I feel.

"Go on," Eli prompts.

January draws in a shaking breath. "Eventually I stopped being sick and... you know... but I was exhausted. I didn't feel better for almost a week."

"Did you throw up the next day?" Doc asks.

"No, but I felt like I had the flu."

"And your mood? Were you depressed? Did you have trouble sleeping?"

It's been a long time since I've seen him like this. Professional. Take away the tattoos and the cigarette and he could be a doctor doing hospital rounds.

"Um, just tired I think." January seems a new kind of nervous as though Doc asking sensible questions is more disturbing than him taking his cock out. "Do you think Mr. Parker gave me Orchard?"

Doc looks out the dark rain-flecked window. "Did your mom talk to you about what happened?"

"No."

There's a heart-breaking tremor in her voice. I can't fucking stand it. "Your mom might not have understood. She might have really thought you got food poisoning or something."

January gives me a soft smile. "My stepmom is pretty smart. I don't think she misses much."

There isn't anything I can say to that.

"Thanks for telling us what happened," Doc says quietly. "How you feeling now?"

"Um, good?"

She's lying. Her voice is shaking, and her eyes are bright with tears. Again, I look at Doc, ready to chew him out if he mocks her, but his face is tight with worry. I remember him looking that way back when everything first started. Before Alessia, before Orchard, he used to have normal human emotions. But somewhere along the way, the laughing mask became his face.

"Enough." Eli's voice is cold. "Outside. We need to talk."

"Should I come with you?" January mumbles.

"No, *bella*, you be a good girl and sleep. In an hour I'll have Gretzky bring up some food."

She nods, her eyes already closing. The urge to climb into bed beside her returns. I hang back as the others file out of the room. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

Her cheeks go pink. "Could you maybe... stay with me for a bit?"

Something in her eyes makes my cock harden. I think of the Orchard still swimming in her blood, my offer to make her come without taking her virginity. "I... what do you—"

Eli whistles. "Bobby. Now."

I bite back a sigh. "Sorry JJ. Sleep well."

She lowers her head. "Goodbye, Bobby."

“Simp,” Doc says, as soon as I’m out the door. I glare at him but what am I supposed to say? That I’m not completely stupid for January Whitehall? That I don’t want to be whatever she needs?

Eli locks the door behind me, giving me a look as he puts the keys in his pocket. “Don’t even think about it.”

I expect him to lead us to the dining room, but he heads for the nearest balcony.

“I want a cigarette,” Eli says. “Do you have your pack, Domenico?”

“Don’t call me that,” Doc mutters but he pulls his battered Marlboro lights from his jeans.

It’s freezing cold outside, rain falling off the roof in a steady stream. Doc hands Eli and Adriano a cigarette then looks at me. “Want one?”

I never smoke unless I’m so wasted, I don’t remember doing it. I shake my head, the icy wind whipping at my face. It must be below freezing but Doc’s barefoot and in a T-shirt. Still, I know better than to suggest he put shoes on. Doc’s the sulking big brother I never asked for.

“What do you think?” Eli asks.

Doc lights his cigarette, a flicker in the dark. “He gave her O.”

“How?”

“Parker must have stolen some.”

Ell exhales a stream of white smoke. “Did he steal it? Or did he replicate it?”

Doc draws hard on his cigarette. “He’d need a sample to replicate it, so either way he must have stolen some. But he gave her some of ours.”

“What makes you think that?” Eli asks.

“Because she threw up a bunch of times.”

Adriano flicks his cigarette, creating a shower of sparks. “Could have been the alcohol.”

“One cocktail she barely drank?” Doc shakes his head. “Orchard isn’t shelf stable. Longest I kept a dose was six months and when I gave it to Mel—no, Meg—she said she felt sick after. She didn’t puke, but it was the first time anyone’s said that. If Parker’s been making his own gear, then the puking’s a new feature. If he’s kept what he stole, it oxidized. My money’s on that.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t kill her,” Eli says darkly.

Doc lights a second cigarette off the tip of his first. “If she’d drunk the whole cocktail, he probably would have.”

We stand there for a long time, our breath and cigarette smoke mixing with the wet air. I imagine the girl tucked into the bed not two rooms away, dead at a charity gala. I want to go to her and give her anything, everything, to make her feel better.

“Risky,” Adriano says. “Doping her in front of her family.”

“Fucking pig,” Doc mutters. I remember watching him pace the hospital after Alessia was attacked and my gut knots.

“Did he want her gone?” Eli asks. “Was he trying to kill her?”

Doc snorts. “No fucking way.”

“Then what...?”

“The motherless cunt got sick of waiting. He had a room all picked out to take her to, didn’t he? If her mom hadn’t come after her...”

A horrible thought comes to me. “Did January say how old she was when it happened?”

“Fifteen,” Eli replies.

I’m expecting anger, and it’s there, but mostly I feel miserable. January’s sweeter than anyone I’ve ever met. How has this been her life?

“Why would he throw everything away like that?” Eli asks. “Paying January’s mother for years, not even letting himself hold her hand. Why would he give that all up just to dose her at a gala where there’s every chance he’d get caught?”

“Because he snapped.” Adriano grinds his cigarette end under his boot. “You know what he’s like.”

We do. Better than anyone. But I learned a long time ago that revisiting those memories is asking nightmares to take up permanent residency in my head.

“*Porca miseria*,” Eli mutters. “What a fucking mess.”

Doc blows smoke toward the sky. “You got that right.”

“We can’t send January away. Not until we know whether Parker’s making Orchard,” Eli says.

I try not to let my expression change. “Do you want her back in the cage?”

“No. She can stay in the east wing. Actually, she can walk the house for all I care. It’s not like she’s a danger to anyone.”

Adriano turns away.

“Fine by me,” Doc says. “I need to ask her about the O. Maybe run some tests—”

“You won’t be doing that,” Eli interrupts. “Parker still needs dealing with. We have a job to do and limited time.”

Doc looks mutinous but he doesn’t say anything.

“That goes for all of you,” Eli adds. “Stay away from the girl. We have bigger fish to fry.”

He holds my gaze until I nod. “Okay.”

“Good.” He rounds on Adriano. “I’m warning you, Rossi. She dies and you are in the shit.”

Adriano inclines his head.

Eli rubs his brow. “I need to call Peirce. He hasn’t mentioned Parker has access to a drug that works on women,

but he didn't know that's information we're interested in. Get some sleep. Tomorrow, we go to work."

He leaves, taking the key to January's door with him.

Adriano grunts and disappears after him. I feel a stab of panic and remember that if I'm locked out of January's room, so is Rossi.

Doc pulls another cigarette from his pack. "Big night."

"Yeah," I say. Should I follow Adriano? Make sure he doesn't go after January?

"Another girl doped because of me."

There's a beat and I realize Doc's being serious. Misery lines every inch of his face. I grab his arm, his skin is cold as a corpse. "You're not responsible for what Parker did."

He doesn't look at me. "She could have died."

Again, that twist in his voice, fear and softness together. I tighten my grip on Doc's arm. "You weren't trying to hurt her. You couldn't have known."

"That's what you said about Alessia."

It's been years since I heard him say her name. I squeeze harder. "You're not a bad man."

He snorts. "Then how did we end up here?"

We're skating dangerously close to the thing none of us wants to talk about.

"Things happened the way they did. You're still not responsible for Parker."

A smile quirks Doc's mouth and he lifts a frozen hand to mine. "Thanks."

"Anytime." I clear my throat. "You need to put some fucking shoes on."

Doc laughs. "This is why all the ladies love you, Bobby. You're so sincere."

I shake my head but I'm grinning. "Let's go get some sleep."

"Wait a moment." He fumbles with his lighter, igniting his fresh cigarette. "You want a hand? I can use my powers for good and evil, you know?"

"The fuck are you talking about?"

"January. I saw the way she was looking at you before Morelli made you leave."

I roll my eyes. "Don't butter me up just because you feel bad."

"I've never buttered anyone up for anything. The girl's been alone for days, she's probably dying to be touched. And as much as I hate to admit it, you got the closest with her tonight. She still trusts you."

"She hates me for killing her bodyguard."

"She's confused and horny. She wants you to comfort her."

"But she won't marry me."

Doc chokes on his cigarette. "Fuck, Basher. You don't want much, do you?"

I fail to suppress a smile. "Whatever you're thinking, it won't work anyway. Eli locked her in."

"Did he?" Doc pulls Eli's keychain from his pocket. "Should we go pay her a visit?"

I hesitate. The four of us are close but there's always been divisions. Doc and Adriano on one side, me and Eli on the other. I owe Eli my loyalty. But he was going to send her away and he wasn't going to ask my opinion about it.

Doc flicks his cigarette and heads for the door. "Come on, Basher."

I stare into the rain. "She's supposed to go to Eli's cousin."

"That's later. Now is now."

And then I'm behind him, walking back to January's door. The bedroom is warm and already smells like her. I inhale. I'm dizzy and drunk yet all too aware of my surroundings.

Doc pads to her bedside table, flicks on a lamp. "Hey, Tesorina."

She is lying on her back. Looking at her makes me wish I wrote music. Her green eyes flick open and she looks from Doc to me. "Hi...?"

Doc sits on her bed. "Basher and I thought you might want some company."

"Oh." She places a tentative hand on Doc's arm. "You're freezing."

He grins. "Yeah. Can we share your blankets?"

January's chin dips into her chest, but she smiles. "Maybe."

My heart is going like a freight train. Doc's right. She's scared and horny and craving comfort. This might actually happen.

January moves across the bed, making space for Doc.

"Thanks, baby." He climbs in beside her and beckons me forward.

For a million reasons I want to tell him to stop—Eli, the Orchard, his dirty feet.

Instead, I watch as the smartest, most irritating man I know snuggles into the woman I love. My cold hands are burning, my heart is still going too fast.

"Bobby?" January's voice is shy. "Are you...? Do you need to get warm too?"

I do, but I can't move. I can't even speak.

"He'll come, Tesorina. Just give him a moment." He grins at her, bright and wide, and she smiles back.

She's nervous, but you can tell she's glad he's there. A tight feeling hooks behind my navel and pulls hard. This isn't the first time, me, Doc, and a girl. But it's always some dancer at one of his clubs. Someone who knows the score and wants nothing but sex. This is January and January is everything.

Doc strokes her hair out of her eyes. He makes it look natural. Like he's done it a million times. "You won, Tesorina. You beat me."

I move toward the foot of the bed until the covers brush my knees.

"What do you mean?" January asks.

"You beat me," Doc repeats. "You withstood the O and made fools out of all of us."

January smiles. "Sorry."

"Never be sorry for winning." Doc runs his finger down her cheek to the nape of her neck. "Would you like a reward for being such a good girl?"

She shivers so hard it makes her curls tremble. "What do you mean?"

Doc leans closer his nose an inch from hers. "You want to get your little pussy licked?"

January's eyes go wide and I see the same fear and longing that's burning inside me. "I don't know..."

The blanket has tumbled down her shoulders. She's still in her pink lingerie. Slowly, easily, Doc moves an arm around her. "Basher just wants to do what he said before, Tesorina. He wants to tongue your virgin pussy until you come. Don't you want to let him?"

She bites her lip. "I shouldn't."

"Shouldn't' is a stupid word." Doc's hand moves lower, caressing her through her bra. January's eyes roll in pleasure before she pulls away, staring at me with enough shame to torch a nun.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do this with both of you.”

“What do you mean, both of us?” Doc says in mock puzzlement. “I’m touching you and Bobby’s not doing anything.”

“But you can’t both be here when...”

“Why not?” He moves his palm across her breasts in a slow circular rhythm. “Don’t you want your first orgasm to be special?”

“I don’t know.” She closes her eyes, her breathing hard. “But won’t you want me to... do something back?”

No, I think. It can be just for you, January. Of course, it can.

Doc laughs quietly. “Don’t worry about us, Tesorina. We’re big boys. We can control ourselves.”

He pinches her nipple and she gasps. “Then I guess... I think... but I really shouldn’t...”

Doc gives me a hard stare. *Move. Now.*

I lift the covers from the mattress and duck under, feeling completely disconnected from my body. Am I really about to do this? And in front of Doc? But January’s feet curl above my head, her smooth soles and cherry-painted toenails. I can smell her already, sweet as apple pie.

“Are you excited, Tesorina?” Doc asks, somewhere above me.

“I shouldn’t... I’m supposed to stay a virgin.”

“And you will.”

I grab January’s ankles and ease them apart. She gives a high, breathy moan. “Bobby...”

“Shhh,” Doc’s voice is low. “It doesn’t count, baby. It’s just the three of us in your little bed, playing together. No one needs to know. Just let Basher make you feel good.”

She says something I can't hear, but her scent grows stronger. I slide my hands up her calves. Her skin is soft and smooth, long muscles twitch beneath my fingers.

"Bobby, are you sure?"

"He's exactly where he wants to be," Doc says. "Why don't you just lie back and let me..."

There's a sound of material shifting, and January gives a sharp moan. My cock pulses against my stomach. He must be sucking her nipples, the way he did in the cage. I watched him do it on the monitors. Jerked off about it later. Not that I'd ever admit that.

I slide my hands to the top of January's thighs, brushing my thumbs over the sheer pink thong Eli chose for her. She's soaked through, wet as the rain outside. My mouth fills with saliva. All I want to do is to make her come with my tongue. With a single fingertip, I move the sodden panties to one side and my vision swims. She's small and pink and soft and perfect.

And then her hands are cupping my head. "Bobby, you don't have to..."

I pause, tongue already extended. I'll die if I have to stop, but I'd die for January anyway.

"Tesorina," Doc croons. "You're a big girl and you won your bet. If you don't want Basher's mouth on you while I suck on your tits, you can say no."

"I can say no," she repeats, her voice thick with lust. I hover, tongue quaking, praying Doc knows what he's doing.

"That's right." There's a soft sucking noise. "But you want some relief, don't you, baby? You've been aching for it all night, all your life, you just want a man to make you come."

"Yes," she breathes. "Yes... I want to come."

That's all I need. I lean forward and give her a long, slow lick. She gasps and her thighs close around my head, locking

me in. Half-convinced this is a dream, I go to work, licking her pussy the way I'd like to kiss her perfect pouty lips.

"You greedy little girl," Doc mutters. "You like Bobby's tongue nice and soft in your cunt while I play with your tits?"

January bucks hard against my face. The noises she makes are like razor wire going through my brain. I press my aching cock against the mattress and wish it was her pussy.

Light makes me look upward. Doc's lifted the sheets, checking out the action. Fucking pervert. I smirk into January's folds and go back to work. She whines and a surge of silky girl juice floods my mouth.

She's close, I want to tell Doc. Real fucking close.

But he already seems to know. The light vanishes and I hear him suck her nipples again. I draw soft circles with my tongue and January's hips shudder. She says something I can't hear.

"I can't kiss you, baby," Doc says. "I've been smoking."

"I don't care. Please, Domenico?"

The way she says his name... It hurts. It hurts and feels good and fucked up. Tangled the way it always is when I get talked into screwing a girl with Doc or Eli, only a million times worse. A million times better.

Doc chuckles. "You want two tongues in you, Tesorina?"

"Yes," January sighs.

I can't help myself. I rut against the mattress. I was hoping I'd be able to make it to my bedroom to jack off. But fuck it, if this is the closest I'll ever get to January, I might as well come while I eat her out.

"Kiss me," January whispers and I know she's talking to both of us. I lap at her slow and steady and feel her come as she and Doc make out. The sound of them kissing goes through me like bullets. I've always liked watching, liked threesomes, but something about Doc kissing January while

she comes on my face just makes me lose it. I moan into her pussy as liquid pumps out of me.

I keep licking until January pushes my forehead away. I want to crawl up and hold her, but Doc's already sliding out of the bed. I move out from the blankets the way I came in, blinking in the golden lamplight. I feel disgusting, but you can't see anything. No one has to know. She looks up at me flushed and so gorgeous it hurts. "Um, thank you, Bobby."

I can't talk, I can't even smile. I can still feel her legs wrapped around me, smell her everywhere.

"Basher'll do that any time you like, Tesorina." Doc backs away from the bed. "We're gonna go before Gretzky shows up with pizza rolls for you."

January's smile dims, then she tilts her head to the side. "Do people call you Doc because of the pills?"

"Huh?"

"Your nickname. Is it because you were a drug dealer?"

A beat and then a half smile. "Yeah."

"I thought so." Her voice is soft. "I'm not always stupid."

I reach down, finding her foot through the covers, and give it a gentle squeeze. "You're never stupid."

"Bobby..." she mumbles.

Doc catches my eyes and taps his wrist.

I let go of January's foot. "Bye JJ."

"No," she says, all sweet like a little girl.

Doc leans forward and gives her a swift kiss on the forehead. "Sleep, Tesorina." He jerks his head at me. "Let's go."

Back in my wing of Velvet House I strip off and shower. Put on my pajama bottoms, brush my teeth. As I do it, I replay the kiss Doc gave January. Not the mind-bending one while I was going down on her, the fast one on the head as we left.

That kiss worries me. I know I love January and Eli wants her, and Adriano hates her. But as of fifteen minutes ago, I have no idea what my psychotic, chain-smoking, drug-inventing friend feels about her.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

January Whitehall

BOBBY IS BETWEEN my legs, licking me softly. I tilt my hips and pleasure washes over me like a wave. I shouldn't let him do this but it's so good. His brown eyes find mine, warm and kind. "Touch me, JJ."

I reach down and brush my fingers through his hair and it becomes long and blond. Doc grins. "You gonna come on my face, Tits?"

"Don't call me that!"

"Ah relax, little *bella*." Eli is sitting in a chair beside me. He leans forward, brushing a hand over my breasts. "Domenico's only complimenting you. You have perfect tits."

The tongue between my legs moves faster, fluttering over my swollen clit. I scream as my orgasm surges closer.

"Stop! Please? Let me go?"

Eli fastens his ruby necklace around my throat. "Too late for that, Pryntsesa."

I look down and it isn't Doc licking me, it's a man with shaggy brown hair with shaved sides. His mouth is hot as steam and he digs at me, deep and hard with his teeth. I try to yell but no sound comes out. He looks at me, green eyes glowing like twin traffic lights. "Come and I'll kill you."

He lowers his head and his tongue slicks through me. He's good at this. Too good. I'm going to come, but then so is death. I need to scream—

“Miss?”

“No!”

“Miss Whitehall?”

I jolt upright. I’m not where I was.

A man stands in front of me. A stranger. He’s wearing the same grey uniform as Mr. Gretzky but he’s white-haired with a long Santa beard. He raises the bundle in his arms. “Sorry for disturbing you, Miss”

I pull the blankets up to my chin, my heart racing. “I... That’s okay.”

The older man smiles. “I’m Harvey. I’m here to bring you fresh clothes and take you down to the dining room for breakfast.”

It’s been so long since someone talked to me in a normal way, I’m a little blindsided. “Breakfast?”

“Of course. Although it’s almost lunchtime.” He lays the bundle on my bed with a toothy grin. “The ensuite is through to your left if you haven’t already seen it. I’ll wait outside.”

He leaves, closing the door behind him.

I was too stressed to pay attention to the room last night, but it’s pretty. There are leaf mouldings across the roof and a small grate for a fire. I crawl out of bed and wander to the huge window. Outside is a white fountain and what looks like a tennis court. Beyond that are rolling green grounds as far as I can see.

The ensuite is just as pretty as the rest of the room. Vowing to use the claw-foot bath later, I run the shower as hot as I can and get in. As I move the loofa across my skin, arousal pulses through me. This was where Bobby’s mouth was. This is where Doc’s hands were. That was no dream. I let a man go down on me while another man and I kissed. “Oh God...”

The night we met, Eli told me my morals were untested. I want to say I’m a good person and I know what’s wrong and

right, but do I? I was excited to be put in front of them in my underwear and relieved to have a reason to be attracted to them. I know Bobby killed Kurt and Eli ordered it and Doc would have happily done it instead, but I still let them touch me last night. And I wanted them to touch me more. All of them, even—my stomach contracts as I think it—Adriano.

I shake my head, sending water everywhere. “But I’m still a virgin,” I tell myself. Even I hear the hollowness in my voice. It doesn’t feel like much of a consolation. What would mom say if she knew? What would Zia Teresa say?

I imagine her sitting on the edge of the bath, playing slot machine games on her phone.

“Zia, do you think I’m disgusting?”

She looks up at me, her expression mild. “I think you should get out of the shower, *bella*.”

I do as I’m told, drying myself and examining the clothes Harvey brought me. Yellow cotton panties, a blue sundress and ballet flats.

As usual, the dress I’ve been given fits perfectly but snugly. I look at myself in the full-length mirror and sigh. No wonder Doc keeps calling me ‘Tits.’

There’s a light knock on the door. “You ready to go, Miss?”

I put on my best ‘meeting new people’ smile. “I’ll be right out.”

Harvey leads me from my wing down another red carpeted hallway. The house is even prettier by daylight, but it’s dirty. There’s an inch of dust on every surface and cobwebs across the gorgeous stained-glass windows. Beyond them, I can see the edge of a thick green forest. We seem to be miles away from anywhere.

“Excuse me, Harvey?” I ask, trying to sound innocent. “Where are we?”

“Albany.”

Relief floods through me. Upstate New York. Not too far from home.

“And what is this place? It’s so beautiful.”

“Isn’t it? Velvet House belongs to Mr. Morelli now, but it was built by Wallace McKenna in 1869. He was a financier and a Governor of New York...”

As we walk down wooden bannisters and past huge bedrooms, Harvey keeps up his tour guide-y speech. He tells me when the conservatory was built and how old certain paintings are and the important people who were married in the gardens. I smile and nod, but my mind keeps dragging me back to last night. Kneeling in front of the fire as Doc took off his shirt; Eli murmuring to me in Italian....

Slut, my mind whispers. If I’d let them have me last night, I’d probably be on a plane to Italy right now. Is Eli still going to send me away? The floor seems to skid beneath me and I halt, one hand over my eyes.

“Miss? Are you okay?”

“Just a bit dizzy.” I try and smile at Harvey. “Is, um, Mr. Morelli or any of the others around...?”

His expression is a little too sympathetic. “Mr. Morelli and Mr. Bassilotta have gone to New York and Mr. Rossi and Mr. Valente have business elsewhere today.”

“Oh.” I suppose it was the same while I was in the cage and I just had no idea, but it’s strange they’ve gone and left me here. Like all five of us should be in the same space.

“Mr. Morelli told me you’re free to explore the house,” Harvey says. “There’s a library and gym. Or you can visit the family gallery on the third floor or watch a movie in the cinema. Or I’d be happy to take you for a walk around the grounds?”

My head swims. I just want to go somewhere quiet and sit down. “That all sounds really lovely but could I maybe have breakfast before I decide please?”

“Of course.”

We continue on our way, Harvey talking about the history of Velvet House at the top of his voice, and I wonder if he was involved in getting rid of Kurt’s body. He seems like such a nice man. Is he some kind of psychopath? But then who am I to judge? I let Kurt’s murderer go down on me. And I came while he did it. I could blame the Orchard, but I’d be lying.

Your morals are untested.

It’s another couple of minutes of winding staircases and same-y hallways before we enter a marble-floored area. Harvey pushes open a metal door. “This is the kitchen.”

I have to bite my tongue to keep from crying out. It’s gigantic, even bigger than the cafeteria at school, and it’s *filthy*. Every surface is covered in grease or dirty cups and plates, and it smells like old vegetables that have been left in the sun. If Zia Teresa saw this place, she would faint.

Harvey clears his throat. “It’s a little... We haven’t had a cleaner in a while. Or a chef. Let’s not stay here. Your breakfast is this way.”

He leads me out through another door to a beautiful dining room that is also filthy. The massive table is heaving with boxes and paper and takeout containers and more dirty plates. There’s so much garbage that most of the velvet-backed chairs have been stacked high too.

Harvey points to where a small space has been cleared for me. A box of cornflakes waits patiently next to a bottle of milk and a single bowl and spoon. “There you go, Miss”

“Thank you, Harvey.” Inside, I’m screaming. How do these men live like this? I know they’re murderers but messing up this gorgeous old house is a different kind of crime.

I take my seat and pour the cereal. Harvey hovers with grandfatherly concern. “Would you like some coffee?”

“Only if you’re getting some for yourself,” I say, and a thought occurs to me. “Mr. Harvey—”

“Just Harvey.”

“Sorry, Harvey, how many people work at Velvet House?”

I expect him to become cagy, but he keeps smiling at me. “There’s a rotating staff of thirty, and five of us live on site. Gretzky and myself you’ve already met, but there’s also Dolmio, Jackie Schnee and my son, Sal.”

“Your son?” I say. “You live here together?”

“We do. It’s been great for Sal since his divorce.” Harvey glances at the door then gives me a big grin. “Would you like to meet him and the others?”

The idea of meeting more men is a little scary but Harvey’s excitement is cute. “That would be lovely.”

He leaves by the door we came through and I add milk to my cereal and try not to think about how dirty my bowl might be. You can tell this is a house only men live in. Aside from the mess, it’s freezing cold. Maybe this is why Adriano is in such a bad mood all the time.

I’m scraping up the last of my cereal when there’s a knock at the door. Harvey reappears with a bald-headed man and a middle-aged guy with droopy eyelids.

“Dolmio and Schnee,” he says. “Sal’s napping and I couldn’t get that grumpy bastard Gretzky to come see you. Oops. Apologies for swearing.”

“That’s completely fine.” I stand, extending my hand to the middle-aged guy. “Hi, I’m January.”

“I know,” he says, rubbing his nose. We shake hands. Mr. Schnee’s touch is as limp as wet noodles.

The younger guy, Dolmio, grins at me. “You’re eighteen.”

“I am.” I hold out my right hand. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-nine.” He holds out his left hand and the two of us stare at each other. But when I withdraw my right hand and hold out my left, he changes hands too, leaving us unable to shake again.

“Christ,” Harvey mutters, elbowing Dolmio to one side. “Just go back to the security room, okay?”

“Okay,” Dolmio agrees. He leaves the room, whacking his shoulder on the doorframe.

“Sorry,” Harvey says to me. “He’s a family friend and he’s still in training.”

“It’s fine. He seems nice.”

“Hmm. Anyway, have you decided what you’d like to do today?”

“Could I maybe... call my sister?”

Schnee’s heavy eyebrows lift. “No.”

“Okay, well...” I mentally scan the options Harvey suggested but I don’t feel like doing any of them. My gaze falls on a velvet chair stacked high with pizza boxes. “Could I maybe... clean up?”

The men exchange uncomfortable looks.

“That’s sweet of you, Miss,” Harvey says slowly. “But I’m sure that’s not what Mr. Morelli had in mind.”

“I know, but I’d like to feel useful.” And if it convinces the others to be nicer to me and possibly not kill me or send me to Italy, that would be a bonus.

Harvey looks at Schnee who shrugs, wiping his nose again. I really wish we hadn’t shaken hands.

“I suppose there’s no harm...?” He tells Harvey.

I beam at them. “Amazing! Do you have any cleaning supplies?”

Schnee shows me to a small closet full of rubber gloves and leaking bottles of cream cleanser.

“Do you... want a hand?” he asks.

“Not at all.”

“Great, I’m allergic to dust.” He swipes a hand over his runny nose. “Okay, well there’s an intercom in every room. Press the middle if you need us.”

“Sure.”

He’s halfway out the door when he turns. “If any of the bosses ask why you’re cleaning, make sure you tell them it was your idea.”

I frown. “I don’t think any of them care what I do.”

Schnee gives me a long look. “You’re wrong.”

Before I can ask what he means, he vanishes.

The kitchen is gross, but it’s also empty. There’s nothing on the shelves or in the industrial refrigerators except wine, condiments, and a six-pack of orange soda.

Glad I don’t have to throw anything out, I pile all the dishes from the kitchen and dining room next to the sink and fill it with hot soapy water. As I scrub, I run through my scales, up and down and back again. I like cleaning. I always tried to help Zia Teresa at home, but she didn’t want to look lazy in front of mom. And if I so much as took an empty carton to the recycling bin, mom would scold me.

Here I can take as long as I want and focus on getting the —peanut butter?—stains off the plates. When the dishes are done, I wipe down the stainless-steel counter tops, until they gleam silver again. I sing Dolly Parton as I go. I’m digging the ancient mop and bucket out of the closet when Harvey sticks his head through the door. “Are you hungry, Miss? I can run out and get you something? Anything you’d like.”

I wipe the hair out of my eyes with my bicep. “If it’s not too much trouble, could you please go to a grocery store for me?”

“Of course,” he says, surprised. “What would you like?”

“I was thinking I could cook you dinner to say thank you for being so kind to me.”

A flush spreads over his cheeks. “That’s not necessary.”

“But I’m cleaning up the kitchen. It would be a shame not to use it.”

Harvey’s expression is pained. “I’m sorry, Miss Whitehall, but Mr. Morelli is due back this evening and I’m worried he’ll think... well I don’t know what he’ll think. But I know he wouldn’t want you cooking for me.”

I remember the way Eli looked in the firelight, slowly rolling up his shirtsleeves. My pelvic muscles clench. If I belonged to Mr. Morelli, he probably wouldn’t want me cooking for another man. But I don’t. So why would it be a problem?

I smile at Harvey. “Mr. Morelli would love for me to cook for you. He told me to make myself useful.”

Harvey’s brow smooths. “Did he?”

Last night Eli told me to ‘be a good girl.’ Surely cooking and cleaning is being a good girl? I cross my fingers behind my back, just in case. “He did. And I can make enough food for everyone. You and Mr. Gretzky and Mr. Schnee and Dolmio and Sal...”

Harvey gives me a rueful smile. “It has been weeks since I’ve had a home-cooked meal...”

I try not to look too excited. “Wonderful. Could I maybe write you a list of ingredients?”

“Of course. What are you going to make?”

The food to cure all sadness. The one thing I feel like eating whenever I’m low. “An old family recipe.”

Harvey finds me a pen and paper and I note down everything I need. When he leaves, I mop the kitchen floors until they’re sparkling clean. As they dry, I move back into the dining room and stuff all the dirty containers and paper into trash bags. Everything that looks useful goes into a big box in the corner of the room. Once the junk is cleared, I polish the dining table and sideboards and push all the chairs back into

place. The carpet is still dusty but everything else looks a hundred times better.

Feeling stupidly proud of myself, I go back into the kitchen and get an orange soda. I sit on the clean counter and drink it like I'm the queen of the world.

My whole life I've just *been there*, like a candy cane on a Christmas tree. Zia Teresa did my chores. My teachers and Bobby made excuses for my homework. I was good at singing and ballet, but I didn't help anyone with it, just like I wouldn't have helped anyone if I studied Fine Arts at Columbia. No one even needed me to marry Mr. Parker. Mom needed money and Mr. Parker needed a wife with an important last name, but no one needed January Whitehall.

Yet this kitchen used to be dirty and now it's clean because of me. For the first time in my life, I've done something useful. Mom would be furious to see me acting like a servant but what's so bad about cleaning? Everyone likes when things are clean. I look around at the sparkling surfaces. Maybe I could ask Eli if I could be his housemaid?

It sounds crazy, even in my own mind, but they definitely need somebody and I'd like being a housemaid a lot more than I'd like being shipped off to Italy. Plus, it might be safer if Eli and the others saw me as a servant. I don't want to be their sugar babies or wives, their strippers or murder victims. I want to be too unimportant to proposition or kill. I want to melt into the walls of this beautiful house the way Zia Teresa did at my place. As a maid, I'd be nobody. And I could be happy being nobody.

"Afternoon!" Harvey bursts into the kitchen, arms laden with groceries. "Everything looks wonderful."

"Thanks," I say, sliding off the counter. "How did it go at the store?"

"It took a while, but I found it all."

Harvey bought three times as many ingredients as I need. I decide to make everything at once, that way all the staff can

eat and they can have leftovers. I've already found a big pot for the meat, so I set the chicken and beef to simmer in salted water as I carefully shred the skin off the carrot and potato.

I shouldn't know how to cook. Mom didn't like my interest in food any more than she liked me singing, but whenever she was gone, I hung around Zia Teresa in the kitchen. Zia could make any cuisine under the sun, but when it was just the two of us, we only cooked Italian. The meals she grew up with and loved. Zia showed me how to cut spaghetti and fettuccini, to roll gnocchi, to fold ravioli parcels full of parsley and fresh ricotta. We made alfredo and carbonara and cannelloni though most of the dishes didn't have real names.

"What do you call this?" I would ask of a thick soup of spinach and rice.

"It's spinach and rice," Zia would say.

"But what is it in Italian?"

She would roll her eyes. "Spinaci e riso."

While mom was away getting her eyelids done, Zia Teresa focused my studies on desserts, tiramisu and profiteroles and continental cake. When mom returned and I was back on a diet of kale and grilled chicken, I dreamed about mascarpone cream.

In the eighth grade I wanted to run away and become a chef. As I got older, I imagined cooking for Mr. Parker, making him so happy with my food he would let Zia Teresa move in with us. Then she and I could hang out in my kitchen and we could talk and make trays of lasagne and sugar-dusted biscotti. As I skim the fat from the surface of my broth, I hope with all my heart Zia Teresa knows I'm alive and well and making brodo.

"Hey, Tits."

I jolt, my spatula flying out of my hand. Doc leans against the clean counter, smirking at me.

"Doc! You scared me."

“Sorry,” he says, looking around the spotless kitchen. “What’s with the cleaning? Are you broken?”

His T-shirt is baby blue today. The color makes his eyes a million times prettier. I wipe my hands on my dress. All day I’ve tried not to ruin it, but I’m already covered in grime and my hair is a mess.

That doesn’t matter, I remind myself. You want to be a servant.

Doc folds his tattooed arms across his chest. “Is there a reason you’re playing housewife?”

“I just felt like doing something.”

“I don’t know if anyone told you, rich girl, but we have a gym. We have a pool. You don’t have to do Mrs. Hughes’ cosplay.”

I don’t know who that is, but I can tell Doc’s making fun of me. That even after last night, he still hates me. “I can’t help being a Whitehall any more than you can help being where you’re from. And I’m not trying to suck up to you guys, I just like cleaning.”

Doc hauls himself onto the counter. “Fair enough, Tits.” He looks me up and down. “You know, if you want to be our little maid, I can get you a uniform.”

I know he means a frilly apron and high heels. Stripper clothes. “No thank you.” I pick up my vegetable knife and return to my carrots. “How was your day?”

“Why?”

God, what is his problem? “I’m just trying to talk to you.”

“Oh yeah?” He shifts closer to me. “How about we talk about what me and Bobby did to you last night?”

I shave a tiny piece of skin off a carrot, refusing to look at him.

“You sigh, you know,” he says conversationally. “Whenever anyone kisses you. At first, I thought you were

putting it on, but you're just that horny, aren't you?"

I ignore him, peeling another strip of skin from my carrot.

He shifts closer again. "Remember, Tesorina? Remember how I kissed you?"

All too well. His mouth soft and lazy on mine, the taste of liquor and rain and fresh cigarettes.

"It was a good kiss," Doc says with a grin. "Don't you agree?"

I bend my head, letting my sweaty hair swing between us. It was a perfect kiss, but that doesn't make it any easier to peel vegetables. Doc has probably kissed a thousand girls. He doesn't care about me.

"Gonna ignore me, Tits? After that nice orgasm I gave you?"

I carefully slice a potato into halves. We both know it was Bobby who gave me the orgasm. He just wants me to talk to him and I won't.

Doc swings his long legs against the counter. "You gonna stay and cook once Morelli's wife moves in?"

My mouth falls open. "Mr. Morelli's *married*?"

Doc laughs. "What's wrong, Tits? Jealous Prince Elliot's already taken?"

I drop my gaze to the potatoes, furious at myself for talking.

"Don't worry. He's not married yet. But he needs pure-blooded Italian babies to inherit his eighteenth-century wine glasses or whatever the fuck. He'll have a wife by summer."

I try to focus on cutting vegetables, but I can't stop picturing an Italian goddess with golden skin and liquid brown eyes. Eli's rubies around her neck. My plans to be a housemaid go up in smoke. There would be nothing more humiliating than waiting on Mr. and Mrs. Morelli.

“What are you making?” Doc asks. “Harvey said it was an ‘old family recipe’ but judging by what’s going on here, that’s bullshit. Unless you’re doing mayonnaise salad.”

I can’t help but smile. “I never said it was *my* family recipe.”

“Very clever, Tesorina. Another gift from your Zia Teresa?”

He remembered her name. A silly little thrill goes through me. “It is actually. Brodo is Zia’s favourite. And mine.”

“Right.” Doc’s gaze lingers on the simmering pot.

“Did your mom make brodo?”

He snorts. “My mom was a pillhead, Tits. Kraft mac and cheese was the only pasta I got growing up.”

Before I can think of what to say to this, Bobby wanders in. “What’s going on? Why can I smell—”

He sees me and does a double take. Doc laughs. “Here’s a boy whose mama made pasta, Tesorina. Basher’s nearly as bad as Morelli. Won’t go to Italian restaurants because it doesn’t taste enough like home.”

“Hi,” I say, avoiding eye contact. “Welcome back.”

“Hey.” Bobby’s wearing a cable knit sweater and looks every bit my former math tutor. “Are you... good?”

I think of his stubbled cheeks brushing my thighs, the soft swipes of his tongue, the tattoo of a swordfish on his heavy bicep... I stare down at the cutting board. I know people hook up with people and then talk to them again. Why can’t I?

Doc cackles into the awkward silence. “Hey, you know what actually tastes like home to Basher, Tits?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Bobby snarls.

I manage to smile at him. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

“Aww lovers reunion,” Doc mumbles, shoving a cigarette between his teeth. He pulls a lighter from his pocket and snaps it so a tiny flame appears.

I almost have a heart attack. “You can’t smoke in here!”

Doc raises his blond brows. “Pardon?”

“I just cleaned! Can’t you go outside?”

He scowls, and for a moment I’m sure he’s going to light it just to spite me. But then the cigarette and lighter vanish. “If I behave, can I kiss you again?”

I remember those slow, confident laps of his tongue and my face becomes unbearably hot. “I... No. You can just have healthier lungs.”

Doc rolls his eyes and I’m reminded so forcibly of Zia Teresa I almost burst into tears. Maybe it’s fate. No matter where I go, some grumpy Italian will refuse to quit smoking around me. I pick up the cutting board and slide the chopped vegetables into the pot.

“How about I give you another kiss anyway?” Doc says. “Just because you like it so much?”

I glance over my shoulder and Doc laughs. “Worried Basher’ll get jealous? Don’t. He likes sharing. Remember last night?”

Bobby’s cheeks go scarlet, but he doesn’t look angry. My insides tighten. I have no idea what I want to happen.

Doc slides off the bench and takes the cutting board out of my hands. “One kiss, Tesorina. That’s all.”

“Doc...”

“Domenico,” he corrects. “Whenever we do this, you call me by my real name.”

I look away. It wasn’t supposed to go like this. I was supposed to be a servant. To fade into the background.

Doc’s finger lifts my chin. “Just one little kiss.”

My eyes flick to Bobby. He's watching the two of us with a strange expression on his face.

Doc bends down and nuzzles my neck. "Don't be shy, baby. Basher knows how much you like kissing. He could taste it."

I swallow, my mouth dry as toast. Doc smells like cigarettes and liquor, cologne and sweat. I know I should pull away, but I close my eyes instead.

"One kiss," he says, so close I taste his words. "One kiss for me, then one kiss for Basher."

"No," I whisper.

"Yes. A kiss for both of us and then—"

"The fuck is happening here?"

I jump like someone fired a gun. Doc sighs, lowering his finger from my chin. "Perfect timing, Morelli."

Eli stands in the doorway in a dark suit and red tie. As always, his angular beauty hits like a brick. I tuck my hair behind my ear. I felt untidy in front of Doc and Bobby. I feel disgusting in front of Eli.

"So this is where you've been all day, Domenico? Making Miss Whitehall clean the kitchen?"

Doc snorts. "I've been dealing with Romanov. The girl cleaned on her own."

Eli gives him a skeptical look.

"Believe me. If it was my call, she'd be upstairs polishing something else."

Eli glances at me. "Was the cleaning your idea, *bella*?"

I wish I'd done anything else today. Gone to the gym. Walked in the grounds. Even read a book. "Yes, um, it was."

"I already offered her a maid outfit," Doc says. "Want to kick in? Buy her a feather duster?"

Eli ignores him. He walks to the stovetop where the brodo is beginning to smell like heaven. He turns to me. “You can cook?”

“I... Yes?”

He walks closer, shiny shoes clicking on the newly washed floor. “You didn’t tell me you could cook.”

“I, um, didn’t think you’d want to know?”

He jerks a thumb behind him. “Is that Pastina di Pollo?”

“I don’t know. It’s... my Zia Teresa calls it brodo.”

“I see.” Eli’s expression is mild. Maybe my dinner is so inauthentic, he’s going to pour the entire pot down the sink.

“You don’t have to eat it,” I say quickly. “I just thought Harvey and the others would like it and *I* like it and I really wasn’t trying to... do anything...”

Eli’s gaze falls on the plastic-wrapped parmesan sitting beside the grater. His face darkens. “*Cos’è questa merda disgustosa?*” *What is this disgusting shit?*

I wince. “Harvey brought it back.”

I feel bad throwing Harvey under the bus, but he’s way less likely to get locked in a cage if Mr. Morelli hates store-bought Parmesan as much as Zia Teresa.

“Put it in the trash,” Eli snaps. “Harvey can drive to the deli for parmigiano.”

He pulls out his phone and taps a message. A text to Adriano ordering him to strangle me for insulting their heritage? What possessed me to make Italian food in the house of an Italian prince? Why didn’t I just ask Harvey for a burger?

Eli shoves his phone back into his suit jacket and looks me over. “You’re filthy. And your dress is ruined.”

“I know. I’m sorry but—”

“Can your meal wait another hour?”

I blink. “Um, of course. It gets better the longer it simmers.”

“Good. Go clean yourself up. I’ll bring you a new dress and we’ll eat at seven.”

“You mean me and the guards?”

His mouth curves upward. “I mean all of us. There are things the five of us need to discuss.”

My stomach twists. Five means Adriano. I don’t know his opinions on Italian food, but I really don’t want to offend him. “Maybe you can eat without me? Or I can serve you and eat in the kitchen?”

Doc laughs. “See? Told you she wants to be our maid.”

Eli raises a brow. “Is that true, *bella*? Do you want to serve us?”

It’s my moment to say yes. To take the first step into becoming a useful, invisible nobody. But as I look into Eli’s amber eyes, I think of the rubies he once offered me. The ones I would see around the neck of his Italian wife.

“Um, no. Not really. I mean, not like that.”

“I see.”

“Pricktease,” Doc says. “I wanted that uniform.”

Eli points to the kitchen door. “Leave now, Miss Whitehall. Go make yourself pretty for us.”

The sentence echoes in my head as I wander the halls trying to find my way back to my bedroom. ‘Go make yourself pretty for us.’

Us, as in all of them. Does that mean Eli knows about me and Doc and Bobby? He didn’t seem upset to find Doc about to kiss me. Could they have already told him what we’d done? That seems impossible, but they did plan on sleeping with me in front of each other last night. They had bets on who would go first. The skin on the back of my neck tightens. Is this a thing men do? Share one woman between them? I imagine

asking Zia Teresa and all I see is her taking off her slipper and whacking me with it. I could ask Margot or Penelope maybe if they were here, and we'd all been drinking.

“Oof!”

I've walked right into a wall. I look up grinning to find Adriano Rossi glaring down at me. I open my mouth to apologize but before I can speak, his tattooed hand shoots out and closes around my throat. He pins me against the paneled wall.

“Help,” I gasp.

He leans in, his beard rough against my cheek. “Heard you came very close to getting fucked last night, little girl.”

I want to scream but my body is frozen. I remember my dream, those electric green eyes burning bright as his tongue delved deep inside me. “Please...”

“The second they're done with you, you're gone.”

He lets go of my throat and I crumple to the dusty carpet. He steps over me and keeps walking.

“Mr. Morelli said you're not allowed to hurt me,” I whisper.

Adriano turns, gold tooth flashing. “Accidents happen, Pryntsesa.”

I watch as he disappears around a corner, every fiber of my body humming with fear.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elliot Morelli

“I’M SORRY, MR. Morelli.” Harvey lays the freshly grated parmigiano, warm bread and salted butter on the dining room table in front of me, his face flushed with embarrassment.

I offer a small nod. “It won’t happen again?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. Take everything into the kitchen then go fetch a few bottles of the Montalcino.”

The old man dashes away and I wonder if January knew she was being held next to a few million dollars’ worth of wine. Probably not. She strikes me as a delightfully unobservant girl. Not simple but focused only on the things that interest her. I Inhale the aroma of her cooking. If it tastes half as good as it smells, she’s very talented. A beautiful little virgin who speaks Italian and cooks. Am I really going to give a girl like that to Gio?

Adriano wanders past, his face buried in his phone.

“Coming to dinner?” I call.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“It’s not a suggestion. We need to discuss things with the girl.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to her.”

“And what about us? Your brothers?”

A look crosses his face. Weariness. Or maybe just plain old tiredness. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing with this girl?”

“Don’t be melodramatic. She’ll be out of your hair soon enough.”

His eyes narrow.

My temper, held back through endless meetings with paranoid associates of Parker, rises. “If you’ve got something to say, say it.”

“Parker pissed away millions keeping that pussy on hold. You sure you’re not doing the same thing?”

It’s a question I’ve asked myself many times today, as I ignored Gio’s calls confirming January’s place in his house. But I’ll be damned if I’ll tell Adriano that. “We took her for the right reasons.”

He looks pointedly at the glossy carrier bags on the chair beside me. “You sure it’s not something else?”

“Are *you* questioning my judgment?”

“No,” he says flatly. “But you need to be careful. Doc and Bobby...” He shakes his shaggy head. “Forget it.”

“What?”

“I said ‘forget it.’”

I trust Adriano with my life, but it’s difficult to know where he stands on anything that isn’t breaking someone in half. He’s not entirely Italian. A criminal with no ties to organized crime. He has few needs and he’s never liked women. Never, to my knowledge, had a girlfriend. But his loathing of January is unprecedented. And irritating.

“You’ll be at dinner,” I tell him. “You’ll dress appropriately, and you’ll behave like a human being and not some vicious *cafone*. Understood?”

He says nothing as he leaves the room, but I know he’ll be there. Whatever else, Adriano’s loyalty is absolute.

Doc and Bobby wander in. Doc's wearing a shirt. A black one I've never seen before. I gesture at him. "What's all this?"

Doc tugs at his collar. "You said to dress up."

I want to ask, '*Since when do you give a shit about what I say?*' but it would be poor leadership to question someone obeying orders. I collect the carrier bags beside me. "Sit down and have a drink. I'm going to give January her gifts."

"What did you get her?" Bobby asks.

"You'll see."

Doc can't meet my eyes. I'm not sure if it's the shirt or because I know what he did to January last night. He hoped Bobby wouldn't tell me, but Bobby's my oldest friend. He tells me everything.

What Doc might not realize is that I'm not mad he touched January. I'm pissed at him for stealing my keys and undermining me, but their little pseudo threesome gives me hope.

She let them touch her, which shows with a little persuading she's willing to be touched. And if Adriano was trying to warn me that Doc and Bobby are infatuated with her, that's hardly news. So am I. However this evening plays out, I'm still going to tell Gio she's a virgin.

I unlock January's bedroom door, but she's nowhere to be found. "Miss Whitehall?"

A small squeak from the ensuite. "Mr. Morelli?"

"Come out. I've brought you some things."

She emerges in a towel, water droplets still clinging to her skin. She looks as beautiful as a sunset over the Mediterranean. I want to recline with a tumbler of the world's best scotch and just watch her.

"Mr. Morelli...?" she repeats, cheeks now scarlet. "What did you want to give me?"

I keep my face stern. She has no idea how attractive she is, but it's better that way. Better she doesn't form bad habits. I extend the largest carrier bag toward her. "For you to wear to dinner."

"Oh." She folds an arm across the towel and takes the rope handles. "You didn't need to... although I guess you did because I didn't have anything else to wear. But thank you."

She sits on the bed and opens the bag. The dress emerges in a rush of cream silk. January looks at me. "It's white..."

"And you're still a virgin, *bella*. Go into the bathroom and get changed."

She hesitates. "It's a gorgeous dress, but I still need to cook the pastina for the brodo."

"Gretzky can do it."

The pinch between her brows makes me smile. "The man can boil pastina, *bella*. It's more important you look beautiful for us. Now go put on my dress."

When she emerges a few minutes later I have to clench my jaw to keep from smiling. She's exquisite. The dress is backless with a deep slit in the side, and it makes her pale skin shine like moonlight. You can see the lines of her abdomen, the swells of her breast, and the shadow between her legs.

She turns self-consciously. "You don't like it?"

"This is how a woman with your figure should dress. Now the shoes."

January returns to the bed, and I pass her the second largest bag. She pulls out the black and white striped box and her eyes widen. "Aquazzura?"

"Surely, you've had them before?"

"No. I wasn't allowed to wear high heels because..." She goes bright red, and I understand. She's tall for a woman. In heels, she'd tower over Parker.

"You don't have to worry about that anymore, *bella*."

“I know. I mean, thank you.”

She opens the box, unveiling the sparkling rose-gold heels. “They’re *beautiful*.”

I watch as she slides the shoes onto her toes. I don’t usually care for feet but hers are gorgeous, small and white with tiny pink nails.

I hold out the small bag from Bergdorf’s. “Makeup. I’ll leave you to apply it, but I’d like you to wear red lipstick.”

“You picked out makeup for me?”

“I described your coloring to an assistant. I want you to be subtle. Do not overpower your face.”

“Yes, Mr. Morelli.”

I like the way she talks, husky and sweet, just the way a woman should be. “There’s one thing left,” I tell her.

Her green eyes shine up at me. “Yes, Mr. Morelli?”

I pull the ruby necklace from my pocket, the stones glittering in the bedroom light.

She pulls away from me.

“You don’t need to panic. No promises will be made because you wear this necklace. I just want to see it against your skin.”

She shifts back even further onto the bed. “I don’t think... I just...”

My good mood vanishes. For all her beauty and gratitude, she’s acting like a child. I shove the necklace into my pocket. “Fine. Put on your makeup and come downstairs.”

Her face falls. “Mr. Morelli...?”

“Do not keep me waiting.”

I find my men sitting around the freshly cleaned dining table, all of them well-groomed and drinking wine. This is how Velvet House should be.

I sit at the head of the table and raise the glass of Montalcino that's been poured for me. "Salut."

"I was just saying Parker's acting strangely," Bobby tells me. "Sealing himself in his office with his counter chief."

"You were expecting him to do something else?" I ask.

"I was expecting threats. Him biding his time worries me."

Doc throws a chunk of bread into his mouth. "Let him sit around and sulk. Gives us more time to look into this Orchard bullshit. I've tracked down an ex-girlfriend of his in Monaco. I'm trying to reach out and ask if she was ever overwhelmingly horny in Parker's presence."

"Good idea," I say. "If we get confirmation we can—"

Everyone turns to the doorway. Bobby goes red. Doc's jaw hangs. Even Adriano stares. It's January Whitehall, in record time and she looks fucking delicious. I stand and the other three follow.

She raises her hands then lets them flutter back down to her sides. "Hi everyone..."

"You look like a movie star," Bobby blurts out, then looks mortified. I expect Doc to make fun of him but he seems incapable of speech.

I move toward her and hold out a hand. When she takes it, sparks run up my arm. I lead her to the seat at my left.

"What a pretty dress, Tesorina," Doc says slyly. "Did Morelli buy it for you?"

"Yes."

Doc raises his glass to me. "Good choice."

I bite back a smile as I fill January's wine glass from the decanter.

She touches a hand to her blood-red lips. "I probably shouldn't drink."

“You shouldn’t be rude either, *bella*,” I say, passing her the wine. “I’m your host.”

She raises the glass with two hands and sips, a tiny shiver passing through her.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes,” she says with an unconvincing smile.

“My sisters were given a splash of wine in their lemonade as children,” I tell her. “Would you prefer that?”

She takes a much larger sip. “You don’t have any lemonade. Only orange soda.”

Bobby laughs and she looks gratified.

Gretzky and Schnee serve the food. They’re not happy to be treated like waitstaff, but they know better than to complain. I dip my spoon into the broth and taste home. Oil and salt, cheese and pasta. I eat a few mouthfuls and look up to see January staring at me. She hasn’t touched her food. She looks even more uncomfortable than when Adriano fucked her mouth with a gun. I smile at her. “It’s good, *bella*.”

Bobby nods and even Doc grins. “You’ll never be allowed to leave now, Tits.”

January flushes and picks up her spoon.

We could keep her. It would be risky, letting her stay where Parker could so easily find her, but what is risk to men like us? And it might take time to make her trust us, but time isn’t an object. While we wait for her more prudish tendencies to be broken, we could eat together like this. The table laid out with good food and wine. We could laugh and relax, reclaim something that’s been lost to us for far too long.

Doc asks Bobby about the Czech ceramics he’s just sourced for a private collector in Hudson.

January perks up when he mentions blown glass. “I think I saw something like that at The Met last year.” She says it in a nervous rush, as though expecting us to punish her.

Doc smirks. “The only time I’ve been to the Met is to sell weed.”

January’s eyes widen. “Really?”

“Yeah, he was some doctor’s kid who wanted to meet in the European sculpture and decorative arts section...”

January listens with rapt attention as Doc tells the story. Bobby intervenes, correcting Doc’s errors and deflating his egotistic proclamations. I watch all three of them with a smile. My brothers are happy. Even Rossi doesn’t look so fucking miserable. It reminds me of being back in my Nonno’s house, surrounded by his friends and cousins and their wives, all of them drinking wine, and telling stories.

Gretzky returns with the meat course and it’s as good as anything my Nonna ever served. I have to fight not to praise January. As with her beauty, my appreciation of her cooking has to be tempered or it will ruin her.

I notice her wine glass is almost empty. For someone who didn’t want any, she’s getting through it fast. There’s a glow in her eyes and her movements are more languid. I refill her glass.

We finish our second course and the mood becomes even lighter. As January, Doc, and Bobby laugh and flirt, I consider where we should take her after this. We could go back into the living room, but my bedroom has full-length mirrors and a minibar—and I want to see everything.

Bobby gestures at his empty bowl. “This was perfect, JJ.”

“Thank you,” she says. “The pastina was a little overdone.”

I can’t help laughing. “Are you sure you aren’t Italian, *bella*?”

January turns pink but I know she likes the question. “I suppose I’m used to my Zia Teresa giving me feedback.”

“A maid correcting your behavior? Did you get angry at her?”

She looks shocked. “Of course not. You can’t improve without correction.”

I study her over my wineglass. It’s a rare thing, a woman who can receive criticism without taking it personally. I think of my vow to send her to Gio. To let some other swine possess this jewel of a girl.

“Where’s Gretzky?” Doc demands. “I want dessert.”

January draws a breath. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t make anything.”

“I know you didn’t,” I tell her. “I had Harvey pick up some cannoli.”

She gives a shy smile. “That sounds wonderful. I love cannoli.”

“Good,” Doc says. “I’m going to handfeed you in my lap.”

January barely has time to react. There’s a loud rap on the door and Schnee comes into the room. “Sorry to interrupt. We have an issue.”

“What?” I say. The warm, date-like atmosphere immediately vanishes.

“A crew has shown up to the north river warehouse. It looks like they’re trying to burn the place down.”

“Shit,” Doc hisses. “How many?”

“Two dozen. Fully armed as far as we can tell.”

Doc stands, pressing a napkin to his mouth. “So much for the lack of threats. Basher?”

Bobby’s already on his feet. “We’ll take the chopper,” he tells Schnee. “Tell Piscopo we’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

Adriano drains his wineglass. “Fucking assholes.”

“Go,” I say. “Contact me as soon as you have news.”

“Wait, where are you all going?” January asks.

Doc walks to her side of the table and kisses her on the cheek. “You’re lucky, Tits. You get to keep your virginity another night.”

He points at me, and I nod behind January’s back. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not cruel. I won’t fuck her without Doc watching.

“Thanks for dinner, JJ,” Bobby says.

January hides her smile behind her hand. “Anytime.”

Both their cheeks are red.

“Awww,” Doc says. “Isn’t this cute?”

“Very,” I agree.

“Fucking hurry up,” Adriano growls.

I don’t go with them. I want to, but it’s a bad look for a boss to assist with what will probably end up being a minor incident. But as I watch them leave, my chest tightens. It’s never easy, sending people you love into danger.

January stares after my brothers like a little lost lamb. “Please, Mr. Morelli? Where are they going?”

“To sort out a problem with your ex-fiancé.”

Her hand lifts to her throat “Mr. Parker is burning down your warehouse?”

“No. Men who work for him are *attempting* to burn down our warehouse. They won’t succeed.”

“But why would he do that?”

“This is our life, *bella*. It’s not all of what we do, but it’s a part of it. And considering what we did to Parker, we expected this sooner and worse.”

She looks down at her half-eaten dinner. “I can’t believe this is all real.”

I briefly close my eyes. In the past week January Whitehall has surprised me with both her intelligence and naiveté. I need to know if she has a stomach for criminal activity or if she’ll

continue to bury her head in the sand. “What do you know about how Parker made his money?”

“Um, I know he works in technology?”

“Very good. And do you know where he got the money for his company?”

January’s gives me a look of beautiful confusion. “He’s... a self-made man, isn’t he?”

I snort. I will never understand the American obsession with the underdog. In Europe, you’re admired for your connections, and your family name. Here, everyone wants to be known for working their way up from nothing.

“Parker is self-made as much as this...” I rap my knuckles on the dining table. “... is twenty-four-carat gold. He inherited his money. Although that’s still being too diplomatic. ‘Laundered’ is the correct word.”

“Mr. Parker’s money was dirty?”

“Yes, *bella*. It was filthy. His father ran drugs for the Mariucci family. Hash and heroin and coke. And before you say Parker had no control over who his father was, he worked for him. He discovered how to launder drug money through cryptocurrency and online poker. In that sense, he was a tech entrepreneur.”

January sucks her lower lip. “Does he still sell drugs?”

“No. He changed his mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“Parker’s father died when he was twenty. Zachery took over, but he had no appetite for the business. He took what money and manpower he could and went legitimate. That’s why a few years later he was running a tech company and courting your father, hoping to marry into your family.”

January’s eyes move from side to side as she processes this. I appreciate her response. A woman who goes still when confronted with bad news is a pleasant surprise.

She blinks twice, and her gaze returns to mine. “How do you know all of this?”

I pour myself another glass. “I just do.”

“Does it have something to do with why you stole me or —”

“Enough.” I push back my chair. “Why are we wasting our evening talking about that ugly man? Come here, *bella*.”

Her cheeks go pink, but she doesn’t move.

I open my arms. “Come, little doll. And bring your wine.”

She lifts her glass and carries it carefully toward me. The pearl polish on her fingernails is chipped, probably from cleaning the kitchen. When Parker is dead and I’ve hired staff to clean and serve dinner she can get her nails done. Blood red. Or palest pink. She sits delicately on my lap, and I pull her closer, settling her against my chest. “Drink your wine.”

She sips obediently and I watch her throat work, tucking a curl behind her ear. I can’t get rid of her. I will put my rubies around her neck, and she will belong to Velvet House.

She turns her head and inhales deeply.

“Is something wrong?”

“Your cologne...” she whispers, a little slur at the edges of her voice. “What kind is it?”

“Do you not like it?”

“Oh, no I do, it’s just... I don’t think I’ve smelled lavender on a man before.”

“Is it embarrassing, *bella*? Unmanly? Do you want me to be like Adriano and smell like leather and blood?”

She shivers against my chest. “He hates me.”

“Don’t take it personally. Adriano hates anything that makes him feel and that includes desire.”

She shudders and I wrap my arms around her, burying my face in her neck. She smells clean and sweet and I want to lick

every inch of her. Bobby said she mewled like a kitten while she came on his face. I want to hear that soft, slightly pathetic, sound. I skim my hands down the sides of her body and she twists in my lap, soft thighs working against mine. “Mr. Morelli, have you given me that drug?”

I pull away smiling. “Is that what you think?”

Her head tilts to the side.

“*Bella*, we both know you wanted me from the moment you laid eyes on me.”

“But then why did you give me Orchard last night? I already wanted... I mean... you didn’t have to...” She buries her face in my shirtfront. “I shouldn’t be saying this.”

I shift against her so she can feel my hard cock. She draws in a sharp breath, but she doesn’t move away.

I run a hand up her thigh, toying with the split in her skirt. “We gave you your Orchard because we thought it would be fun to send you into a frenzy. But you’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“So are you.” She taps my chest. “You’re nicer than you pretend to be.”

I tug the split a little wider, exposing more porcelain thigh. “Is that right?”

“I think so.” She swallows. “Will the others be okay? Doc and Bobby and... and Adriano?”

“Are you worried about them? Have you changed your mind about us?”

“No. I mean, *you’re* the ones who want to get rid of me.”

I laugh. She’s sassy tonight. Maybe it’s her natural state, emerging with wine and a sense of safety. I slide my palm between her thighs. “I could have changed my mind, now I know you can cook?”

She inhales. “I was so nervous. I’ve never cooked for men before.”

I like that she was nervous. “What else can you cook?”

“A bit of everything. Pasta mostly.”

“You mean boiling water and throwing it in?”

“No. I can make potato gnocchi and tortellini and ravioli. Lots of things. Although I’d need a rolling machine.”

I kiss her neck, so she won’t see me smile. “What a delightful little girl you’re turning out to be.”

“T-thank you.”

Whether she’s aware of it or not, she’s spreading her legs, practically daring me to dip a hand between her folds.

“Is that what you want in a wife?” she asks. “A woman who cooks pasta?”

“My wife will not cook.”

“Because she’ll be too fancy to get her hands dirty?”

Here it is again. The teasing sass. “Exactly, *bella*. My mistress, on the other hand...”

“So, you want a woman who cooks, but not as a wife or mother to your children?”

I sigh. “I couldn’t explain to an Americano like you.”

“Didn’t you grow up in America?”

“I did, but that doesn’t make me American. Italians bring their homeland wherever they travel, as the Romans did.”

She smiles. “Did the Romans have mistresses?”

I nip the side of her neck. “Yes.”

She giggles. “Ah, I see.”

“Having a mistress is not a shameful thing. Marriage is an arrangement between two families. Your wife is your business partner. A mistress is a person you chose for pleasure.”

January considers this. “Is that what your father did?”

“My parents married for love.”

“Really?”

“You’re confusing that statement for a happy one, *bella*. My parents were miserable.”

“What happened?”

I raise my palms and close them over her breasts, squeezing her lightly.

She squirms. “Mr. Morelli...”

As soon as I hear that wild, desperate note in her voice, I drop my hands. I’m no horny teenager. If January is to be mine, she needs to learn these games will go on as I see fit. That she cannot control me with her body any more than she could control me with tears.

“My parents met on a holiday in Borneo. My mother was engaged to an Earl and my father, Vincent Morelli, was a financial investor. It was love at first sight. Three days after they met, my mother gave back her ring and my father handed her his.”

January’s eyes shine like stars. “Wow. So, they got married?”

“They did. My mother’s family were furious. My Nonno threw her out of the house.”

She gapes at me. “But the Morellis are one of the richest families in New York!”

“True, but to my Nonno, all American money was new money.” Her incredulous look makes me smile. “My mother came to live with my father in Manhattan. They were married and a year later I was born.”

“Did they have a big, beautiful wedding?”

“They did. Then they had a short, unhappy marriage.”

“Why?”

“My mama was used to travelling the world, used to diamonds and writing cheques without thinking. My father

was wealthy, but he wasn't an Earl. After I was born mama patched things up with Nonno and took me back to Naples and lived in his household for weeks on end. Sometimes she wouldn't even tell my father she was leaving. He would just come home from work and find us gone."

"She *kidnapped* you?"

I snort. "Don't be melodramatic, *bella*. She always returned to New York. Not that it did any good. After my sisters were born, things got worse."

January gapes at me. "How?"

"It just did. My father loved my mother, but he couldn't make her happy. They separated not long after my brother was born."

"Oh." January lifts her glass and takes a deep swallow of wine.

I raise my knee, jostling her. "Did I disappoint you? Do you want to think love conquers all?"

She doesn't smile. "Do you think your parents' marriage would have been better if your father had a mistress?"

"I think people should be rational about what makes marriage work."

"And have you ever been married?"

I frown. Sass is one thing, impudence is another. "No, and neither have you, Miss Whitehall."

January holds her tongue. I shift my hand to her abdomen, feeling her flat belly tense beneath her dress. "Are you so sure you don't want to live here and play mistress, *bella*?"

"Do you mean to you? Or to... all four of you?"

I rub my cheek against hers, stroking her silky skin with my stubble. "Does it matter?"

"I guess. I thought you wanted me all to yourself?"

“I did, but seeing how happy you made my brothers tonight, I’m considering other options.”

January finishes her wine.

Amused, I take the glass and put it on the table. “Is that a ‘yes?’”

“I don’t think I can...”

I bite back a smile. From what she’s already done with Doc and Bobby, there’s nothing she’d like better than being our little whore. But she’s not ready to know that about herself yet. I’ll have to show her. I kiss the side of her neck. “Well, what do you want to do with yourself, Miss Whitehall?”

“I’m not sure. It changes every day.”

“I very much doubt that. You’re domestic. You want to sing and prepare food and prance around a pretty kitchen being a beautiful little girl.”

Her mouth falls open. “That’s so... I don’t want that.”

“Ah, *bella*, don’t protest. It’s lovely.”

“But you’re saying I’m an idiot!”

“No, I’m saying your heart belongs in your home. And it always will.” I press my hand between her legs. “Would you like me to buy you a pasta machine? Fill the cupboards and let you cook us dinner every night?”

My fingertips brush the wet petals between her legs, and she squirms against me.

“I don’t want to be your mistress.”

“Being a mistress is a purer love than being a wife. It’s all affection. All pleasure. It’s precious.”

“And what about the others?”

I laugh. “Ah, the real question. *‘Would I have to give up Doc and Bobby?’*”

“No! That’s not what I mean!”

I smirk. “You don’t need to lie. I heard about last night.”

“You did?”

“Of course. My brothers and I have no secrets.” I rest my thumb against the soft button between her legs. “Would you like to be shared?”

“Shared? What does that even mean?”

“You’re not a stupid girl, I’m sure you understand.”

“But how would it work? Monday nights I’m with Doc, Tuesdays I’m with Bobby?”

“Maybe,” I say evenly. “We can make up our own rules. That’s the fun of it.”

“And you would... approve of that?”

I rub my thumb against her, lighter than a whisper. “As long as you’re not my wife, I don’t mind if you take pleasure from my brothers. In fact, I’d be happy to see it.”

“You can’t mean that!” she gasps. Whether from shock or my touch, I’m not sure.

I move faster, stroking her clit in gentle circles. “*Bella*, you’re young and you’ve never had a boyfriend. You don’t know much about men.”

“No, but I don’t think most men are like you.”

I scrape my teeth along the side of her pale neck. “When you’ve settled in, I’ll have Doc take you to Dreams. Men watch their friends get lap dances; they talk about women’s bodies with one another. When they’re close—and my brothers and I are very close—men can find pleasure in sharing a beautiful woman together.”

There is a heavy silence and I know what she’s thinking. I grin. “What a dirty little mind you have, *bella*. But no, none of us are attracted to men.”

“Then why...?”

“There’s a saying,” I murmur in her ear. “*It’s nice to drive a Ferrari, but then you can’t watch it go by.*’ You are that Ferrari, January. Sometimes I want to drive and sometimes I want to watch you be driven. To loan you to someone I trust because that is my pleasure.”

“I... I’m not a car, I’m a girl.”

“A pretty, obedient little girl,” I say, bringing my second hand between her splayed thighs. Her cunt is soaking, and there’s no resistance as I slide a fingertip inside her. When I pump, she whines like a lost kitty—just like Bobby said she would.

“My brothers and I are busy men, *bella*. We travel and work long hours. We don’t have time to date. Sex is easy to come by, but home comforts are another matter.”

I pulse my fingertip inside her, careful not to penetrate too deeply.

“The longer you’re here, the more I think it might be practical to keep you. A little woman for us to play with.”

Her head tips back onto my shoulder, her green eyes glazed. “I don’t know...”

“So don’t know. Let me know for you. I’m telling you that there is nothing you would like more than to live in my house and cook and sing and get fucked by four men.”

Her cunt ripples around my hand. “No...”

“Don’t deny it. Just the thought of being ours has you coming all over my fingers.”

She tosses her head from side to side. “But Adriano hates me.”

“And sometimes it’s a pleasure to fuck what you hate.”

I rub her in firm circles and she grips my wrist and tries to push my hand away. I shake her off, pulsing and stroking at once.

“No...” She whispers. “Please.”

Her inner muscles clench tight around me, practically drawing me in. I'm going to make her come. Show her where she belongs.

She twists against me, gasping. "I don't want to be a mistress. I want to be special to someone."

"Have you not listened to a word I said? You'd be special to all four of us."

"No. You're lying. You're just scared to love someone the way your father loved your mother."

The words are a knife in my chest. I stand, letting her tumble onto the floor. She cowers below me, shock written across her face. "Apologize, Miss Whitehall. Now."

January's eyes are already bright with tears. "I'm... I'm sorry, Mr. Morelli."

"Not good enough." I grip her hair and yank her to her knees. "I am not nicer than I pretend to be. I'm a thousand times more cruel. You forget yourself. You forget where you are. It is for my amusement you were given a choice between myself and my brothers. There's no way out of this situation in which you won't be tied to a powerful man, bent over, used and made to have his children."

"I'm sorry." The dam bursts and tears stream down her cheeks.

"I know you are. Now you'll prove it. Unzip me and take me out."

"But—"

I tighten my hold in her hair. "Now, Miss Whitehall."

She reaches for my belt, unbuckling it with fumbling fingers. I let her wallow in her own clumsiness. If she wanted me to be gentle, she should have kept her idiotic mouth shut. She pulls my belt open and undoes my pants. She hesitates when she gets to my underwear.

"Have you seen one before?" I demand.

She swallows and I remember the previous evening. “Doc, stroking himself in front of you?”

She nods.

“That man is always ruining things. Never mind, Miss Whitehall. My cock will be the first you taste. Take me out and suck.”

She pulls me from my briefs and my stomach clenches at the tentative touch of her lips. They close over me and she sucks, quite literally, drawing on me without moving. It’s good, but it won’t get the job done. I pull her hair, guiding her back and forth. “Like this.”

She seizes on the rhythm, and I groan. “That’s a good girl. Deeper. Concentrate.”

All the muscles in my body tighten as I strain into her mouth, and I become aware of the weight in my pocket. The ruby necklace. The final crown for the princess on her knees.

“Do not stop sucking.” I release her hair and take out the necklace. I fasten it around her throat. Mine. All mine. She looks up, her mouth full of cock, my rubies shining against her pale skin. “Beautiful.”

I scrape a tear from her cheek and put it to my tongue. She gives a tiny moan of helplessness that vibrates down my shaft. I smile. “There is more you need to learn than just how to make a man come. You’re here now. And you’re ours. You’ve showed some strength, but if you want to be worthy of the world you’ve found yourself in, to be a woman I would be proud to call my own, you’ll need to be more than just a pretty mess.”

A bang on the door. January starts but I grip the back of her head and hold her in place. “Come in.”

Gretzky enters, his expression blank. “Doc needs to talk to you.”

I look down at January, still working back and forward, tears puddling on the ground below her. “Is it urgent?”

“Very.”

Gretzky doesn't exaggerate. I pull myself from January's mouth and swipe a thumb over her swollen lips. Her face is paper pale.

“Take Miss Whitehall to my bedroom and lock the door.”

“Yes, sir.”

I stroke January's tear-stained cheek. “Be ready. When I return, you will do your duty by me. And if the others come back alive, you will do your duty by them, too.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

January Whitehall

I'M RUNNING THROUGH a burning house, grabbing paintings and vases for mom. I'm the only one who can do it. Mom said the fire can't touch me. But maybe she was lying because flames are crowding in, licking my heels, and turning my hair to straw. I run faster, stacking things on top of each other, trying not to drop anything...

"Tesorina?"

A cold hand shakes my shoulder and I gasp. I smell whiskey and cigarettes. "Domenico?"

A low chuckle. "Yeah, baby. Basher's here, too. And Morelli."

I rise and see dark shapes moving at the foot of Eli's bed. It's twice the size of mine, big as an ocean. Doc's icy hand closes on my shoulder. "Did you miss us?"

I want to say no but as his weight sinks into the mattress, I smile. There's a sense of rightness in him being here at odds with everything else. "You're all okay? None of you are hurt?"

"We're fine, Tesorina. Kiss me."

Before I can protest, Doc's mouth descends on mine. I fight for a second then give in. He's such a good kisser. There's no urgency, just a slow exploration like we've got all the time in the world. A bedside lamp flicks on and color rushes at me. I see the bright gold of Doc's hair, the dark tattoos on his forearms.

Another weight settles at my back. “JJ...”

A warmer hand cups my jaw, breaking my kiss with Doc. Bobby. He kisses me, fast and rough. I feel Doc slide beneath the covers, putting his cold knee between my legs. I’m still wearing my white dress and Eli’s rubies are heavy around my throat. I tried to take them off but the clasp is impossible to undo alone.

Bobby moans into my mouth, his hands winding through my hair. There’s a sound of something being dragged across the floor and I pull away. Eli is settling into a chair at the foot of the bed, his dark eyes gleaming. “Hello, *bella*.”

I recall the feel of him in my mouth, his promise before he left that they would all take me. A sizzle of fear runs down my body.

“Bobby’s been a brave boy,” Eli says. “He was stabbed.”

I gasp. “What?”

Bobby glares at Eli. “You had to tell her?”

Doc laughs into my neck. “Show her your war wound, tough guy.”

With a scowl, Bobby leans back and I see a bandage where his t-shirt meets his collarbone.

“Oh my God!”

“It’s nothing, JJ. Just a graze.”

Eli laughs. “You’re going to have to make Bobby feel better, *bella*. Give him another kiss.”

He says it lightly but it’s an order. I press my lips to Bobby’s and heat surges between my legs.

Doc licks a line across my cleavage. “What about me, Tesorina? I’ve been brave too.”

Bobby releases me. “Go on, Jay. Kiss him.”

The next moment Doc’s tongue is back in my mouth, licking softly. Just like falling asleep after what Eli did, it’s

easier than I want it to be.

Bobby's hands brush over my ass. "God, you're sexy. The girl of my fucking dreams."

My insides go molten, and I kiss Doc even deeper. He smirks against my lips, reaping the benefits of Bobby's compliment. My cheeks burn. I should be stopping this. Or at least not moaning and pressing up against the two of them while sparks light up my body.

Doc breaks the kiss and lowers himself, panting, to my nipple. "Make out with Bobby. I wanna do this."

He pulls my dress open and draws me into his mouth. My gaze finds Eli. He's lounging in his armchair like royalty, watching his men put their hands all over me. He said he wanted to be my first, but Bobby is pulling up my dress and Doc is sucking my nipple and he's just watching, his stare as heavy as his necklace.

He smiles. "Don't worry, *bella*. Just enjoy yourself."

Bobby's hand is between my legs, his fingers rubbing lightly. As my eyes roll back, Doc kisses me again.

"You look so pretty between them, Miss Whitehall. I'm going to watch you get fucked and then I'm going to take my turn."

I make a panicky noise and Doc swallows it with his tongue.

"I did want your virginity," Eli says. "But my brothers were so brave tonight, they deserve that honor. Bobby will be the first man to finish in your mouth. Domenico has earned the right to take your cunt."

Bobby's fingers run along my slit, spreading the wetness like cream. I moan and Doc grunts in response, his jeaned cock pressing into my thigh. We all fit together so easily, like pieces of a puzzle.

"There's still your tight little asshole, *bella*. That will be mine. But I'll let the boys take their pleasure first."

Shock ripples through me. If that's true, when they're done I won't be any kind of virgin. And what will happen then? Eli won't want me as his mistress. Bobby won't make me his wife. Doc can't auction off my body. Adriano will kill me. I push a hand into Doc's chest. "Please don't take my virginity?"

He growls. "This bullshit again."

"Miss Whitehall, we discussed what was and was not possible at dinner," Eli says coldly.

"I know. But my virginity is the only valuable thing I have."

Bobby makes a disturbed little noise. He might disagree but he still can't save me.

"It's ours," Eli says. "You have no choice."

"If you let me stay a virgin, I'll do things for you. For all of you. With my mouth and my hands."

"You'll do that anyway."

"Yes, but I'll be... enthusiastic. I'll dress up. I'll be happy. You won't have to threaten."

Doc pushes me onto my back and climbs on top of me. His butterfly knife is in his hand. "Lie still."

My eyes fill with tears. "Domenico, *don't*."

He lowers the knife to my throat. "You don't get it, do you? Threatening you makes my dick hard."

"But please—"

His mouth twists in that Elvis sneer. "Forcing myself on you will make me come so hard I'll go blind. I've earned you and I'm gonna fucking have you."

I look at Bobby. His face is shadowed, his eyes unreadable. The flat of Doc's knife digs into my skin. "You think Basher'll come to your rescue? He loves you, Tits, but he loves me more."

Bobby holds my gaze, saying nothing.

A tremor runs through me. “This can’t be happening...”

“It is.” Doc sits back, his hips pinning me to the bed. He shoves his knife between his teeth and unbuckles his belt. His hands dip into his jeans and he pulls out his cock. It’s hard and thick and shining at the head.

“Please stop?”

He ignores me, shifting forward to sit on my chest. He fists my hair, jerking my head up. “Open wide,” he says around the knife.

I part my lips and he drives into me. He’s thicker than Eli with a raw taste that makes me think of bloody steak. It’s harder to give a blowjob on my back but I slurp and suck and rock back and forward the way Eli showed me. If I do a good enough job maybe I can protect my virginity.

Doc opens his mouth and the knife falls into his hand. He holds it to my throat. “Morelli? Can I fuck up this dress?”

“Go ahead.”

I moan around Doc. The silk is so lovely and expensive.

Eli laughs. “Sorry, *bella*. We like ruining beautiful things.”

Doc swings a leg off me and brings his knife between my breasts. “Hold still.”

I freeze as he cuts. The silk barely makes a sound as it splits. It falls away from my body like autumn leaves and my nipples pucker. Doc grins, grabbing my breast. “Fuck, these are huge. What size are you?”

I whimper as he pinches me.

Doc taps his knife on Eli necklace. “Come on, bitch. Say it.”

“30G,” I whimper.

“30G?” Doc gives a low whistle. “You couldn’t tell under all those nun clothes.”

“What about her wedding dress?” Eli asks. “I’ve never seen a bustier bride.”

“Yeah, Parker’s a tasteless fuck. But I thought it was a push-up bra or whatever.”

Despite their casual conversation—or maybe because of it—there’s a wildness in the air. A sense that anything can happen. I try to sit up, but Doc presses the knife to my neck. The next second he’s back on top of me, gripping my hair and forcing himself into my mouth.

The mattress shifts and I hear the rustle of zips and buttons. My body stiffens.

“Deeper,” Doc snarls. “Suck my fucking cock.”

Hands close around my calves, lifting my legs onto either side of a warm, hairy chest. My pussy splits open, wetness pouring down my thighs.

“Bobby, no,” I try to say.

“Fuck,” Doc groans. “When she talks, I can feel it up my dick.”

Something smooth and hot slides between my legs and I shriek. I know what it is, Bobby dragging his hard cock through my pussy.

“Watch it, Basher,” Doc snaps. “That cherry’s mine.”

“Just playing,” Bobby groans, as he rubs himself through my wetness. I don’t want to like it, but he’s gliding over the place he licked last night making everything tingle.

“You look beautiful, *bella*,” Eli calls. “Naked and trapped. Take Domenico into your throat. Swallow him.”

I obey, widening my mouth and letting Doc go deeper. As long as I’m sucking him, he’ll stop Bobby from taking my virginity.

“Pretty girl,” Eli says. “Does Bobby’s cock feel nice against your cunt? Do you wish he’d slide himself inside you and fill you up?”

Doc pauses. “Morelli, I killed three men and kept Basher alive. She’s *mine*.”

“I know,” Bobby pants. “But until you free up her mouth, I’m gonna keep doing this.”

As they work at opposite ends of my body, orgasm surges inside me, like lava rolling over the earth. Bobby’s cock vanishes from my folds. There’s a moment’s relief before his stubbled cheeks are against my thighs and he’s licking me again. I moan, unable to keep myself from grinding against his face. My pussy feels lush and empty. I need something inside me even more than I did when I was on Orchard. But I can’t lose my virginity.

Doc pulls out of my mouth. “I’m gonna nut if we keep going. I’ve been on edge for too long. Basher, go take a knee.”

Bobby gives me a last lick then moves to the end of the bed. Doc tosses his knife on to the bed and peels off his shirt. Sliding off me, he strips away his jeans. His thighs and shins are covered in tattoos. Roaring lions and twisting thorns and skulls with knives in the eye sockets.

My heart jolts so painfully I’m almost sick. It’s going to happen. I’m really going to lose my virginity to a violent psychopath.

Doc kneels between my legs, his cock in his hand. “Now, how should I do this? From behind? Make you ride me and give the boys a show?”

I lie frozen, naked except for Eli’s necklace, knowing the moment I’ve been dreading is here.

“I could do it nice and traditional,” Doc says. “Missionary.”

“Please?” I manage to whisper.

“Please do it missionary? Fine.” He braces above me, one hand on the bed, and rubs his cock through me. It’s thick and round as a baseball bat. “You ready to become a woman?”

“Domenico...”

He flashes a smile at the others. “You watching, Bash? Ten bucks says she comes as soon as I’m all the way inside her.”

He moves the head of his cock through my folds like Bobby did and his eyes find mine. There’s a question there. *You want this too?*

Yes, I think. Yes, I want to know what sex feels like. Yes, I want to know what it feels like with this man. But there’s more to it than ‘yes.’ There’s Mr. Parker paying millions to never touch me. Eli warning me that wherever I go I’ll belong to a powerful man. Adriano telling me I’ll die as soon as the others are done with me.

I shake my head and for a heart-breaking second, Doc looks crushed. The next his knife is at my neck.

“Fuck you. I know you want to. Say it.”

I can’t. I push back against Doc’s blade and a sting edges at my throat.

Panic blurs his handsome features and he lifts the knife. “The fuck, January?”

“Domenico.” There’s a warning in Eli’s voice. “If she’s going to hurt herself, you need to put the knife away.”

Doc presses a thumb to the stinging place at my neck. “Is that right, Tits? You’d rather behead yourself than fuck me?”

I hear the hurt behind his anger, but I also hear Adriano telling me he’ll end my life. If there’s any way I can get out of sleeping with Doc—with any of them—I need to take it. I say nothing.

Doc lifts his thumb and there’s blood, as red as Eli’s rubies smeared across it. He raises it to his lips and sucks it away. “You don’t know how fucked you are.”

My skin crawls, but before I can scream, his hand is over my mouth. He drops the knife and climbs onto my chest, his lean, wolflike body pinning me to the mattress. He spits on me, smearing my breasts with his saliva and cups me roughly. He slides his cock into my cleavage. It doesn’t hurt, but it feels

strange. He pushes forward, his fingers biting into my breasts. “I’m gonna paint you a little mental picture, before I paint your rack with my cum, Tesorina.”

I feel the gulf between that sweet nickname and how Doc actually feels about me, and it stings. But I’ve won. My virginity has been spared. I bend my head forward and draw the head of his cock into my mouth as much as I can.

Doc lets out a guttural moan. “You’re gonna stay here at Velvet House with us. No chance of getting out now. You’ve got Morelli’s rubies around your neck and my cock between your tits, and you can’t lie for shit. We’re not sending you to Italy so Eli’s cousin can find out we gave him damaged goods. *Look at me.*”

He smiles, the same cold smirk he offered as I made my way up the aisle a million years ago.

“No one wants a wife who’s been servicing four criminals. So you’ll stay here, cooking and cleaning for us. And we’ll let you be a virgin, because who gives a fuck? There’s plenty of pussy around.”

The words slice through me, more painful than his blade. The thought of him sleeping with another girl, any of them sleeping with another girl, is awful.

“You’ll suck me off whenever I want it though. While all your idiot friends are getting married and having kids, you’ll be here at Velvet House with your collar on, blowing me.” He runs a finger across Eli’s necklace, pulling it tight as he pumps between my breasts. “And you’ll stay here until I’m fucking done with you.”

As I suck him, I know this is the price of denying him my virginity. He has to humiliate me. To be the winner. It didn’t have to be like this. Doc came into the room smiling and kissing me. But I made my choice. I wanted to stay a virgin. And as Doc grunts and pulls it out of my mouth, I think of my first night at Velvet House. Eli saying I’ve never made any real choices. I made a choice tonight and it led me here.

Doc comes, the spray thick across my breasts. He rubs his palm through it, wiping cum all over me. His smile is hard as nails. “What if Zia Teresa could see you now, huh?”

It’s so cruel, the air rushes from my lungs. I press a hand to my lips and wait for someone to make him apologize.

“Clean her up and get out of the way,” Eli demands.

Doc doesn’t move. “Not yet.”

He clucks his tongue. “What do you—”

Doc falls to his knees beside the bed. He clasps my hips and pulls me to the edge before settling between my legs. “Don’t move or you’ll get cum all over Morelli’s sheets like the dirty whore you are.”

Then he licks me. The same tongue that said such ugly, unkind words laps so sweetly, my body convulses. I want to hate it, to scream in protest, but my body is tight with longing, orgasm only a breath away. I curl my toes and brace for the end when something hard presses into me. I sit up, my stomach muscles clenching. “What’s that?”

Doc ignores me and keeps licking my clit, pumping whatever’s between my legs in and out. Pleasure surges through me and I collapse onto the mattress.

“*Domenico*,” Eli warns.

Scowling, Doc raises his head. “It’s only an inch. Your precious flower’s still a virgin.”

He lowers his mouth and continues lapping as he thrusts the hard object inside me.

I scream. “Seriously, what...?”

But as I say it, I already know. The handle of the butterfly knife that cut my throat. “Oh my *God*.”

I try and sit up again but Doc pushes me back down. “That’s right. If you won’t take my cock, you’ll fuck my knife.”

He lowers his mouth to me, sucking and licking like an animal until I come. My orgasm detonates like a bomb, and I scream until my lungs give out.

Doc watches me, his eyes black with hatred. “There,” he says, pulling his knife from me. “You’re not better than me, are you, you rich cunt?”

Shock whips through me, turning my rubbery muscles to stone. He hates me. He really, really hates me.

“Clean her up,” Eli says coldly.

“Do it yourself.” Doc shoves himself to his feet. He uses his toes to scoop up his clothes and leaves without another word.

It isn’t Eli that cleans me. It’s Bobby. His fingers are steady as he wipes me with a damp cloth and then a dry one until no trace of Doc remains. I hold back tears as he does so. It’s like I’ve been broken apart in the dirt. Bits of me scattered wide across a huge stretch of land. I want Bobby to comfort me, to pick me up and hold me, but his touch is dutiful, and he won’t meet my eye.

When he steps away, Eli looks me over and clicks his tongue again. “Little Miss Whitehall... What am I going to do with you?”

I don’t say anything.

“I’m going to offer you another chance to make things right. Will you let Bobby take your virginity?”

Bobby stands naked and impassive at Eli’s side, but I can see red staining his cheeks. He still wants me. He still wants this, but what was true for Doc is as true for him. I shake my head.

The brightness in Bobby’s eyes departs, and they turn to empty shells.

“Fine,” Eli says. “You’ll pay a different way. Bobby, show Miss Whitehall what you like.”

Bobby looks at him, brow raised.

“I mean it,” Eli says. “Move before I change my mind.”

My blood runs cold. What could he do to me that Doc hasn't already?

Bobby scrambles onto the bed and hauls me to all fours. He seems bigger naked, dark hair dusting his muscular chest. He pushes hard into the small of my back until my ass is in the air. “Stay still, JJ.”

I open my mouth to ask what he's going to do and he spans me.

“Ow!” I look behind to make sure it's Bobby—my sweet math tutor—doing this.

His expression is stony. “Turn back around.”

I feel a surge of anger. “Or what?”

Bobby's mouth thins. “I'll spank you until you can't sit down. Don't test me. I'll do it.”

Looking into his brown eyes I know it's true and the indignity of it makes me cry out, “You're supposed to be nice!”

Eli laughs but Bobby's hard expression doesn't change. “Fuck being nice. Where's that got me?”

“*I like you.*”

“But you respect Doc. You respect Eli. You don't respect me.”

“That's not true!”

“Spank her again,” Eli says lazily.

His hand comes down hard, and I arch my back at the sting. Red heat spreads through me, followed by a shameful truth. This *doesn't* feel bad. Not the way it should. Bobby grips the back of my neck. “Turn, January. Watch.”

I do and the sight of him makes my pussy clench. I imagine him taking me while I'm on all fours like this, his

heavy muscles flexing as he slams into me. As I watch, he spits into his hand and slicks it over his cock. “I’m gonna make you come now.”

“Bobby...”

His gaze softens. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

My throbbing butt says that’s not true, but I know what he means. He won’t take my virginity. And he doesn’t. He notches his cock between my legs, pushing my thighs tight around himself, the way Doc did to my breasts.

He pulses forward, brushing my aching clit and the sensation’s so sharp, I gasp. “Bobby!”

He gives a guttural moan. “You don’t know how good this looks, January. Your ass bouncing up against me. Your little pussy soaking my dick.”

My muscles tremble as I struggle to hold myself up. I can’t believe this is Bobby being so disgusting, but his cock slides against me, and bright spots rush across my eyes.

“She’s going to come again,” Eli says, sounding amused. “Move slower. Steady.”

Bobby swears but he does as he’s told and as his swollen flesh drags across me, my body shakes. I can’t need to finish again. Not after Doc just made me. I’m *not* a whore. I don’t like this.

But the pressure between my legs builds and Eli’s necklace slaps into my skin and I’m doing what Bobby said I was, soaking his cock with my needy, disobedient pussy. I can feel Eli watching, I can picture Doc going down on me, thrusting into me with the handle of his knife. My ass is burning and in the back of my mind, I see Adriano Rossi, his gun trained on my forehead—

“That’s it,” Bobby pants. “Just like that, sweetheart. Come on me.”

My vision blurs and my whole body stiffens. Somewhere I can hear myself screaming, but inside everything is still.

Bobby tunnels through my soaking flesh, forcing stimulation into me until I feel like I'm going to pass out.

"You're dripping all over me," he snarls. "Fuck. Fuck. *Fuuuuuck!*"

His hips slap into mine and wetness sprays across my stomach. I collapse forward, pressing my face into the sheets as Bobby pumps between my thighs. More wetness comes, sliding in thick ropes down my abdomen to the underside of my breasts.

Bobby blows out a breath. "Sorry about your sheets."

I mumble that it's okay, then realize he isn't talking to me.

"It's fine," Eli says. "Are you staying or...?"

"Nah, I'll go."

And like Doc before him, Bobby scrambles off the bed and collects his clothes, leaving without a second glance. I press my face into the covers as my heart zigzags. I've been used again, left again, but I'm still a virgin.

"My turn, *bella*." Eli's voice is as soft as the velvet that makes up his name. "Are you going to be a smart girl and spread your legs?"

He already knows the answer, I can hear it in his voice. He's daring me to deny him to his face.

I keep my head buried in his sheets. "I'm sorry, Mr. Morelli. I can't."

"Of course, you can't." There's a snapping sound and a strong, sweetish scent fills the air. I raise my head and see Eli has lit a cigar. He exhales a cloud of silvery smoke above our heads. "I thought you were smarter than this, Miss Whitehall."

"Maybe this *is* me being smart."

His jaw hardens. "Perhaps Adriano is right about you. Perhaps you are more trouble than you're worth."

Cold slithers through me. “I don’t want to disappoint you, Mr. Morelli. I just want to stay a virgin.”

Eli draws on his cigar, and the end burns orange-white. “In some ways I admire you, Miss Whitehall. There isn’t a woman in a million who could have withstood Orchard the way you have, and your childish insolence has its charm. But I laid out certain expectations tonight and you have failed to meet them.”

His even tone is worse than Doc’s threats. More unnerving than Bobby’s anger. “I’m sorry, Mr. Morelli.”

He points the cigar at the floor in front of him. “On your knees.”

My heartbeat pounds in my ears as I crawl across the bed toward him. I eye his cigar and remember the fire from my dream. Was it a warning? Is he going to burn me?

Eli blows out a cloud of smoke. “I will not ask again.”

I collapse at his feet.

“*Bella.*” The cigar hovers above me. “You’re running out of time and options. Do you know that?”

I nod, trying not to keep my face away from the burning end. I already feel the heat of it on my cheek, the threat of it in my heart.

“You’re going to finish what you started in the dining room. You’re going to suck me like your life begins and ends with my cock. And while you do it, I’m going to sit here and smoke this...” he tilts the cigar at me. “... and think about why I should let you live.”

My mind goes blank. Fear obliterating thought.

Eli moves his hands to his armrest. “What a mess we’ve made of you.”

I touch my hair. It’s a rat’s nest from being grabbed and pulled and I’m still covered in Bobby’s cum. Eli’s judgmental

smile makes me want to curl into a ball and hide. But I'm frozen, hypnotized by the burning cigar tip.

"You're filthy," he says with satisfaction. "Now take me out and suck."

My hands shake as I undo his fly and pull him into my palm. On my wedding day, I nearly fainted at the thought of doing something like this to Mr. Parker. Tonight, it's a compromise I need to make to stay alive.

I fist the base of Eli's cock and take him into my mouth. As I bob in his lap, I watch the cigar. Fear has me moving twice as fast, sucking as though he's something delicious.

"Did you enjoy what my men did to you tonight?"

It's a trick question. He's only saying it to taunt me. I redouble my focus, running my tongue along his shaft.

"Fine," he says curtly. "Don't respond. The reason I ask is because like Bobby, I have something I enjoy in bed. Do you want to know what it is?"

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I've already been spanked, already had a knife against my throat and between my legs. What more can these men do to me that's not sex?

Eli shifts forward, the movement forcing his cock deeper inside me. I retch, readjusting my jaw and try to swallow. The fingers of his free hand close around my throat. "I like choking. Knowing I'm holding a woman's life in my hands as I make the blood rush to her head."

I gag.

"Good girl," he croons. "I look at your pretty white neck, dressed in my rubies, and think how easy it would be to end you, Miss Whitehall. How convenient."

His grip tightens. The sensation is unnatural but no more uncomfortable than having his cock thrusting between my lips. I lap at him, trying to be better than I was in the dining room. Trying to make him come. Trying to finish the night a virgin.

Eli fingernails dig into my throat and I taste a burst of salt. My head spins at the lack of air, but I keep going, pushing, knowing he must be close.

“*Bella*,” he breathes and semen floods my mouth. I swallow and he moans, shuddering helplessly above me. He’s so ruthless, so utterly controlled, but I made him weak.

I sit back on my heels and wait.

After a long moment, Eli tilts my chin to look at him, his chest heaving. “Have you had enough, or should I send for Adriano?”

My heart stops. He wouldn’t let me negotiate my virginity. He would sleep with me just to humiliate me—and then end my life. “No please,” I say, thick-tongued.

“Fine. Maybe next time.” He holds out a hand to me. “Come, *bella*. You need sleep.”

I hesitate, wondering if this is just more games.

“No tricks. Let me help you.”

I place my hand in his and he lifts me to my feet. “How do you feel?”

The answer to that question is too large for me to say. I just nod.

He gives me a sad smile and nudges me toward the bathroom. “My ensuite is through there. Shower. I’ll wait for you.”

I wash in a jumble of disjointed movements, water running through my hair. I won. I kept my virginity. I negotiated my way out of a dead-end deal, all on my own.

I creep out of the bathroom, expecting Eli to be sitting where he was, but he’s standing by the bed as Bobby lays down fresh sheets.

“Here.” Bobby says when he’s finished, throwing open the covers and beckoning me.

I look to Eli. He moves toward me and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I need to go, but you are to sleep here tonight.”

I open my mouth but no sound comes out.

Eli leans down and kisses me softly on the forehead. “Lie down. Bobby will stay with you and keep you safe.”

I climb into bed and Bobby slips in the other side. We lie there together, almost touching. Is he feeling the same as me? That he’d like to hold me but he’s not sure if it’s appropriate? I shift, brushing my shoulder against his. Bobby presses back, his skin warm as sunshine. “JJ?”

“Yes?”

“Can you sing for me?”

My heart squeezes. “Um, sure. What would you like to hear?”

“That French one.”

I know what song he means. ‘La vie en Rose.’ “Are you sure Eli or someone won’t be mad if I make noise?”

His fingers weave through mine. “I’m positive. Please sing for me.”

I close my eyes and sing as quietly as I can, my voice cracking over the lower notes. And as I whisper the words to ‘La vie en Rose’ Bobby lets out a soft breath, as though something inside him has released. And when I’m finished, we lie together, holding hands.

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“WE’RE GONNA NEED to head out there today. Make sure...”

“... But not if...”

“... Yeah, that’s a better idea...”

Light presses against my eyelids. I ignore it. I’m so tired and my whole body aches.

“What else?” a man asks.

It's Bobby. I can feel his legs beside me, hairy and warm, like a big friendly teddy bear.

"Not much, we're just stuck dealing with the fallout."

That's Mr. Morelli. He must be standing by the bed.

"There were always going to be casualties," says a third voice. The sore patch on my neck throbs. It's Doc. Is he here because he's forgiven me? Is everything okay?

"What if it's a coincidence?" Bobby asks.

Doc snorts. "Parker moves in on the warehouse and the next morning the old woman's in the hospital?"

The sound of flesh hitting flesh.

"Chiudi quel cazzo di bocca," Eli hisses. *Shut your fucking mouth.*

I feel all three pairs of eyes on me. I let tiny trickles of breath run in and out of my nose, the rest of me is still as stone.

"Thank fucking Christ," Eli mutters. "This conversation is over. Get dressed and come downstairs."

The covers shift and Bobby's warmth leaves my body.

The old woman's in the hospital. Why would one person being hurt matter if the warehouse was attacked and lots of people were hurt? My body feels it before my mind understands. A sharp cramp in my stomach. My eyes fly open. Doc and Eli are at the bedroom door, Bobby has frozen, his t-shirt halfway on.

"Zia Teresa is in the hospital," I say. "Mr. Parker attacked her."

They have no time to lie. The answer is written on each of their faces.

Eli starts to say something, but a hole is opening inside me, a hole where Zia Teresa stands, smoking and telling me what

to do. I scream and the sound comes from deep inside and goes on and on and on.

Bobby presses his hands to his ears. Doc bolts from the room. In a stride Eli is beside me. He grips my cheek and slaps me across the face. But I keep screaming. I scream until my head swells and my eyes blur. I will scream until I die.

Out of the haze comes Doc. With a needle. He jabs it in my arm and darkness falls.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

January Whitehall

I SPEND SEVEN days alone, locked in the east wing. Every morning Harvey or Mr. Gretzky brought me food I didn't eat. I pleaded with them to tell me something—anything—about my Zia, about what the others were doing. They never did. One time Mr. Gretzky asked if he could have Eli's ruby necklace back. "If he wants it, he can get it himself," I told him.

Eli never came.

On the third day I tried to pick the lock on my door with a pair of nail scissors. I had no clue what I was doing and the scissors slipped and cut my hand. Doc burst into the room with another needle. When I woke up, anything I could use to break stuff or hurt myself was gone. He left the necklace though.

On the morning of the eighth day, I come up with a plan. It's terrible and probably going to get me killed, but I don't care what happens to me now. If Zia Teresa got hurt because of Mr. Parker, then nothing else matters. She has four daughters and eleven grandkids and she's already giving her whole life to me. I need to get out of here and make sure she's okay. Besides, everyone from my old life must already think I'm dead by now. I have nothing left to lose.

I put on my lightest dress, strip off my socks and braid my hair, tucking Zia's St. Christopher into the tightest folds. The wind is howling outside, bending the great big trees almost in half.

When I hear someone coming, I press my ear to the hardwood floor. A slow, even tread says it's Mr. Gretzky bringing me breakfast. He's who I was hoping for. He always comes further into the room than Harvey and he seems more inclined to deal with a problem himself than contact the guys.

I open the bedroom window as wide as it will go, then creep behind the door. Part of me knows this can't work. It's a childish trick Margot and I played on each other when we were kids. Hiding behind the door then jumping out and yelling 'boo!' But it's the best I have.

Mr. Gretzky knocks on the door. "Miss Whitehall? Your breakfast."

He unlocks the door, and it swings out, concealing my body. My heart pounds against my chest so hard I'm afraid he'll hear it. He takes a step forward and puts the breakfast tray on my dresser. "Miss Whitehall?"

I try not to breathe.

"Oh shit," Mr. Gretzky says, and I hear a flurry of footsteps.

I peek out from my hiding place. He's at the open window looking down. It's my moment. I slip around the door and then I'm there. On the other side. With a rush I see he's left the key in the lock.

"Hey!" Mr. Gretzky yells.

Time slows down. I pull the door closed as he lunges toward me. My fingers fumble at the key and I'm sure he's going to reach me before I can lock it, but then the metal turns with the sweetest little click.

Mr. Gretzky's body slams into the wood so hard it pushes the door forward like a wave. "Unlock it! Let me out!"

"Sorry, Mr. Gretzky." I take the key and run, the dusty carpet soft beneath my bare feet.

I dash down a banister, breathing fast. I never expected to get this far. My plan ended with Mr. Gretzky tackling me.

From the loud bangs echoing behind me, he won't be locked in my room for long. I sprint faster. I just need to get to Eli or Doc or Bobby—

A door to my right swings open and a huge, scarred man steps into my path. The only person I didn't want to see. There's no time to change direction. I slam into Adriano Rossi at a hundred miles an hour. His body feels like cinderblocks. I struggle backward but his hand closes on my shoulder, biting down. "*You.*"

There's a crash behind us and Mr. Gretzky appears, panting. "I'm sorry, sir. She was hiding. I thought she jumped out the window."

Adriano glares at Gretzky. "You let her escape."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"She can go back in the cage."

"No!" I scream, desperately trying to organize my thoughts. "I need to talk to you!"

"Shut up." Adriano snarls. "Gretzky. Cage."

"I know something! Adriano, I know where Mr. Parker keeps the Orchard."

His fingers tighten on my shoulder. "What?"

"He has a secret safe. I heard him talk about it on the phone. I bet the Orchard is in there. And even if it isn't, I bet a heap of important stuff is!"

Adriano's green eyes burn into mine. "You're lying."

"I'm not smart enough to lie!"

His face shifts, eyebrows drawing together.

My heart jolts. He believes me.

"You heard Parker talking about a safe?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

“I’ll... I’ll tell you if you take me to my Zia Teresa.”

Adriano shoves me to the floor. “I’m done with you.” He raises a boot as though to step on me.

I throw up my arms to cover my face but I force myself to keep talking. “If you kill me, you won’t find the safe.”

A moment of silence and I’m hauled to my feet.

“Mr. Rossi?” Gretzky says.

Adriano turns to him. “You got something to say?”

“No, sir.”

“Good.”

Adriano drags me up the hall and through the door he came through. Black spots pop in front of my eyes and I see different futures stretched out like invisible roads. Life. Death. Naples. Zia Teresa. Mr. Parker. I wish I’d been brave enough to run away at my wedding. To stop all of this before it happened. Adriano steers me up wooden staircases and down sweeping halls. His hand is as cold as the gun he put in my mouth. I wish I could shake it off, but I know better. He might be leading me to my death, but it’s a chance I have to take to get closer to Zia Teresa.

He opens a set of double doors with his thumbprint and practically throws me inside. The room is a gothic hell chamber. Knives on the walls and paintings that would give children nightmares. Monsters shrieking in front of red skies, crows, bones, scaly long-fingered dragons. There’s an art to it, but it’s ugly. Mean. In the middle of everything is a huge bed with black sheets. It’s hard to believe Adriano Rossi does anything as vulnerable as sleep. He should prowl the grounds of Velvet House at night, tossing back his horns and bellowing at the sky.

“You have one minute. Tell me what you know.”

“I... can you take me to see my Zia Teresa?”

He pulls his gun from his shoulder holster. And a snort of hysterical laughter escapes me. “Are you going to put it in my mouth again? Is that why we’re in your bedroom?”

Adriano does something to the gun so it sounds more ready to deliver death. My blood turns to ice. “You can’t kill me. If you kill me, you won’t find out what I know.”

His nostrils flare, but I can see him turning the dilemma over in his mind. My gaze falls to a bottle of vodka on his bedside table. “I’m sorry, can I... can I have a drink?”

His eyes skim my face, reading me like a novel he hates.

I fight back another crazy giggle. “I’m pretty sure I’m about to die. And if I am, I don’t want to do it sober.”

He stares a little longer then shrugs and stomps to the bottle, tossing it to me. It’s not vodka, it’s grappa, and when I twist off the lid, the oily scent almost makes me gag. I swig from the neck and choke and sputter. Adriano watches me. I can tell he’s enjoying himself. I drink again.

“Parker’s safe. Where is it?”

“What happened to my Zia Teresa?”

He crosses the space between us in a stride and presses his gun to my head. A cold little circle. He smells like earth and stone. An ancient forest hiding behind mountains. “You want me to do it?”

The liquor burns down my stomach in a scorching trail. “If you kill me, I bet the others will be angry.”

“The others. If they weren’t so cuntstruck, I’d have killed you weeks ago.”

“Sorry,” I say icily.

He gives me a look I can’t read. Maybe scorn. Maybe just plain disgust. “How the fuck have you convinced them to let you stay a virgin?”

A lump rises in my throat. “Maybe they didn’t want to hurt me?”

“That makes three of them.” He presses the gun harder to my forehead, but I don’t feel any fear. The alcohol is whipping through me like trails of light, lending me fire. “Mr. Rossi, I just want to know what happened to my Zia. Haven’t you ever loved someone so much you’d go crazy if they were hurt?”

“No.”

I keep my gaze locked on Adriano. I have green eyes too. Maybe like his mother or his sister. “Please?” I whisper. “Please, Adriano?”

His mouth twitches, opens almost against his will. “She got jumped leaving your stepmother’s house. Broken arms, fractured face.”

Air leaves my lungs in a swoosh. “She was mugged?”

“It was a put-up job. Parker reminding us what he can do.”

Tears well in my eyes and roll down my cheeks. I leave them where they are. I don’t deserve to wipe them away. “Why? Zia’s not even my real family.”

“Use your head. Parker’s not going to go to war with the Whitehalls. He picked someone who’d send a message but didn’t have the resources to protect themselves.” Adriano’s voice is bitter.

“Is that what he did to you?”

I didn’t know his hold on the gun had slackened until he presses it harder against my skull. “The safe. Now.”

“Mr. Parker and I were walking through Central Park when he took a call from a guy installing a safe in a tree in his backyard.”

“A tree?” Adriano rams the gun into my head. “A fucking tree?”

“A-A hollow that was being expanded. They were going to install a biosafe then plant something over it. It was high up. Like fifteen feet in the trunk.”

“And Parker said this in front of you?”

I think back to that frosty winter afternoon, my red mittens and my excitement at choosing my own Starbucks order—a Venti caramel with whipped cream. That girl feels so stupidly young, like a little sister who’s gone away to boarding school.

“Mr. Parker thought I was an idiot,” I say. “He drugged me in front of my whole family. Do you really think he was afraid to take business calls in front of me?”

Adriano lifts the gun. “You were still going to marry him though.”

“Yeah, I already told you I’m not smart.” I raise the grappa and drink. This time I barely choke.

Adriano watches me swallow. “What do you think of Parker now?”

“He’s a creepy asshole.”

Adriano smiles.

I would’ve said whatever I thought he wanted to hear but the insult comes out sweet as caramel. I want to do it again. “He’s a perverted, disgusting criminal.”

His smile vanishes. “You’ve told me what you know and I told you about your Zia. You’ll go back in the cage until we repair your bedroom door.”

“Wait!” I reach out to him, and almost stagger sideways. “Sorry, this grappa is crazy-strong.”

Adriano’s face softens. “So, stop drinking, Pryntsesa.”

The nickname—whatever it means—gives me strength. “Adriano, please take me to see my Zia?”

His gaze falls from my mouth to the front of my dress. It’s ivory lace. Whoever is dressing me still favours white. I push my shoulders back. “Please?”

He huffs. “You trying to seduce me?”

“I…”

“Let’s get something clear. You’re a dog, January Whitehall. A yappy little dog. And if it were up to me, I’d put you down like one.”

I stagger backward as though he shoved me, dropping the grappa so liquor glugs all over the floor.

Adriano grins and the scars on his face twist like lightning. “You’re going back in your cage.”

The cage. The small dark space where I sang and practiced ballet alone. “Okay.”

Adriano heads for the door. My limbs are loose as I stumble after him, my chest a raw tangle of nerves. He presses a thumb to the panel sensor, and I remember how he used to wait for me at the ballet studio. Whenever I walked past him, I held my breath, wishing I could disappear. His gaze seemed to follow me through locked doors and around walls, as if he was everywhere I went.

My head is rushing like it’s travelling down a freeway. He was there at my studio watching me dance. He was there when they gave me Orchard, competing to be my first.

Adriano Rossi is *lying*.

I tug the straps of my dress down and it falls to the floor. I’m naked except for my cotton panties. I thought I had nothing to lose, but I do. My virginity.

Adriano turns. His face morphs into a grotesque patchwork of pain and lust. My legs go weak, and I’m barely able to hold myself up but I trace a hand across my shoulders, down to my breasts. “You loved watching me dance. Would you like me to dance for you now?”

The silence is so loud it stings. I cup my breasts, running my palms over my nipples. Heat zaps through me and I let out a surprised little ‘*oh.*’

Adriano’s jaw tightens. “What do you want?”

“Promise to take me to my Zia and you can be my first.”

His lip curls. “You’d let me ruin you?”

I trail my fingers over my abdomen hoping he can’t see the shake in my hands. “There are more important things than purity.”

“What’s to stop me fucking you then slitting your throat?”

I take a small, controlled breath. “I don’t think you *can* kill me.”

He steps toward me. “What?”

Every muscle in my body thrums. If I jumped, I might break right through the ceiling. “I don’t think you can kill me because of how I dance.”

Adriano turns his face away and I know I’m right.

“You want to get rid of me,” I say quiet as a prayer. “But you can’t end my life and the others don’t want to let me go. So, take me to see my Zia and then I’ll run and never come back.”

He closes his eyes, and I realize Adriano Rossi is almost handsome, with his thick hair and full mouth. Even his silvery scars are kind of pretty. Then his eyes flick open and all I can see is his cold, empty gaze.

“You think my brothers will let me lose you?”

“They’ll forgive you. What you four have is bigger than me.”

“It was. You fucked everything up.”

“I’m sorry, I just—”

“Heartbroken,” he spits the word like it sickens him. “All three. Not talking. Not eating. Because of you.”

His eyes fall to my breasts, and I feel him turning like a handle on a door. He shoves his gun back into its holster. “I’ll fuck you then I’ll take you to your Zia. Then you can get on a plane to South America. Chile or Brazil. You’ll have to figure

out everything on your own. Learn the language. Probably clean houses or suck cock for money.”

I ignore the sudden pressure in my stomach. “I don’t care.”

He moves closer. “You’ll never see the others again. If you even dream about contacting them, I’ll kill you.”

I think of Eli waiting for me as I showered. Doc sidling up to me in the kitchen. Bobby asking me to sing. “Fine.”

“Then it’s done.”

I freeze, waiting for his next move. He reaches down, cupping my pussy in his palm. His other hand closes around my neck and he steers me toward the bed. The pressure between my legs hurts, but I keep my mouth shut. Whatever happens I will not cry out in pain.

He pushes me onto the mattress and pulls off his shoulder holster and his shirt. His chest is covered in mottled scars and bruises and tattoos. He tears open the button on his jeans, yanking down the zip. He’s not wearing underwear and his cock juts through the V. It doesn’t look the way it did at the cathedral. It’s thick and hard and red at the tip, the tattoos stretched tight around his skin. He bends forward and skims a palm across the flat of my stomach. My body contracts. I feel like I’m going to pee but there’s another sensation behind it, a hot, warm, alive feeling.

“You’ll fuck me for your freedom?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

He settles over me and I’m sure he’s going to sink his teeth into me. Then his lips find mine and his big tongue strokes into my mouth. I’m so surprised my eyes roll back. Not only is he kissing me, but *I like it*. It’s as easy as kissing Bobby or Doc. His hands pin mine above my head and he kisses me so deeply I feel like I’m drowning. Up close his scent is musky like the forgotten corner of a library. I’ve been alone for days and my hunger for touch roars up like a beast. I wrap my legs around him.

Adriano grunts into my mouth, his hips rolling onto mine. If it's like this, it won't be too bad. But then his hand locks around my throat, holding my skull like I'm a bobblehead doll. He tears his mouth away from mine. "Little whore."

I cry out and he squeezes tighter. "Say you want me."

"I want you," I gasp, unsure if it's true or not. Heat pulses between my legs and I try not to think about his long, tattooed cock.

His teeth lock around my earlobe. "You fingered yourself?"

"Not... not on the inside."

"But you've been licked by Doc and Basher. And Doc shoved his knife in you."

"Just a bit of the handle. Please don't do the same?"

He slaps me, and the side of my face goes white hot. I cry out and he squeezes my throat harder. "Lie still or I'll kill you."

I lie like a board as Adriano reaches to one side and pulls out a length of black cord. He binds me to his headboard, like I'm a dead deer he's strapping to his car.

"Keep your fucking mouth shut." He moves down my body and parts my folds with a thick finger. I wait for more, but he just stares into my pussy. Do I look disgusting? Disfigured? But there's a stillness in Adriano's scarred face, a pleasure I didn't expect to see. He catches me looking at him and slaps my clit. "You're soaked. Doc told me you liked dick, but who fuckin' knew?"

I whimper, unsure of what to say. My wrists already hurt from how tightly he's bound me. He rubs a rough, tattooed thumb through my lips and my pussy flutters. I wait for him to force himself inside me, but instead his shaggy head lowers and his tongue laves my clit. It's softer than any part of him should be. He sucks and the whole world tilts again, this time in a way that has nothing to do with alcohol. "Oh my God!"

He looks up at me from between my thighs. “Quiet.”

He returns his mouth to me, and as his tongue rolls through my aching pussy, I bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from screaming. Adriano is the third man to do this to me. They’ve all been so different. Bobby was precise. Doc was lazy and practiced, but Adriano laps at me like a bear at a river. Like it’s a primal act. I was going to pretend I liked whatever he did to me, but I don’t have to pretend to like this.

He growls as he licks, slow and steady. He likes it too. His beard tickles my thighs and I arch against him, my toes curling. “Adriano...”

He pulls away, swiping his hand over his mouth and I scream like a little brat.

I brace for a slap, but he lets out a rumbling laugh and fists his tattooed cock. I can’t imagine how much it would hurt to get tattoos on that part of your body. The only purpose must be scaring the women he sleeps with. So, they know how much pain he can withstand. He kneels above me pumping. My pussy tightens, hot with displeasure. It wants Adriano’s mouth again.

“Please?” I mumble. “Adriano?”

His furious green eyes find mine. “When I’m done fucking you, you’ll leave the country?”

“Yes. Anything you want, Mr. Rossi.”

His mouth becomes a tight line. “You fucking liar, telling me whatever I want to hear. Maybe you won’t go to Brazil on your own. Maybe I’ll follow you.”

I shudder.

“Don’t like that, do you?”

I shake my head.

He drops onto his elbows, the hair on his chest brushing my nipples. “Too fucking bad. I know how to follow people without them seeing. I’ve done it to you for years.”

He strokes his cock through my folds and I whimper. His mouth has me so on edge that I can hardly think, and as scary as the rope is, I'm glad it's there. It means I'm being forced to this. To feel this way.

"Maybe wherever you end up I'll get an apartment nearby," he mutters. "Maybe you'll feel me watching you while you go to work. While you sleep at night."

I imagine Adriano out there, looking through dark windows and standing just out of sight on the packed streets where I make my new home. A feeling I didn't expect comes over me. Warmth.

"Maybe I'd feel safe," I whisper. "Maybe I'd feel like you were protecting me."

He shudders, big shoulders shaking, then he reaches up and releases the rope holding my hands. I let them fall to the bedhead, throbbing with blood.

"I can be your pet monster," Adriano mutters. "Come out at night and fuck you while you're unconscious. You'll have no idea until all your kids come out looking like me."

I should be terrified, but there's a note in his voice that if it was sung would make me cry. I brush a hand over his back feeling the smooth furrows of scar tissue. "Adriano, I'm not afraid anymore. I'm giving myself to you."

He throws his head back, avoiding my eyes. His fist is still pumping his tattooed cock and I can see a pearly droplet swelling at the head. "I don't want what you have to give," he says.

"But..."

"You're already mine, January."

Everything inside me goes still.

"I watched you dance and you were mine. Parker wants your last name. Your stepmother wants money. The others want your body, but I *saw you*. I watched you dance. And every night since I've dreamed about you."

I can't breathe. I can't think.

"Your hair. Your mouth..."

Adriano's free hand traces my lips. Then he screws his eyes shut, discomfort and embarrassment warring on his face.

The frenzied death I thought was gone, hovers close again. If I upset this man right now, if I offend him, he will kill me just to save his heart. I touch his scarred cheek. "Adriano, I need to go. I need to see my Zia."

His green eyes bore into mine. "I saw you."

My heart aches, because he did. He watched me dance when no one else would. Too tall and too busty to be a ballerina, he didn't care.

His breathing is ragged now, his fist still working his cock and as scared as I am of him taking me, I'm more scared of what will happen if he doesn't.

"You hunted me," I whisper. "You caught me. Please take me."

He closes his eyes, green lamplights dimming. It's just the two of us alone in his bed. The last people in the world. The hand on his cock slows and he angles himself between my legs. My body aches, my clit is flushed, and I know I'll come while he fucks me. I'll come screaming and shaking and pleading for more, and my husband, whoever he ends up being, will not be the first man to make me feel these things. Adriano Rossi will be. I close my eyes, waiting for the moment my pussy stretches to let this brutal murderer inside me. "Please be my first," I whisper, as a small tear drops from my eye.

The head of Adriano's cock rubs against me but doesn't penetrate.

I buck my hips, urging him inside me. "Take me. End this."

"Pryntsesa..." Adriano rears back like a stallion, looking me right in the face. I don't know what he's trying to see but

he doesn't find it. He bares his teeth and then he's above me, his fist juddering across his cock, one hand grasping my breast.

His cum is thick and warm as it rushes across my hips and stomach. He throws his head back in a snarl, a grizzly bear straining against a trap. It's over. Adriano finished without penetrating my body. I am still, somehow, a virgin.

He turns away and I hear a zipper snarl. "Let's go."

"Adriano?"

He looks at me, his expression as hateful as the night I arrived in Velvet House. "We're leaving."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Adriano Rossi

JANUARY SITS BOLT upright in the car seat beside me. I told her to put on makeup, enough that anyone who knows her wouldn't recognize her right away. She's done a good job. Heavy gold eye shadow, pink cheeks, shiny red lips. The clothes help. A thin little nothing of a dress and the ruby necklace and sky-high heels Eli bought her. She looks like a snotty little socialite.

She stares straight ahead, her green eyes vacant. I want to break her head open and read her thoughts. Is she thinking about what we did? Or is that calm, empty expression for her future?

After I was done with her, she picked up one of my T-shirts and wiped my cum off her stomach like she'd been doing it her whole life. "Can I go see my Zia now?"

It was like my head had been turned inside out. I'd finally touched the girl who danced in my dreams and the only reason she'd allowed it was to get her own way. I wanted to throw her back in her cage and hide the key. Instead, I pushed myself to my feet. "If I take you to see your housekeeper, it'll be the last thing you do on US soil."

She looked at me, her back straight and her mouth steady. "I know."

She packed her bags, and I shaved and dressed. By the time we collected an unmarked BMW from the underground garage, neither of us looked like ourselves.

January's already got a new identity. Eli had it made when he was still deluding himself that he'd send the girl to Naples. Isabella Bianco. I've got her passport, driver's license, and an AMX card with ten grand on it. When we get to international departures, I'll shove her on a plane with all three and watch her fly to freedom. Morelli's going to be livid, and Doc and Bobby will throw hands, but eventually, they'll appreciate why I did it.

This girl is trouble. Abducting her was a needless risk that all of us undertook for different reasons. Or maybe it was the same reason in the end. We all wanted her closer and that was a mistake. As long as she's with us, things cannot be right. Sending her away is the only thing that can bring the scale back to balance.

Teresa Calderoli is a patient at St. John's Private Medical Center. It looks more like a mansion than a hospital and the parking lot is full of Porches. Considering Calderoli's a housekeeper, someone stumped up serious cash to keep her here. Parker or the Whitehall bitch.

I park the car and scan for anything suspicious. Bobby's intel says Parker's men abandoned the hospital after three days without us or January showing up. Still, no reason to make things obvious. I reach into my glove box and pull out a pair of clear black framed glasses. The scar on my face is always identifiable, but clean-shaven in a tailored suit and glasses, I don't look much like Adriano Rossi. I turn to the girl. "Ready to go?"

"Do you usually disguise yourself as a stockbroker?"

She seemed so serious in the ballet studio, so solemn and small. But here she is making fun of my clothes. And back in my room, she acted like my gun-fucking her mouth was a kink of mine. It must be Doc's fault. He's always been a bad influence.

"Can we go?" she asks, one hand already on the door. "Please?"

I hold up a finger. “Why are we here?”

“To visit my Aunt June. She broke her leg falling off a bike.”

“And who are you?”

“Elizabeth Mills. A first year at the Fashion Institute.”

I point at myself. “Me?”

I expect her to blush, but she just smiles coolly. “You’re my father, Anthony Mills.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

I fold her arm underneath mine as we walk to the hospital. I don’t want to touch her but she’s shaking like a junkie. She leans into me, and I try not to breathe in her scent. Like sweet nectarines and moonlight.

The outside might be fancy, but the inside of St. John’s smells the way all hospitals do, like disinfectant and microwaved beef. Heads turn as we make our way to reception, men and women staring at January. Unavoidable. I could have made her wear jeans and scrub her face, but the girl’s too good-looking. Nothing short of a potato sack would have helped and that would have been even more noticeable.

“Five minutes,” I mutter in her ear. “Then we’re out of here.”

“Yes, dad.”

“Morning,” I say to the bored-looking woman behind the front desk. “Anthony Mills. My daughter and I are here to visit June Mills.”

I pulled the name off Bobby’s scouting notes. Some old girl we can pretend to be visiting if Parker’s still checking the guest register.

“Ms. Mills is on the third floor,” the receptionist says. “Sign in then take the elevator to the left.”

I scribble a fake signature on the guestbook then steer January to the lift. She sticks her heels into the ground. “Can’t we buy Auntie flowers?” She gestures at the stand beside reception.

I grit my teeth. “Fine.” I get a bunch of stupidly expensive yellow roses and January does a decent job of looking bored as she picks her nails at my side. She should really be on her phone, but I’m not giving her one. She can buy something when she gets to where she’s going. It’ll be safer that way.

“Here,” I say handing her the roses. “All yours.”

The corner of her mouth twitches. “Thanks, *dad*.”

As we make our way to the elevator, I think of her father, Nicholas Whitehall. He gave in to cancer without stopping his viper of a second wife from doing whatever she felt like after his death. He knew what she was, warned her not to meet with Parker, but he never took steps to protect his daughter.

If I was January’s father, I’d have sold off my foreign properties and tied up the money in trust funds the stepmother couldn’t touch. I’d have sent January to a Swiss boarding school to grow up in the snow and soft skies. Made sure she came into millions as soon as she turned eighteen. But that’s rich idiots. Always thinking nothing can hurt them, even once they’re dead.

When we’re in the elevator I hit the button for the sixth floor. Teresa Calderoli is in room 612. As the elevator moves, I hear January’s shallow breathing and think about her sprawled in bed, my tongue between her legs. She was under me, moaning and seconds away from coming. All I had to do was plant my cock inside her and end it. But I couldn’t take her virginity. I don’t know why. Only that I’d have cut my dick off before I slid into her.

Maybe she’ll fuck a man as soon as she lands wherever she goes. Get rid of the thing that everyone wants. Maybe she’ll even fall in love with the guy. Some nice, normal guy who

vows to protect her and give her the safe little world she craves.

I'll still find her. I've tasted her cunt and watched her dance. I was the first man she offered herself to. We're joined now. As long as she's alive, she's mine.

We exit at the sixth floor. January walks too fast up the hall. I yank her shoulder, make her slow down. She's crying already. Tears splashing onto her slutty pink dress. I turn my face away. I can't stand women's tears. We pause outside room 612.

"Five minutes," I repeat.

Her eyes are fixed on the door. "Of course."

I grab her chin. "Your Zia looks bad. She might not be conscious. You scream or make any noise, I'm coming in there and shoving my hand in your mouth."

She looks me right in the eyes. "I promise I'll be quiet."

I release her. "Then go."

She keeps staring at me. "Adriano. Thank you."

I clench my jaw and say nothing.

She opens door 612 and slips inside. I give her a couple of minutes before I stick my head in. The room is dim, with thick curtains drawn over the windows. There are cards and flowers everywhere. January sits beside the bed, her face buried in Teresa Calderoli's sheets. The old girl looks bad. Her face is a mess of purple and both her arms are in casts. Whoever worked her over went beyond the call of duty. She's unconscious or the stuff in her IV is helping her sleep. They're probably more generous with meds in a place like this.

"You okay?" I ask.

She lifts her head, makeup smeared around her eyes. "Is it time?"

I want to lock her in the basement. Hide her away from everything that makes her look like this. "Not long," I say,

closing the door on her.

We passed a coffee machine on the way from the elevator. I find it, prepared to shove any amount of money into a slot to get some. It turns out to be free. I press a button and watch the freshly brewed beans pour into a paper cup.

My phone buzzes. Eli ringing me. I've already got messages and missed calls from Bobby and Doc. So, it begins.

I shove my phone away and take my coffee. It's too hot but I empty the cup into my mouth anyway. I was hoping January's Zia would be awake. I wanted to see if the relationship was mutual or if the girl had projected a mother onto another disinterested party. Looking into my empty cup, I find myself hoping it's real. That someone loved January the way Magdalena Rossi loved me. Stupidly. Against all her better judgment.

Mama feels close in this hospital, so different from the one where I watched her die. Eight hospital beds crammed in a room, dead-eyed doctors giving distracted updates, their minds already on the patients who might live. Eli wanted to pay for a private hospital, but I knew it was too late. I was just waiting for her to go. I close my eyes and see her in our tiny green kitchen, folding varenyky and singing along to the radio. I'm older than she was now and everything about that is wrong. I was supposed to die young.

A noise behind me. A squeak like a scuffed shoe.

Time folds backward, peeling away like the point of a blade. I pull my Glock from my shoulder holster but it's too late. I know it like I know my name. The bullet slices my side. I turn, clipping a short guy through the forehead, but I've barely had time to aim at the massive blond behind him before someone grabs me. I heave against them, breaking their hold but they jam their fingers into my bullet wound, tearing downward. My head splits open in agony.

"Take him down!"

The massive blond sprints toward me, I raise my gun as his fist slams into my nose. The pain whips the air from my lungs. I collapse onto my knees, gagging on blood.

A woman screams. January? I push my foot into the floor and try to stand but the blond kicks me in the chest. I sprawl onto my back and my fake glasses go flying. I hear them splinter on the floor. An ambush. A stupid run-of-the-mill ambush.

The metal tang of blood goes down my throat and I hack it up. The blond takes my gun, and spits in my face. “Fucking scumbag.”

Another feminine scream. “Adriano! Help me!”

I see January in her tiny pink dress, sitting next to her Zia Teresa. I remember the feel of her under me. I should have fucked her. Why didn't I fuck her?

“Hello, Rossi.”

It's funny how little Parker's changed in twenty years. His face is unlined, his round blue eyes still flicking around for more money, more pussy, more power, more pills. An empty void swirling around nothing. I cough, spraying more blood up and back over my own face.

Parker laughs. “I'm going to kill you, Rossi.”

He's going for Morelli's light confidence, but his voice is shaking.

“So, fucking do it.”

Parker licks his pink lips. “You and January checked in as father and daughter. Was that a joke or have you violated my fiancée?”

I laugh. “You don't know the half of it.”

Parker's gaze goes black. “Shut up.”

“I had her on my face an hour ago, naked and begging me to—”

Parker's not strong, but a boot in the ribs is still a boot in the ribs. I feel another dull crack and my breathing twists off like a rusty tap.

"You've grown a tongue, bootlicker. What happened to letting your friends do the talking?"

I laugh even though it makes my insides scream. "You're fucked, asshole. You kill me, there's three more coming."

Parker pulls a Beretta from somewhere and hovers it over my face. "Time to die, huh?"

I don't speak. Better men than Parker have held a gun to my head. I wouldn't insult them by begging for my life. Death was always a possibility, and this is my fuck up. I deserve it. All I can hope is that the others find January. That Morelli marries her and lets Doc and Bobby fuck her whenever they want. And they have dinners like the one we had.

I look into the barrel of the gun. "Hurt January and the others will make you pay."

Parker bares his teeth, and the world goes black.

◇ ◇ ◇

RED LIGHT THROUGH paper cracks.

Slow, seeping heat.

A man screaming. That horrible insect whine.

Sirens.

"Mr. Mills?"

A woman in white is pressing something to my head, saying something I can't hear. I blink. White walls with a leaf border. Mica flecked floor. I'm still in St. John's hospital. I try to push myself up and collapse, blood streaming into my mouth like poison. I press my hand to the bullet wound and go again, staggering to my feet. The pain is there but a street or two away. Someone else's problem. They must have given me drugs.

A girl behind me screams and the doctor says something else. I ignore them and stagger forward. Teresa Calderoli's door is open, the cards and flowers and candy exactly where it was. The old woman is still in bed and for a second, I think it's okay. Then I see her blank brown eyes.

She's dead and January is gone.



EPILOGUE

January Whitehall

“**Y**OU DISGUSTING, DEGENERATE slut.”

I sit across from Mr. Parker in a limousine. The windows are blacked out. If he hits me no one will see.

Zia Teresa is dead. A masked man put his hands around her throat and killed her. I saw him do it. I heard the awful sounds. Adriano is shot. I don't know if he's dead but when I was dragged past him, he wasn't moving.

These are the facts. They can't be argued with or cried at. They can't be changed.

Mr. Parker leans forward, steepling his fingers. “Ten years. Ten years I've been paying your bitch of a mother for you to get snatched away at our wedding. Millions of dollars down the drain.”

Mr. Parker's bodyguards have glazed looks on their faces. It seems like my ex-fiancé has been ranting about this a lot since my abduction.

I fix an understanding smile on my face. “I'm so sorry, Mr. Parker.”

“Don't smirk at me, you little cunt. You know, your mother thinks I stole you. Why the fuck would I do that?” He looks at me expectantly.

“I'm not sure, Mr. Parker.”

“Of course, you're not, you stupid bitch.” His expression is gleeful. I'm sure he's been dying to talk to me like this. It was

probably hard for him to buy me flowers and take me for walks when this is the relationship he really wanted to have.

He leans in close, tapping a finger to the ruby necklace. “Have you been fucking Eli Morelli?”

His breath is sweet and sour like rancid soda. My throat constricts. “No.”

Mr. Parker gives a high wobbling laugh. “So, you fucked Adiano?”

“I... who?”

He looks at me like I’m a worthless patch of dirt. “Adiano Rossi.”

I smile. “It’s pronounced ‘A-dree-ah-know.’”

Pain explodes across my face.

“You worthless whore,” Parker hisses. “You fucked them. You fucked all four of them, didn’t you?”

My lip is split. I touch the tiny part in my skin, feel the blood drip through like oily water. I was struck by the others, but this feels completely different. When they did it, my pulse picked up and resentment and heat fought for space inside me. Looking into Mr. Parker’s eyes, all I feel is dull, quiet disappointment.

“I’m still a virgin,” I tell him.

“You’re a lying little bitch.”

I lick my upper lip. I hate the taste of blood, but I don’t have any Kleenex and I don’t think anyone is going to give me any. “I swear on my Zia Teresa, I’m still a virgin. None of them slept with me. Nobody has.”

Mr. Parker narrows his eyes. “And if I have a doctor examine you? You’d still be intact?”

I’m pretty sure the hymen doesn’t work that way. That if it did cover the hole you wouldn’t be able to have your period. But I’m not going to tell Mr. Parker that.

“Of course, I’m intact,” I say, trying to sound sad but lightly offended. “You can have a doctor examine me. I want you to. I’m still a virgin.”

He sits back in his seat. He still doesn’t believe me.

“They would have filmed it. If they took my virginity, they would have filmed it and showed you.”

Mr. Parker traces his teeth with his tongue. “We never got any recordings of them fucking with you after the first one. I thought you were dead.”

He sounds mildly annoyed, as though he’d lost a wallet. He grips my wrist, crushing it in his fleshy, too-hot hand. “Why didn’t they keep filming you? Why didn’t they force themselves on you?”

I think back to that dinner at Velvet House. The five of us sitting around the polished dining table eating and drinking and laughing. I should have said yes to staying there. If I had, I’d be safe and Zia Teresa would still be alive.

I touch a finger to my shoulder, where my St. Christopher is hiding beneath my dress strap. Zia Teresa is with me now. I carry her in my heart. And she once told me not to blame myself for what other people do, but to focus on my own survival.

Mr. Parker is still watching me, waiting for an answer.

“I think they had feelings for me,” I say quietly. “They didn’t want to force me. They wanted me to choose them.”

He gives a giggling snort. “That’s fucking hilarious.”

His bodyguards grin obligingly.

I bite back my own secret smile. Mr. Parker believes me. He knows I’m still a virgin. He’ll keep me alive just to mock the men who stole me from him. As his limousine whirrs through the city, I repeat their names like a mantra. *Elliot Morelli. Domenico Valente. Roberto Bassilotta. Adriano Rossi.*

They're murderers. Dangerous, violent men. And they will come seeking bloody revenge. I just have to survive until they find me.



SILK MALICE
EVE DANGERFIELD

For the women who ask, 'am I allowed to like this?'

I think the answer is yes.



PROLOGUE

Domenico Valente

Seventeen Years Ago

I ALREADY HEAR Alessia and her girlfriend Beckett laughing as I walk up the stairwell. I knock on the door. “Everyone dressed?”

“Shut up, idiot,” Alessia calls.

I take that as a ‘yes.’ The apartment has that saggy feeling that means Mom’s gone, but I call out anyway. “Mother dearest around?”

“Nope,” Alessia yells.

The girls are in the kitchen, their arms wrapped around each other. They’re both in short shorts and bras and every guy at school would cut off a hand to be standing where I am. Me? I can’t really enjoy the view. I could sneak a glance at Beckett’s ass, but Alessia would punch me in the head, and Beckett’s got zero interest anyway. Except maybe that I look like Alessia.

I sit at the kitchen counter. “Either of you gonna put clothes on?”

Alessia kisses Beckett on the nose. “Don’t look if you don’t like it, Doctor Valente.”

“Don’t call me that.”

She grins. Alessia’s blonde and fit and almost as tall as I am. People always think we’re twins. “That name is one

hundred percent earned, little brother. That stuff you gave us...”

I perk up. “You took the Orchard?”

The girls exchange blissful looks. “Yeah.”

“And it worked for both of you?”

Alessia scowls. “Don’t be a pervert, Dom.”

“I only let you have some to test it! Don’t jump up my dick because I want to know if it works.”

Alessia rolls her eyes.

“So, how’d it go?” I ask.

Beckett exchanges another horny look with Alessia. “Amazing. We’ve been up all night—”

I hold up my hands. “Enough, I get it.”

“It was the hottest fucking thing,” Alessia assures me. “You’re a genius.”

I smile at the countertop. Another successful trial. Only I can’t tell Adri or Morelli about this one—they’ll focus on the girl-on-girl thing, and I’ll never hear the end of it. Having a hot lesbian for a sister is no joke. I’ll tell Bobby about it. He’s got hot sisters. He gets it.

Alessia opens the oven door, releasing a cloud of steam. “Still not ready. What the fuck?”

Beckett and I smirk at each other. Alessia is the most impatient person on earth. Thirty seconds is too long for her to cook tater tots, which is what I assume is in the oven. Unless it’s fish sticks.

Alessia slams the oven door closed. “Dom, you’ve gotta be more careful when you come here during the day. Mr. Hodges is watching the place and he told me he’s gonna call social services and tell them you’re not in school.”

“What!?” I turn and look out the front window. “That old bitch. For all he knows, I dropped out.”

“Next year, it won’t be a problem. Just stay out of his way for now.”

“Whatever.”

Beckett takes a seat beside me at the kitchen counter. “You’re not in school? Don’t you want to go to college?”

“Nah, I’m making plenty of money doing what I’m doing.”

“Selling drugs?”

“*Making* drugs,” I correct. “Distribution’s not my area.”

She frowns. “That’s bullshit. A guy as smart as you should get a degree.”

“Hey,” Alessia says, her head back in the oven. “Dom doesn’t need to go to college. He’s gonna make a million dollars and buy me a Harley.”

“Exactly,” I tell Beckett. Although Alessia’s wrong. I’m not gonna make a million dollars. I’m gonna make a billion dollars. And I’m not just gonna buy her a motorbike: I’m gonna buy her a house and a car and anything she wants. Then I’ll buy Mom a cottage where she can do pills all day and hire a nurse to look after her. And maybe in a few years, she’ll get bored and start painting again. Who knows?

People say money can’t buy everything, but that’s bullshit. Money opens doors. It makes everything easier. That’s why I like Morelli. He’s a grease ball who unironically wears polo shirts but he’s not one of those rich kids who thinks they’re better than their trust fund. He wants to make Orchard as big as I do. Patent it if we can and sell it to pharmaceutical companies. Yesterday he sent me an article about scientists trying to find the ‘female Viagra.’ We definitely have that, it’s whether the government will let women get high that’s the issue.

But fuck, they let people get drunk and smoke cigarettes, and I don’t think we’re that far from legalizing weed. Why not get girls stupid horny? Who doesn’t want that?

Once I'm rolling in cash, I'll go to college. Tech at Yale. Bio chem at Oxford. Medicine at Johns Hopkins. Once I have money, it won't matter. I can spend the rest of my life legitimizing what I already know; that I'm the smartest guy to come out of this shithole neighborhood.

Alessia slams the oven again. "Not long now."

"Okay, babe," Beckett says patiently. She pats my shoulder. "You gonna go see your girlfriend?"

"Don't have a girlfriend."

"The prep school bitch," Alessia says, squinting at the oven door.

She means Rosie Constantine. We started hooking up last year and we've been banging on and off ever since. Rosie's no fun to be around when her class assignments are due, but she's a ten and her college boyfriend means she doesn't want to be seen with me in public. Which suits me just fine. An involuntary smirk spreads my lips. Now that Alessia and Beckett have taken Orchard and it went great, it's time to ask Rosie to give it a try.

"I'm heading into the city," I say, standing. "Where's the money jar?"

Alessia points to the cupboard below the sink. I hunt around and find the old Jiff jar full of change. I take a couple of fives and shove them in my pocket. Alessia nudges me with her foot. "Put it in the other place. Mom'll be back tonight."

"Sure." I put the jar on top of the fridge and push it to the back where Mom can't see or reach it. "I'm gonna head off, okay?"

The oven dings.

"Finally!" Alessia grabs the dirty towel from beside the sink. "Want tots before you go?"

"You tryna kill me?"

I hate tater tots. The grease. The mushy potato filling. The smell. I watch as Alessia dumps the slightly burnt tots onto two mismatched plates. None of the plates in our apartment match. Nothing in here is good in any fucking way. Last month I went to Morelli's house and there was a *fountain* in the entrance. Alessia grabs the ketchup from the leaking fridge, and I want to snatch it off her and throw it out the window at old Mr. Hodges.

"Five years," I mutter. "Five years and I'll have a billion dollars."

Alessia sprays ketchup all over her plate. "What was that?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Then get out of here. Beckett and I are refueling and then we're going back to bed."

"Good for you." I watch Alessia run a tot through the red sauce and toss it in her mouth. Christ, I hate tater tots. I'm not a food snob but—

She coughs, potato spraying onto the floor.

"Jesus. Alessia, chew!"

She glares at me, pressing a fist to her mouth as she coughs up more tot.

"Are you okay, babe?" Beckett asks.

"She's fine," I say. "I don't know if you want that mouth near you though. Might have to give her a few sticks of Big Red before you go back to bed."

We're still laughing when Alessia hits the floor.

Beckett screams as potato pours from my sister's mouth. Only it's not potato. It's thick white foam. I vault the counter and start digging it out with my fingers, but it won't stop coming. Alessia's eyes roll back in her head and her whole body shakes.

"What's wrong?" Beckett keeps saying. "What's wrong? What's wrong? What's wrong?"

I grab Alessia's arms and hold her still. "I don't fucking know! Call 911. Call a fucking ambulance!"



CHAPTER ONE

Adriano Rossi

“**Y**OU STOLE JANUARY.”

I try to focus on Bobby’s face but my vision blurs to gold and glass.

“You stole January,” he says even louder. “Now she’s gone and her fucking Zia is dead because you brought her here.”

Here. I force my eyes to blink, to concentrate on my surroundings. I’m on a bed with crisp white sheets, still fully dressed. That means ‘here’ is still St. John’s Private Medical Center. Here is where Parker found us. Here is where I was shot; a bullet in the side, another grazing my skull. But it didn’t kill me. Nothing ever kills me.

“We’re... in the hospital,” I manage, though my tongue is thick as a steak in my mouth. “I’m in a hospital room.”

“*Eh mannaggia,*” says a low voice.

Eli. I turn, but I can’t see him.

“Parker,” he says in his accented voice. “You need to trace Parker.”

“For the hundredth fucking time, we are,” Bobby says.

“Is he taking her to the compound?”

“No, traffic cams showed his limo getting on the interstate and—”

“There’s no point talking to him, Basher. He’s fucking high.”

A new voice. Doc is at my shoulder, his butterfly knife turning in his hand.

“What’s up, Doc?” I ask.

He jabs the blade at me. “Stop smiling, you fucking clown. If you were anyone else, I’d gut you.”

“Okay,” I say and bite the inside of my cheeks. Then a thought comes to me. “Wait. Why are you all here? Why aren’t you going after...?”

I can’t say her name, but even after all the drugs the doctors have pumped into me, I can still see her clearly. Those round green eyes and pink mouth. Her dark hair rippling as she flashes me her ingenuous smile.

“Fucking hell,” Bobby says. “We are trying to find her.”

I blink. He’s sitting at a table in the corner of the room, his laptop in front of him. “So why are you still here?”

“Don’t answer,” Eli says.

I turn my head right. There he is. Standing by the window, his hands in his pockets. A stranger would think he was calm, but I see the rage burning in his eyes.

“What was January wearing, Adriano?” Eli says.

“When?”

Doc swears.

“When you brought her here to see her Zia. Do you remember anything? Her hair, was it up or down?”

I screw my eyes tight. Picture her beside me in the elevator. “It was... down. And she had your necklace on.”

“Her St. Christopher?” Bobby asks. “She put it on my chain?”

“No. Eli’s necklace. The fancy fuckin’ necklace with all the rubies.”

“Je-sus,” Doc says. “You were gonna let her steal Morelli’s jewelry?”

I shrug and my fractured rib shifts inside me. “Dunno.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Eli says. “This is excellent.”

“Because you have so much money, you can piss away rubies?” Doc asks.

“No.” Eli points to Bobby. “Go into the security program and trace VellutoTaylorTwenty.”

Bobby’s already hammering at the keys. “Passcode?”

“Seventeen-Q-eighty-J-nine hundred and four.”

Bobby gives a sharp laugh. “Got it. Holy shit. There’s audio and visual.”

Doc cackles. “You put a camera on whatever chick wears your necklace? Morelli, you fucking stalker.”

“It’s for security.”

“And knowing she’s not blowing her ex-boyfriend downtown never came into it, I’m sure.” Doc looks over Bobby’s shoulder. “Have you found January? Do we have a location?”

“Hang on.” Bobby types frantically. “Hang the fuck on, we’re almost in.”

I close my eyes. My head is mossy with painkillers. I want to sleep, but powerful things are winding under my thoughts, straining at the flat surface of the medication. Rage. Fear. And something else, something that gnaws like a beast.

I should never have brought the girl here. I betrayed my brothers. I betrayed her. I don’t deserve to live.

I force my eyes open. “I’m getting up. I’ll get her back if it kills me.”

“It’ll just kill you,” Eli says. “Harvey is coming in the chopper. You’re going to Velvet House and awaiting orders. Bobby, what the fuck is happening with the necklace?”

“I’m in.” Bobby pushes back his chair. “No audio but we’ve got visuals. She’s in sunglasses and a hat and... where

the fuck is she?”

“Has the limo stopped?” Doc asks. “Is Parker taking her to the airport?”

“No,” Bobby says. “She’s not... I don’t think...” He turns to Eli. “Could Parker have taken the camera out?”

“I doubt it. It’s embedded in one of the rubies.”

“Where is she?” I say, my voice stupidly slurred.

“About an hour from here on the highway,” Bobby says. “But she’s not in Parker’s limo, she’s at a rest stop. In a men’s room, it looks like—”

“*What?*” I try to jerk my legs sideways to stand. Nothing moves. “Who’s she with? Parker?”

Bobby hammers on the keyboard. “I don’t think so. Another guy.”

“Show him,” Eli demands. “If he’s one of Parker’s men, Adriano might recognize him.”

Bobby almost drops his laptop bringing it over to me. I sit up straighter, feeling my rib scrape. “The meds are wearing off.”

“We’ll top you off at Velvet House,” Doc says. “Focus.”

The back of a huge blond man is hustling through a truck stop.

“Dunno,” I say. “Could be anyone.”

“Look harder,” Eli demands.

I squint just as the blond turns and looks right into the camera. “I know him. He works for Parker.”

Bobby lets out a breath. “What’s his name?”

“No name. He was the one who hit me.” I gesture at my broken nose.

None of the guys say anything, but I feel their secondhand embarrassment. Still, I don’t have the right to pride, not while

January's missing. "He's alone," I say. "Why's he alone with her?"

"Maybe she needed the restroom?" Bobby says.

"The men's restroom?"

"Shit," Doc snatches up the laptop. "Dolph Lundgren's not taking her to Parker's limo. He's got his own car."

"Maybe it's part of the plan," Bobby says. "A decoy ride?"

"No way. Look at him. Look at how freaked out he is and he's dragging January's arm. He's taking her."

"*Another* abduction?" Eli says. "How is that even—Doc, what are you doing?"

Doc tosses the laptop onto my bed and heads to the door. "We know where she is. We know who she's with. I'm leaving."

"We need a plan," Eli says.

"So come up with one while I'm driving. January's already been double abducted by some Russian boxer. I'm not gonna waste time sitting around."

"No, you're going to cowboy your way into an early grave."

I unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. "Let him go. We need someone after her."

"*You*," Eli glares at me. "You lost the right to contribute the moment you took that girl."

"So, kill me once she's back," I say. "Bobby and Doc can go out together and you can focus on—"

A sickening wave rolls up my body and I fall back into the pillow.

"...passing out..." Bobby says.

"...call the goddamn doctor..."

My eyes scrape open. A man is floating over me. Not a man I know. I try to swat him, but my arms are like logs.

“January,” I mumble. “Where’s January?”

“Easy, Rossi,” Eli murmurs in my ear. “We’re getting you out of here.”

I tilt my head and see Harvey holding my stretcher. Sal has the other end. I’m rolling down a hallway, harsh lights flashing like UFOs.

The man I didn’t recognize is running beside me, arguing with Eli. “You can’t remove a patient without my authority.”

“I think you’ll find I can.”

“But the police want to interview him and—”

Eli shoves a wad of bills at the doctor. “Mr. Mills is going to a different hospital, and he won’t be filling out your forms. Is that understood?”

The doctor looks down at the bundle of cash. “I still think ___”

“Either take the money or give the speech,” Eli says. “You don’t get to do both.”

The doctor grabs the cash and scurries away.

“Are we heading for the chopper?” I ask.

“We are.” Eli looks me in the eyes. “Did you fuck her?”

I tilt my head back. Harvey and Sal’s faces are blank but I can tell they’re listening.

“I’m waiting, Rossi.”

I shake my head.

Eli’s gaze bores into mine. “Then *why*?”

I think of the way January looked as she danced in her cage. Terror and control and magnificence. It’s humiliating. She’s a beautiful young girl and I’m... what I am. But I can’t

deny it. Not now she's been taken from all of us. I let Eli read the answer on my face.

He lets out a long sigh. "You of all people?"

"Yes."

"So, you didn't want to kill her?"

"I did and I didn't. I do... I don't know."

"It would have been easier if you'd just killed her," he says wearily, but I know he doesn't mean it. There is no life without January Whitehall now. Not for me or Eli, or Bobby or Doc. But I don't say that. We can deal with who loves who and what to do about it once we have her back. Because if we don't get her back...

A red haze washes over my brain. I'm going to pass out again. "Are Doc and Bobby...? Where are Doc and Bobby?"

"On the road. Getting closer to her every second."

Fear drills at my inner ear. "If we don't find her...?"

"We will." A cool hand rests briefly on mine. "Sleep, old friend, and pray we don't kill you when you wake up."

I try to smile, but my face won't move. Then I'm gone.



CHAPTER TWO

January Whitehall

One hour earlier

I WOULD RATHER be at Velvet House than here. The thought echoes through my mind as I sit in Mr. Parker's limo for what seems like eternity. I keep sneaking glances out of the tinted windows as we drive, but it's pointless. I don't recognize where we are. In my darkest moments at Velvet House, when I was caged in the basement, or being tormented by Doc or Adriano, I wondered if I would rather be Mr. Parker's wife. But now I'm in the same space as my ex-fiancé, I want to dissolve like sugar in hot coffee.

The thread holding my body and soul together feels thin. Thinner than it ever felt at Velvet House. Eli, Doc, Bobby and Adriano are dangerous men who *could* do anything to hurt me. Mr. Parker is a dangerous man who *will* do anything to hurt me. He just needs a reason and I've given him plenty.

Mr. Parker sits across from me, on his phone. He's watching YouTube, his big puckery lips rubbing together. They look like two pink slugs. I rub the stinging cut on my own lower lip. I thought after Mr. Parker hit me he'd keep yelling and screaming, but he's ignoring me. Biding his time.

In fact, the only person who seems vaguely interested in me is one of Mr. Parker's bodyguards, a huge blond guy with a split eyebrow. The other bodyguards stare ahead, blank faced, but he keeps glancing over. I wish I was wearing more than a tiny dress, a ruby necklace and heels. *I wish I was wearing a bra.*

Dry prickles roll down my back and across my arms, lifting the fine hairs. I can't give in to panic. I try to focus on things I can see inside the limo. The wooden minibar, the grainy pattern on the leather seats. I need to keep my head together. If I think about Zia Teresa lying dead in the hospital or the gunshots in the hallway where Adriano was, I'll scream.

It's my fault Zia was killed, just like it's my fault Adriano was shot. I seduced him into taking me to the hospital. I did what Eli Morelli forbade and escaped. If Adriano is still alive and he's told the Velvet House men what I've done...

But of course Adriano is alive. He has to be. He's a minotaur. He's going to follow me around forever, watching me dance. Just like Doc is going to insult me and Bobby is going to lift his eyebrows and ask if I'm okay and Eli Morelli is going to wear beautiful suits and oh my God, why did I think I could escape? Why did I think I could make anything better? I should have stayed trapped in my wing at Velvet House where the only person suffering was me.

The limo stops. I look outside and see a large manor house.

"Baskerville, go get Emilia," Mr. Parker says.

The leery blond guy opens the door. I glance at Mr. Parker, expecting an explanation, but he drops his gaze to his phone.

A few minutes later a girl climbs into the limo. Her floaty red hair and wide blue eyes remind me of the little mermaid. She doesn't look happy to be here. She looks terrified.

"Hi," I say instinctively as she sits beside me. "I'm January—"

"Shut your fucking mouth," Mr. Parker says as the blond guy gets back into the limo. "January, this is my girlfriend. Emilia, this is my fiancé, January Whitehall."

Emilia draws back like I'm going to hit her, but all I can do is stare. Girlfriend? So, the whole time Mr. Parker and I were engaged, he had someone? Or did he meet her after I was taken?

“Emilia’s been mine for almost two years,” Mr. Parker says as though reading my thoughts. “Haven’t you, my little cum-dumpster?”

Emilia nods super slowly, like she’s drunk or maybe high.

I feel Mr. Parker watching and I try to rearrange my face into something calm. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Emilia.”

Mr. Parker cackles. “What a good little whore you are. Say hello back, Emilia.”

Emilia slouches, so her red hair covers her eyes. “H-hi, January.”

The shake in her voice sends goose bumps down my arms. What’s happened to make her act this way?

Mr. Parker leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You know what? I want a better hello. You girls kiss.”

I blanch. “What?”

Mr. Parker pulls a gun from his coat and all the air seems to leave the limo. He points the dark circle at me. “Kiss each other. On the mouth. Now.”

Emilia’s cold hands close around my cheeks, turning me toward her and then she kisses me. Her lips are very small. Mr. Parker hoots and the bodyguards stare. Not all of them. Out of the corner of my eye I see the blond looking away, and feel a surge of affection for him. Although he might not be polite. He could just be homophobic.

Emilia and I separate and Mr. Parker claps, his round face red with excitement. “Again. Tongue this time.”

Before I can think, Emilia is pressing her small wet tongue into my mouth. She’s more obedient than I am. Or maybe she’s learnt better than to disobey.

There are louder whoops and cheers.

“Touch her, Emilia,” Mr. Parker says. “Grab her tits.”

Emilia's tiny hands clutch me through my dress, squeezing my boobs like they're cantaloupes. I inhale but nothing happens, I can't drag air through my nose. It's like being underwater, but I can't panic. If I'm calm, I'll be allowed to rise again.

Eventually Emilia pulls away and I stay limp, though I'm dying to wipe my wet lips.

"Very good," Mr. Parker says. "Come here."

"Me?" I ask, but Emilia is already moving carefully across the limousine. She doesn't sit beside Mr. Parker, instead she drops to her knees. My stomach churns, sure of what's going to happen next. Mr. Parker keeps his eyes on me as he unzips his fly. "You like watching?"

I don't say anything. The blond bodyguard is still staring purposefully out the window. I try to copy his passive gaze. Emilia bends her head toward Mr. Parker's lap and slurping sounds fill the limousine. My skin crawls as he jerks his head at me. "Look at me, January."

I ignore him, focusing on the street blurring past the window.

"I said *look at me*," he says and I hear him cock the gun.

Panic rushes down my back like pine needles and I turn and stare wordlessly at my ex-fiancé. Mr. Parker pushes his fingers through Emilia's red hair. "Don't be jealous."

Bile forms at the back of my throat. Jealous? I was jealous when Eli told me I could never be his wife, when Doc talked about the beautiful dancers in his clubs. Watching this is the furthest I've ever been from jealous. I'm *relieved* it's not me being forced to touch him. Relieved and angry. As I watch Mr. Parker violate Emilia, hatred rises up in me, burning like butter in a shallow pan. This horrible man. Why is he acting like this?

"You're very calm," Mr. Parker says, slinging an arm along the back of his chair. "Your little nanny's dead, remember? Don't you want to talk about it?"

I was crying beside Zia Teresa's unconscious body in the hospital when two men burst into the hospital room and shoved me aside. One pressed his hand over my eyes but not before I saw the other wrap his fingers around Zia's throat. The noises she made... the gurgling and the little gasps. Was she awake? Did she know what was happening as it happened? A million pinpricks force their way through my skin, and I wish Adriano had killed me. That his murderous hatred of me had been real and he had taken my life.

"Say something," Mr. Parker demands. "Unless you want to help Emilia lick my cock?"

I part my dry lips. "Why... why did you kill my Zia?"

He laughs, delighted with the question. "I didn't kill your stupid Zia. I ordered her dead."

Tears sting my eyes. "But *why*?"

Mr. Parker puts a hand on the back of Emilia's bobbing head. "I told my men to waste your nanny because she was always a cunt to me. Shooting me little looks out of the corners of her eyes whenever I was at your house. Serves her fucking right."

Heat shimmers through me like the waves above concrete and my hatred burns to black, bitter ash.

"...and you wanted to bring that old bitch onto my staff," Mr. Parker says. "You must have hinted at it a hundred times, thinking you were so fucking subtle. I was always going to kill her before that happened."

My chest contracts. So, it is my fault. Because I loved Zia Teresa, I killed her. She's dead because of me.

How dare you think that!

The accented voice is as clear as if Zia was talking in my ear. I jolt upright.

"What?" Mr. Parker asks.

“Nothing.” I close my eyes, hunting inside myself for the voice. *I’m so sorry, Zia. I’m sorry you died because of me.*

I was old and asleep. Exactly how I wanted to die. And you do not have permission to insult me by blaming yourself. This mascalzone killed me. And not even with his own hands! He made someone else do it, like the lazy bastardo he is! The Zia in my mind draws a deep, rasping breath. *Now, I know this is not a good place to be and I know you’re worried you killed that ugly man, but you need to forget about us and concentrate on saving yourself, understood?*

But Zia—

No buts. You can spend forever apologizing, once you’re away from this man. Now, go and focus on that.

I squeeze my eyes tightly. A visual hug. *I’ll try, Zia. I love you.*

I love you too. Concentrate.

I open my eyes to find Mr. Parker watching. “You really are a moron, aren’t you, January?”

“I guess so,” I say, remembering how nice I thought he was. How I defended him to Eli and Bobby when they kidnapped me. No wonder they looked at me like I was crazy.

Mr. Parker snorts. “You’re dumber than Emilia, and that’s saying something.”

I watch the back of Emilia’s head dip as she sucks his penis. Does she feel as sick and helpless as I do?

Concentrate, bella.

I run my tongue over my lower lip, cleaning the cut. “Mr. Parker, are we going back to your house?”

“Firstly, I don’t have a house, you dumb bitch. I have a fucking compound...”

He swears like an eight-year-old, so impressed with himself for knowing naughty words. I hate him.

“...secondly, we’re not going to my compound. We’re going to a private airstrip and flying to Vegas. Then we’re going to Thailand.”

“Thailand?”

“I have a house there and I think it’ll be more difficult for a certain gang of Italian slimeballs to find us in Southeast Asia, don’t you?”

I weave my fingers together and try to process what Mr. Parker is saying. My knuckles go white with pressure. “But how will we get to Thailand? I’d... I’d need a passport, wouldn’t I?”

“Sartell? Show the girl.”

One of the bodyguards digs around in a black bag, pulling out a familiar pink wallet. He tosses it into my lap. I unclench my fingers and flip it open. My face stares back at me from the photo window. This isn’t a fake, like the one Adriano was going to give me after I left the hospital. This is my real passport.

“Where...? How...?”

Mr. Parker giggles. “Your stepmother. She’s still more than happy for us to get married. And she should be. God knows I’ve given the bitch enough money.”

The news hits me like an asteroid. My stepmother betrayed me. Sold me again to this evil man. I feel a scream rising inside me.

Concentrate, bella.

I swallow the scream.

“Oh,” I say in my lightest, sweetest voice. “That makes sense. Mom always really liked you. So, we’re going to live together in Thailand?”

Mr. Parker looks annoyed by my reaction. “Yes, well, we’ll be going to Vegas first, then Thailand.”

“Why are we flying to Vegas? Is it a connecting flight?”

Mr. Parker whacks the top of Emilia's head like he's slapping his thigh with laughter. "We're flying to Vegas to get married, you dippy cooze. Who knows, I might even get Elvis to do it."

My insides turn to ice. "You can't make me marry you."

Mr. Parker squints as though I've suddenly become hard to see. "Are you fucking serious?"

"I won't say the words. You can't get married if both people don't say the words."

He presses the gun to Emilia's head. "Say that again."

Emilia and I scream, mine clear, hers all garbled.

I raise my hands. "Okay, I'm sorry! I'll marry you. I'll go to Thailand. I'll do whatever you want!"

He flashes me a smile and tosses the gun onto the seat beside him. "Good. You know, I think with a little time you and Emilia could be best friends."

"I-I'm sure we could be."

Mr. Parker pushes Emilia's head further into his lap, making her gag. "Actually, all three of us are going to get very close. Starting this evening."

I press my knees together. Maybe the plane will crash and I won't have to have sex with him.

We sit there for a while, Emilia going down on Mr. Parker as anonymous city streets rush past and the whole scene is so surreal I keep wanting to laugh. Then I want to scream until my throat tears open. I try to do what Zia asked and plan an escape but my mind keeps snagging on getting one of her cast iron frying pans and smashing Mr. Parker's penis. Making it so that he can't hurt anyone with it ever again.

"You remember the charity ball?" Mr. Parker asks. "The night you got all horny?"

That's not the way I'd put it, but I do remember that night. Mr. Parker got around my bodyguards and drugged me with

Orchard, an aphrodisiac Doc invented when he was a teenager. Mr. Parker took me to another room, but before he could touch me, my stepmom whisked me away. The drug didn't work the way it was supposed to. Doc told me Mr. Parker's batch was stolen and it had expired. It mostly just made me sick. Not the way I felt when I was given a fresh dose at Velvet House. But at Velvet House, all four of my captors were beautiful. They terrified me, but I never had to pretend to find them attractive and I can't say the same for my thirty-eight-year-old, rubber-lipped 'fiancé.'

"I remember the charity ball," I say.

"I drugged you," Mr. Parker says. "Gave you something I invented called O."

My eyes widen. He's saying *he* invented Orchard?

"You, um, made a drug?"

"Yup and I've got another couple doses. You and Emilia are both gonna get some in Vegas and then we'll have some fun." Mr. Parker grins. "But don't worry, you'll be the one to get my gravy. I want a son."

I turn my face away, my stomach rolling. And then I see him. The blond guy. He's looking right at me and pressing a finger into his open mouth. I frown. Is he making fun of me? Making fun of Emilia? Is he just a weirdo? He screws up his face and sticks out his tongue, and I realize he's pretending to puke.

I steal a glance at Mr. Parker, but he's occupied with his laughter and his blow job. I look back at the bodyguard who is now pressing a hand to his stomach and tilting his head downward. It's like he's telling me to pretend to throw up. I mirror his actions and he nods rapidly.

On one hand he could be trying to trick me. On the other, I don't know how things could possibly get worse. I decide to take the risk. I bend over and stick out my tongue, coughing until my throat catches.

"What the fuck?" Mr. Parker says. "What are you doing?"

“Sir,” the blond says. “I think she’s gonna throw up.”

He has a southern accent and for some reason that makes me trust him more. I gag, letting my spit run out of my mouth and onto the limo floor.

“Sir, I think we should pull over,” the blond says. My heart jumps into my mouth. He *is* trying to help me.

“Just give her the ice bucket,” Mr. Parker says.

“Sir, that’s a pretty bad smell to be smellin’ all the way to the airstrip.”

I squint through my hair. Mr. Parker is sitting back, both hands on Emilia’s head. I cough and sputter but I’m no closer to actually throwing up. If I’d drunk more water or eaten I could make this look better but my stomach doesn’t seem to want to give anything up. I think of maggots crawling through bread, of soggy bathroom floors and cockroaches. Nothing works. Then I imagine being in bed with Mr. Parker and poor Emilia, or Mr. Parker forcing Emilia’s head into *my* lap, and then my stomach heaves. I gag and this time I bring bile into my mouth.

“Jesus!” Mr. Parker pulls Emilia off him. “Stop puking, you disgusting bitch.”

I see his penis. I wish I didn’t. It’s short and fat and bright red and I hate it as much as I hate him but I make myself stare at it until I gag again.

“There’s a truck stop ahead,” the blond says. “I’ll take her to the restroom.”

“Fine. Whatever.” Mr. Parker presses a button. “Carlo, pull into the next stop.”

My pulse goes haywire, and I’m so scared I’ll smile. I keep my head hanging toward the floor and moan.

“You’re gonna hold her hair, Baskerville,” Mr. Parker says. “And if she gets puke on herself, rinse her out in the toilet.”

“Yes, sir.”

I glance at the blond, but his face is calm. Neutral. My stomach clenches. What if I'm wrong about him? What if he just wants to get me alone so he can hurt me?

It's something, Zia says. You won't be trapped in the car and any man is better than Mr. Parker.

The afternoon sun stings my eyes as Baskerville steers me into the truck stop. It's a big, busy place and the sight of all the bustling families and grumpy truckers makes it even harder to believe I am where I am. Miles from Velvet House. Miles from my family. Forever away from Zia Teresa.

"Hurry up," Baskerville says, dragging me past a cluster of moms. "Bathroom. Now."

So, I was wrong about him. He really did just want to get me alone for some weird, non-rescuing reason.

The moms turn to stare and I pray one of them calls the police. I definitely look like I'm being sex trafficked. Then again, they might think the blond is my mean boyfriend. He has bright hazel eyes and he would be handsome if he didn't work for the nastiest man in the world.

When we get to the restrooms, Baskerville puts his shoulder into the door marked 'men's.'

"Ew! I can't go in there!"

"Yes, you can."

He bundles me into a cubicle and pulls the door closed, separating us. "If you really need to puke, do it now. Or whatever else you need."

I frown. That's a weird thing to say. "What's going on? Why did you bring me here?"

"Shh," Baskerville says, as the bathroom door squeaks open.

This is my chance. I should shout out that I'm being kidnapped. But then Baskerville might attack whoever it is and I'd be responsible for another person getting hurt. I sit on the

closed toilet lid and press my face into my hands. More than anything I want Adriano to be here with two guns and six knives. I want Eli and his cold professional stare and Bobby in full murderer mode. I want Doc to burst in with his butterfly knife and threaten to stab everyone. But mostly I want to be braver and smarter and stronger than I am. The kind of girl who can get herself out of hopeless situations.

“Everything okay in there, Kitten?”

I glare at the door. Stupid gross Baskerville being gross. “Leave me alone.”

“Afraid I can’t do that, honey. Time to go.”

I stand and flush the toilet for no reason and then unlock the door. So much for my big escape. I’m just going to have to scream in the gas station and hope someone—

“What the hell...?”

I’ve lost my mind. I’ve lost my mind, or I’ve been given drugs. I’m looking at Baskerville but... there’s two of him. It’s the same man twice. But the first Baskerville is in all black. The second is wearing a leather jacket and jeans.

“Hi, Kitten,” Leather Jacket Baskerville says. “How you feeling?”

I stare in disbelief.

“Twins.” Leather Jacket points at his chest. “I’m Archie and this...” He jerks his thumb at the other Baskerville, “...Is Bill. We’re gonna get you out of here.”

“I... How? *Why?*”

“Let’s just say we need you for something important.”

My numb brain stutters to life. More men who want my body. My virginity. I back into the toilet door.

Archie gives me a lazy grin. “Not like that, Kitten. Don’t get us wrong, we’d love to, but by all accounts, you’re spoken for.”

“You mean Mr. Parker?”

His smile fades. “I mean Elliot Morelli and his boys.”

My heart stops. “I...? Do you know them? Do you work for them?”

“Not yet.”

“But you’re taking me to them?”

“That’s the plan.”

I raise a hand and touch Eli’s ruby necklace. “But they’ll kill me. I got one of their men hurt. I *escaped*.”

“Too bad, Kitten. We’re taking you to Velvet House.”

My throat contracts. “Please—”

Bill groans. “We don’t have time for this, January. You wanna get back in that limo with Parker?”

I shake my head.

“Then shut up and we’ll get you out of here.” He turns to his twin. “Do what you’ve gotta do.”

Archie shakes out his shoulders like he’s about to dive into freezing water.

“Wait,” I say. “What is your plan?”

Bill smiles. “No time for that. See you soon, January. Tell your Velvet House boyfriend I rescued you.”

“I... which guy do you think is my boyfriend?”

“Ain’t you cute?” He pulls a checked handkerchief from his pocket and hands it to me. “Put this in your mouth. Don’t worry. It’s clean.”

I look at Archie, who nods.

Feeling silly, I put the handkerchief between my teeth and hold it there.

“Good girl,” Archie says, then he pulls out a gun and slams it into the back of his brother’s head.

I bite down the handkerchief as Bill falls to the ground, blood pouring from the back of his head.

“Come on,” Archie says. “We’ve gotta go.”

I spit out the handkerchief, my teeth furry with cotton and shock. “What the hell!?”

Archie shoves his gun away. “Parker isn’t gonna let Bill wander back to the limo without you, Kitten. We need to make this look legit. Now can you stay quiet?”

“I... Okay?”

“*Okay?*”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Archie pulls a baseball cap and a pair of aviators from his jacket. “Here, put these on.”

I think I’ll look more noticeable wearing heels, a hat and sunglasses, but I do what I’m told.

“Right,” Archie says, taking my hand. “Follow me. And smile. We’re a couple on a road trip, okay?”

I answer with a grin. The wide one I was going to wear for my first wedding dance.

Archie and I walk through the rest stop and if anyone notices that the blond man I was with is wearing different clothes, they don’t say it. Archie leads me to the back exit where there’s a smaller parking lot. Waiting for us is a beat-up brown Nissan. The kind of car my brother Harris would call a shitbox.

Archie unlocks the door and I climb in, the skin on the back of my neck itching. This can’t work. Mr. Parker is going to come after us and kill me and Archie. Kill Emilia. Kill Eli and Bobby and Doc and Adriano—if he isn’t already dead...

“Get down, Kitten,” Archie says, climbing into the driver’s seat. “There’s a chance the guys in the limo could see us when we pull out and I’ve got the same face as Bill.”

I put my head between my knees as Archie starts the engine.

“That’s it,” he says, reversing the car. “Stay there.”

“We’re going to get caught,” I mumble into my knees. “They’re gonna see you. Mr. Parker’s gonna get me.”

“No, he ain’t. We’re almost at the exit.”

The car rumbles beneath me, the wheels shifting against concrete. Is this how I die? In a shitbox car with an evil twin?

“Almost there,” Archie mutters. “Almost... made it.”

We turn and the car shoots forward.

“Hell fucking yeah, Kitten! We’re in the clear!”

I don’t lift my head. “How do you know they’re not coming for us?”

“Because if they’d seen, they’d already be shooting.”

I whimper into my legs.

It takes twenty minutes for Archie to convince me to sit up properly. When I do, he hands me a bag of Sour Patch Kids and a bottle of water. “Here. For shock.”

I chew through half the pack without tasting anything. My mind has a floaty, half-asleep feeling, like nothing is real. I could be in a car with a blond stranger, or I could be in my bedroom at Velvet House, or I could be dozing off in science period. Who knows?

“You feelin’ better?” Archie asks.

“I don’t know,” I say, squishing an orange Sour Patch between my fingers.

“That’s fair, but we’ve got about fifty miles between us and Zachery Parker. That seems like plenty of space to me.”

My tummy gives a happy wriggle. “What about Bill? Is he okay?”

“I don’t know. He won’t make contact for another day or so.”

I bite my tongue, but my unspoken words hang in the air between us. *I hope Mr. Parker doesn’t go crazy and hurt him.*

Archie coughs. “Anyway, now you’re talking again, you should know I’m still taking you to Morelli.”

Cold trickles down my body like icy water. I can see Eli in my mind, his handsome face contorted with rage as he orders me into the basement cage to suffer for the pain I caused. For my disobedience.

I imagine Adriano’s mouth twisting in hatred as he realizes I seduced him against his will, helping Doc to throw me into the cage, laughing as Doc’s barbed insults tear at me. The two of them would make sure I pay for what I did a thousand times over and Bobby, my gentle protector will let them. He will never again look at me like the precious thing he believed me to be.

I will truly be Velvet House’s prisoner.

And yet...

I would rather be at Velvet House than with Mr. Parker.

The thought is as true now as it was when it was a fantasy. They will hurt me, they will do everything they can to break me, but I will survive it. And no one else will be harmed because of me. I close my eyes, forcing my tears to run fresh paths down my cheeks.

“Okay,” I tell Archie. “Take me to Velvet House.”

“Right...” he shifts a little in his seat. “You wouldn’t... I mean, you don’t know where it is, do you?”

I gape at him. “You don’t know how to get to Velvet House?”

Archie scowls. “I just... I got a general idea, but I’ve never actually... I mean, the address ain’t on Google maps, is it?”

My heart contracts as I wonder if I can lie to Archie. Get him to take me to an airport or a train station and run away. But where would I go? I don't have any money or my passport and if I managed to get home my stepmom would just hand me over to Mr. Parker again.

“Kitten?” Archie presses. “Help a white knight out here?”

I push my fingers into my ponytail and pull out the St. Christopher medallion I've been hiding in my hair. The one Zia Teresa gave me on my ruined wedding day. “I don't know Velvet House's address,” I say honestly. “I'm not great with directions.

Archie makes a grumpy sound. “You don't have any idea where it is?”

“Albany,” I say promptly.

“That's a big place, sweetness. Any specifics? Anything you'd recognize if you saw it again?”

I was unconscious when I was first brought to Velvet House and when Adriano and I left to go to the hospital, my brain was full of Zia Teresa. And I'm not lying, my sense of direction is terrible. I got lost in my own neighborhood all the time. “Um, I don't know. There were a lot of trees around...”

“Fuck it. We're going to Dreams.”

For a second I have no idea what he's talking about and I think of pillows and unicorns and soul music. Then it clicks. “You're taking me to a strip club?”

“Gentleman's lounge,” Archie corrects. “I can make contact with Domenico Valente there. Or at least someone he knows.”

Fear spikes through me. Domenico Valente. Doc.

Yesterday, I'd have said that Adriano was the scariest of the four Velvet House men, but in his bed, I saw the truth. He is huge and tormented and possibly broken, but he has a tenderness for me that could have killed both of us. That's why

he let me go to the hospital. Why he called for me to run as Mr. Parker's men strangled my Zia.

If he survived—of course he survived—he might go easy on me.

Doc won't.

He hates Mr. Parker with every bone in his body and used that hatred against me like a weapon. He spat in my face, stripped me naked and barely consented to give me the small freedoms Bobby and Eli allowed me. Once I'm back in his grasp, any shred of dignity I have will be torn away.

Doc will hurt me. Spank me, use my body in every and any way he wants. I will be drugged with Orchard and forced to comply with his every wish, possibly to dance in his clubs and sleep with his customers. Certainly, to endure his insults and dress in skimpy clothes and act however he wants me to.

And even as my skin crawls I can feel a twisted sense of longing. Doc is evil, but he also has cornflower blue eyes and a perfectly tattooed body and when he tosses his blond head back and laughs he's beautiful.

I can't go back.

"Please, I beg Archie. "Take me somewhere else, anywhere else. I'll give you money. I'll... I'll call my uncles and have them pay you or—"

Archie's friendly face goes hard and for the first time I see how he's worked for Mr. Parker, how he's dangerous too. "Don't push me, Kitten," he says. "I don't want to hurt you, but one way or another, you're going back to Morelli. Alright?"

I shrink back in my seat. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just be." Archie pulls out his phone and taps the screen. "It's a couple of hours away, you hungry? Need to pee?"

I shake my head, my fingers tightening around my St. Christopher. Archie puts on Johnny Cash and as my mind

fumbles along to 'Ring of Fire' I wonder if I'll die of panic
before we ever get to Dreams.



CHAPTER THREE

January Whitehall

IT'S DARK WHEN we arrive at the sprawling, ivy-covered mansion.

Archie smiles at my shocked expression. “Not what you were expecting?”

“I thought it would be in the middle of a street and there’d be like... flashing lights and girls in tube tops.”

He laughs. “Valente owns a few places like that, but this is the classy one.”

It’s funny to hear him mention Doc so casually, as though he’s existed for years without me, which of course he has. But to me, he was born the day he showed up in the cathedral dressed in a priest outfit for my marriage counseling. It’s hard to believe that his raging energy was out in the world without me knowing about it.

Even now I swear I can feel him coming closer, his brow contracted, his long fingers itching to tear the clothes from my body and punish me.

I cast another glance at Dreams. Its brick façade is as intimidating as any fancy home I was taken to by my stepmom. “Are we, um, allowed to be here?”

“As long as we got money.” He pulls the cap off my head. “Look alive, Kitten. I know you’ve had a hell of a day, but you need to keep it together. Are you ready?”

Am I ready? I'm more tired and strung out than I can ever remember being, but I can't just sit in Archie's car for the rest of time. I push my shoulders back. "Of course."

Archie and I open our car doors and head to the entrance. I pause when I see a bouncer. "I don't have any ID."

"How old are you, Kitten?"

"Eighteen."

He whistles.

"Sorry," I say again. "Maybe we should just leave?"

Archie gives me a wry smile. "Nice try. Look, you're a stunner. This isn't going to be a problem. Just play along."

"With what...?"

He doesn't answer, instead he slings an arm around my shoulders, and steers me to the door. His arm is heavy, and he smells nice, but I feel edgy like one of the boys might see me and get the wrong idea. Archie winks at the bouncer who takes one look at me and pulls back the red velvet rope blocking the entrance.

"Have a good night you two."

The second we're inside, Archie lets go of me. "Easy as pie."

Dreams is pretty inside. The walls are red, and the matching carpet is so thick, my heels sink into it. There are dancers everywhere in even higher heels, moving with far more grace than I am. Tall, beautiful women with big boobs and even bigger butts. Archie's head is turning all over the place.

"What now?" I ask.

"We get a drink." He leads me to a gold, circular bar. On opposite sides of it, women are dancing with the syrupy effortless that I know from ballet takes years of practice.

So, this is where Doc wanted me to work... I can admit it's elegant. The lighting is flattering, and the furniture looks expensive. And all the men are well-dressed, talking amongst themselves or politely watching the dancers.

"This is nicer than I thought," I tell Archie.

His eyes are glued on the woman twerking to our right. "Yeah, it's a classy place. What do you want to drink?"

My stomach rumbles. If I have any alcohol, I'll fall over. "Could I please have a Sprite?"

"Sure." He calls the bartender over, a pretty blonde with a round face. "Hey, gorgeous, we'll take a Makers on the rocks and a Sprite."

She turns to get our drinks and Archie's attention returns to the twerking woman.

I frown at him. "Aren't you going to ask about Doc?"

"Kitten, you don't walk into a place like this and start asking for the boss. We need to chill."

"Oh, okay."

As Archie's eyes follow the shaking butt, I think that things might be moving faster if we weren't in a strip club. Our drinks arrive and I take the seat beside Archie and watch the girls dance to songs I haven't heard before. As they move fluidly around the poles, I feel a stir of what Doc first offered me—freedom. If I worked here, I'd be free to dance and drink and maybe become friends with all these women.

I've always had girlfriends, but I feel like the women who work in this club would be a lot more fun, and I'd be more fun with them.

A man in his sixties, his tie loose around his neck, wanders up to the bar and immediately gets distracted by the twerking lady. "Hey, Mya! How 'bout a freebie?"

The woman doesn't look around, but I see a crease appear between her eyebrows. That would be the real problem with

working here. I don't want men like that to touch me. I don't think it's even that he's old or loud. Archie's handsome and the thought of dancing for him makes my stomach churn.

I watch a pale girl with a sheet of black hair climb into a businessman's lap. We look similar. I imagine it's me in the royal blue lingerie and Doc sitting in the businessman's seat. I would grind up against him, and watch his cold blue eyes burn. His hands would be at his sides but tense, ready to snap around me as soon as he was done letting me play with him. Heat glows between my legs. I want him to look at me that way. To be the only woman he has eyes for. Doc's face shifts into Bobby's, and I picture turning like the black-haired girl and pressing my ass into his lap. He would be all eager with just a hint of aggression peeking through...

A dull ache throbs under my ribs. Maybe if I'd stayed at Velvet House and been what the boys wanted me to be... but I can't think that way. I never could have lived by their rules. Not while Zia Teresa was lying in the hospital and I wasn't allowed to go see her.

“Good evening.”

I turn. A woman in a leather bustier is glaring at me. She's super tall and her bone structure is incredible. She looks like Gabrielle Union and Wonder Woman had a baby, though she doesn't seem nearly as impressed to see me and Archie.

“Hi,” I squeak.

She ignores me, jabbing a finger at Archie. “Haven't seen you here before.”

He flashes her a wide smile. “First time, sugar.”

“And you brought a girl with you?”

“Ain't that allowed?”

Wonder Woman glares at me and I offer her a weak smile. “Hi... again...?”

Her lip curls. “Can I get you a coloring book, sweetie?”

“Um, no?”

“Now don’t be mean, honey, it’s January’s first time.” Archie pulls out his wallet. “Tell you what, why don’t you dance for me? I don’t know what the going rate is, but I’ve got two hundred dollars—”

“—and you can shove every penny up your asshole.”

I press my hands to my mouth to suppress a nervous giggle. Archie looks like someone kicked him in the groin. Wonder Woman puts her hands on her hips. “I’m not going to shake my ass for you blondie. I’m the floor manager and I wanna know why you’re bringing underage tail into my club.”

Archie shoves his wallet back into his jacket. “You got me. We’re here to see Domenico Valente.”

Wonder Woman looks at him like he’s a spider laying eggs in her purse. “Get the fuck out. Now.”

My spine tenses, but Archie flashes her another bright smile. “Hang on just a second, Kitten. This underage tail happens to be January Whitehall.”

Wonder Woman draws herself up to her full height. “Is that supposed to mean anyt...” She cuts herself off and stares at me, dark eyes narrowing. “You...”

I shrink back into my stool. “Hi?”

“She *can* say more than that,” Archie drawls. “This is the bride. I’ve brought her back for safekeeping.”

Wonder Woman reaches for my throat. I flinch but she just touches Eli’s necklace. “Real?”

I guess she means the stones. “I... um, yes. They’re rubies. And diamonds.”

Her gaze snaps to Archie. “What the hell is going on?”

“It’s a real long story, darlin’, but I’ll need to tell it to Domenico Valente first.”

She stares at him for a moment then inclines her head. “I’ll call him. You stay still as a statue and don’t lay a finger on my girls.”

“You’re no fun,” Archie grumbles as Wonder Woman walks away. Then he winks at me. “How do you like that, Kitten? We’re finally getting somewhere.”

I suppose that’s true, but I don’t feel happier. My heart is still pounding. I grab for my Sprite and almost knock it over.

“Whoa,” Archie says, straightening the glass. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” It’s a lie. I’m shivering, goose bumps lifting all over my skin. I ran away. Zia is dead. Mr. Parker kidnapped me. I kissed a girl. I got kidnapped again and now I’m being returned to the men who stole me on my wedding day. The men I betrayed by escaping. Doc is on his way and maybe he won’t keep me as a sex slave. Maybe the snapping anger that exists just below his surface will burst out and he’ll slit my throat with his knife and I’ll deserve it. Adriano was shot because of me. Zia Teresa died because of me.

“January,” Archie says more urgently. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head, teeth chattering. “They killed my Zia.”

“What was that, Kitten?”

“Mr. Parker. He killed my Zia.”

I expect Archie to ignore me. Or to ask what ‘Zia’ means. He does neither. Instead he stares down at the gold bartop. “I’m real sorry ’bout that, January. I was hoping he wouldn’t hurt her.”

“Did you... *know* Mr. Parker wanted to kill her?”

Archie hesitates.

“Please be honest. I can’t handle any more lies.”

He raises his whiskey then puts it down without taking a sip. “I knew Parker put her in the hospital as bait. I knew he was talking about killing her, but it wasn’t a sure thing.”

I think back to the limo. Mr. Parker's laughter. "He said he was always going to kill her because she was rude to him... and because I loved her."

Archie drums the side of his glass. "Goddamn tragic."

I look at him, every line of his face steeped in misery. "Archie... Why do you work for Mr. Parker?"

For a second I think I've taken things too far, that he's going to hit me or worse. Then his face crumples, his eyes squeezing shut. "I don't fuckin' know, Kitten. This situation... it's even worse than I thought it could be. And I've thought some fucked-up shit."

"You mean abducting me from the hospital?"

"I mean *everything*." He picks up his whiskey and drains it. "You really wanna know the truth?"

I nod.

"Bill and I did some jobs for Parker right out of college. Good money. Plenty of side benefits. After a while, we got in with the main security team. That's when we found out about all the fucked-up shit that's being covered up and moved around and disappeared. And don't ask what I mean by that. I'm not low enough to tell you."

A shiver goes down my spine.

"Bill and I tried to leave," Archie mumbles. "Go work somewhere else, but it turned out Parker had some exit policies he didn't exactly write on our starter paychecks."

"Did you have to give him a lot of money?"

Archie's smile is humorless. "You stick with him or you got dropped into the Hudson minus your head and your hands, Kitten."

"Oh."

"Yeah. 'Oh.'" Archie's smile fades. "Bill and I thought it was over, and we'd die working for Parker, but then we heard rumors Eli Morelli and his boys are taking him down. That

they're gonna knock over his business and kill him. Bill and I thought all our Christmases had come at once. All we had to do was wait. We thought 'Velvet House' is brutal but they're not gonna kill everyone who ever worked for Parker. We might even be able to get a new job running with them, who fuckin' knows?"

Archie shakes his head.

"Then I got abducted?" I ask quietly.

"Then you got fuckin' abducted," Archie agrees. "Once that happened all bets were off. Parker went from a controlling nutjob to certified psychopath. He put a bullet through my friend Connor's head right in front of me."

All the air rushes from my lungs. "No."

"Yeah. Killed him and two other guys just because he was pissed you'd gone. Those guys had nothing to do with the fucking wedding. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Archie's mouth twists as he stares into memories I can't see. I put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

He shakes me away. "I don't need your sympathy, Kitten."

"But—"

"Save your fine feelings for the Velvet House boys. Bill and I knew what we signed up for, we protect bad men by day and do a lot worse by night. But we won't work for a psychopath and that's why you're here. You're the eighteen-year-old bargaining chip that's gonna get me and my brother out of Parker's crew."

He drains his whiskey and taps the bar. The bartender swoops over. "What can I—"

"Double this time. Right away, darlin'."

I watch as he finishes his second drink and orders a third. When he finishes that, he mumbles something I can't hear.

I lean closer. "Sorry?"

Archie clears his throat. “Coulda been Bill he shot.”

My heart contracts. “Oh, Archie.”

“Don’t, January. Don’t *‘oh, Archie’* me. It coulda been my brother he killed. Coulda been that poor little redhead bitch, and what would I have done? Nothin’. I’d a got shot myself before I could take Parker out so I stayed right where I was when he killed Connor. What kind of man does that make me?”

His mouth jerks sideways and I can’t stand it anymore. I throw myself off my stool and wrap my arms around his back. “I’m so sorry.”

Archie turns, pushing me off. “I’m fine. Don’t be cryin’ for me. Get away.”

But I don’t get away. I take advantage of his seated position to hold him even closer. And this time he lets me hug him. After a few seconds his shoulders start to shake.

“It’s all okay,” I say. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“You got no fuckin’ idea,” Archie sobs. “You’re just a kid. An’ you been abducted, like, nine times.”

“I know. But I also think everything is going to be okay.”

And I do. Some tiny, shiny part of me still believes. And maybe that’s stupid but I’m glad. It makes me feel less scared. More like myself.

I hug Archie harder. He smells like leather and stress sweat and as much as he didn’t want my hug he’s clutching me so tight it hurts. I bite back a smile. Archie reminds me of my big brother, Lachlan. Lachy’s always rushing into things he doesn’t understand, like his organic sweater business or the dating app The New York Times called a scam. I could totally see Lachy working for Mr. Parker if he gave him enough free champagne and Knicks tickets. He’s impulsive and a bit silly but his heart is in the right place and I think Archie’s is too. I can’t hate him, or Bill. I want them both to get new jobs and be happy and I try to tell Archie that with my hug.

“Ah, Kitten,” Archie mumbles into my hair. “You should let go of me before someone sees.”

But I can tell he’s not ready yet, his arms are still tight around me and truthfully it’s nice to feel close to someone after what’s happened. I squeeze his big back. “I’m okay if you are.”

He huffs out a laugh. “You’re a ray of sunshine, ain’t you? No wonder the Velvet House boys—”

“What about the Velvet House boys, you fucking lowlife?”

My stomach hits my shoes. He can’t be here. We’ve barely been at the club for half an hour. We’re in the middle of nowhere. I would hear him coming. I would *sense* his mania. But when I turn, there he is. Domenico Valente, six feet and three inches of twitching, flickering muscle, and glittering blue eyes. His hard jaw juts as he looks at me and it turns my bones to water.

“Doc—”

“*You*, I’ll deal with in a minute.” His gaze skips over me like a stone to fix on Archie. “*You* are a dead man.”

Archie shoves me away from him. “It ain’t like that, brother—”

I stumble and in the second it takes me to straighten, Doc launches himself at Archie like an attack dog. Archie is bigger, wider but Doc tears him off his barstool like he’s nothing and punches him in the face. Archie bangs back into the bar, clutching his cheek.

“No,” I scream. Everyone ignores me. The dancers, the other drinkers, they’re all acting as though nothing is happening.

Doc bounces on his toes in front of Archie, winding his tattooed wrists in circles. “Come on, bitch. There’s gotta be more in you than that.”

“Wait,” Archie moans. “You don’t understand—”

“I understand you kidnapped my woman, brought her to my club and felt her up at my bar.”

“No—”

“And I don’t know if you’re crazy or you have a death wish,” Doc snarls. “But I don’t give a fuck. Get on your feet and die like a man.”

Archie struggles to stand. The second he’s up Doc punches him again. Archie’s head snaps sideways, ruby blood spraying from his nose. I scream again and I must move because the next second I’m gripping Doc’s tattooed bicep. “Domenico! Stop hurting him! He rescued me!”

Doc pushes me into a heap on the carpet. “Get the fuck back, Tits.”

I inhale, my head spinning as relief swells inside me like a small balloon. If Doc is still calling me ‘Tits’ he isn’t going to kill me. I kneel on the carpet. “Domenico, *please*. Be mad at me, but don’t hurt Archie. He got me away from Mr. Parker. He saved me.”

Doc whips around and stares right into my face. I see the rage burning in his bright blue eyes, but there’s something else. He scans me as though checking I’m really there and when his mouth turns down my heart stops. He was scared. Not because I defied him, because I was in danger. Domenico Valente, a deranged murderer, was *afraid* for me. Doc bares his teeth, trying to return his expression to blazing hatred but it’s too late. I press a hand to my chest. “I’m sorry I left without saying goodbye. I just—”

“Fucked us. Got Adriano shot. Got abducted so you could be raped and tortured by the guy who killed my sister.”

His words land like physical blows, knocking the air out of me.

“I’m sorry,” I breathe. “I wanted to see my Zia. I wanted to —”

“She didn’t have a choice man,” Archie slurs. “Parker was coming for her no matter what you guys did. He’d burn the world to the ground before he let you have her.”

With a growl like a dog Doc drags Archie to the floor, giving him a vicious kick in the side. “You know that shit because you helped Parker take her. You were in it all the way.”

“Nurghht,” Archie moans. “I brought her to you. I want that bastard dead.”

“You fucking liar.”

I climb to my feet as Doc kicks Archie in the back. I’m pretty sure he knows Archie’s telling the truth and he’s just venting his anger at my kidnapping. But I’m equally sure that won’t stop him beating Archie to death. I move to grab Doc’s shoulder, but before I can touch him, huge arms wrap around my waist lifting me into the air.

“January, JJ, Jay! Holy fucking Christ, you’re okay! I’ve got you! You’re okay! *January!*”

This relief isn’t an afterthought. This relief is a firehose pulsing through my body. “Bobby?”

“Yes, baby. It’s me. I’ve got you.”

He spins me around and I see it’s true. Roberto Bassilotta beams at me, as soft and steady as Doc is hard and manic. His hair is on end and his chocolate brown eyes are full of tears. He runs his fingertips across my cheek. “Jesus Christ, JJ. Tell me you’re okay. Tell me he hasn’t hurt you?”

But before I can answer he’s kissing my cheeks, my chin, my nose. It’s not romantic, it’s more like a Labrador snuffling you, loving you physically because it can’t say what it means in words. I let him kiss me, let him rub my arms and run his hands through my hair, dizzy with the knowledge that somehow Bobby is still on my side. That despite my betrayal he might protect me from the others. My mind flicks to Adriano in the hospital, yelling for me to run.

“Mr. Rossi,” I gasp. “Is he okay? Is he alive?”

Bobby presses his forehead into mine. “Yes, baby, he’s okay, but don’t think about that. Are you okay? Did Parker hurt you?”

There’s a dull thump and a moan of pain.

“Get her out of here,” Doc snarls. “I’ll finish this prick and come find you.”

“Okay—” Bobby begins but I tear myself away from him.

“Stop it,” I wail. “Stop hurting Archie! He and his brother got me out of Mr. Parker’s limo. They saved me.”

Bobby takes my arm. “No, JJ—”

“That’s what we were doing, Tits” Doc says, stomping on Archie’s leg. “We were tracking you. We would have gotten you back.”

Archie rolls on the floor, blood pouring down his face. “Parker was taking her to a private airstrip. He was in a military grade vehicle. You couldn’t have saved her.”

Doc presses his sneakered foot into Archie’s neck. “Shut the fuck up, rat.”

Archie shoves at Doc’s shin, trying to get him off. “Me an’ my brother rescued your girl. What kind of fuckin’ thank you is this?”

Bobby steps around me, squaring his shoulders. “The kind you get when you don’t explain yourself. Why’d you take January? And why’d you bring her here?”

“Because he’s a fucking rat.” Doc bends, grabbing Archie by his collar and hauling him up. “I don’t want an explanation. Whatever he and his fuckhead brother had planned can die with them.”

“You don’t unnerstan’,” Archie moans.

“I understand you and your prick clone work for Parker. Have done for years.”

“They wanted to leave!” I say. “Mr. Parker killed Archie’s friend!”

Doc shakes Archie like a rag doll. “I’ll kill his fucking friends. You know his twin’s the one who shot Adriano?”

My vision swims. “What!?”

“Naw.” Archie shakes his head so that drops of blood spatter Doc. “That was Newton. I swear, Bill only broke his nose.”

Doc bares his teeth, looking all the crazier now he’s sprayed with blood. “You think that’s better?”

Archie’s swollen eyes find mine. “Kitten... *Please?*”

Doc gives a low laugh. “You think you can call my bitch ‘Kitten’ in front of me and live? Goddamn, you are a funny guy.”

Doc’s fingers tighten around Archie’s throat. “Or at least you used to be.”

My pulse spikes and I know I only have seconds. I turn to Bobby. “Please, *please* stop Doc?”

He makes an ‘eh’ face. “He does work for Parker, baby. And he probably is a rat.”

“But ‘probably’ doesn’t—”

“Valente, you *fucking asshole!*”

We all turn and I see Wonder Woman stomping toward us. Doc loosens his grip on Archie’s neck. “Hey, Betty. Just dealing with some—”

Wonder Woman—Betty—flings her hands in the air. “Deal with it somewhere else, you stupid son of a bitch! I have a business to run. *Your* business. You think anyone wants to come to a gentlemen’s lounge to watch a man die?”

Doc rolls his eyes and drops Archie like a sack of potatoes. “Better?”

“*No*. Get him upstairs.”

Doc sighs like he's being asked to take out the trash. He hauls Archie to his feet again. "Come on, bitch." Doc looks to Bobby. "Get January to the car. This won't take long."

I step away. "No! You're not killing Archie."

Betty gives me a look that could scorch steel. "All of you. Upstairs. Now."

"Fine," Bobby takes my arm. "Come on, JJ."

He directs me behind the bar, steering me through a door that's barely visible in the wood panelled wall. We climb two sets of stairs then Bobby ushers me into an office. It's cramped with a huge desk and a black wingback chair lined with barbed wire. There's a framed picture of two blond kids on the wall and I want to take a closer look, but Bobby leads me to a smaller non-barbed wire chair.

"Sit. I'll bring you some water."

I do as I'm told, watching as Bobby grabs a bottle of spring water from a black bar fridge. He rubs my shoulders as I drink, and I almost melt into the chair. The water seems to unlock my tongue.

"Is Eli mad?" I babble. "Are you sure Adriano's, okay? Where's Mr. Parker? Am I going back in the cage?"

Bobby doesn't answer my questions. Instead, he presses his thumbs into the knots near my shoulder blades and says things like *'you're safe'* and *'we're not going to let anything happen to you.'*

I'm not convinced, but it's nice to hear friendly words. A few minutes pass and I wonder where Doc and Archie have gone and if Doc is just beating Archie up in some other part of the club. I'm just about to ask when the door opens and Doc shoves Archie onto the office floor.

"This one needed a piss," he tells Bobby, settling himself in the barbed wire chair.

"So," he says to Archie. "You and your brother infiltrated my business and put your filthy hands all over my girl and

expect me to what? Give you a job?”

Archie gets to his feet. “Seems that way.”

I admire how cool he sounds. If I was in his position I would definitely be crying.

Doc picks up a pen, whirling it between his long fingers. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t put a bullet in your head before you can lead Parker back to January.”

Archie swipes fresh blood from his chin. “Because Parker can get fucked. My brother and I want out of his crew. We figured rescuing the Whitehall girl was as good a chance as any to make an impression.”

Bobby’s fingers tighten possessively on my shoulders. “So, you stole January as some kind of up-front payment?”

“You could call it that,” Archie drawls. “For what it’s worth, I had to give my twin a concussion to make it happen and there’s every fuckin’ chance Parker killed him out of spite.”

Doc looks deeply unimpressed. “Why the fuck were you hugging January?”

“It didn’t mean shit,” Archie says, avoiding my gaze. “We were talking tragedy and she hugged me. It wasn’t anything.”

A small smile tweaks the corner of his mouth and I’m not the only one who notices. Doc throws down his pen. “Wipe that fucking smirk off your face or I’ll kill you.”

Archie’s expression goes blank. “Yes, sir.”

Doc shoves a hand through his hair. “If you’re looking to us for protection from Parker, you’re stupider than your fucked-up face implies.”

“You don’t owe us anything,” Archie says. “Bill and I can take care of ourselves. But we did bring your boss’s girlfriend back in one piece.”

Doc’s blond brows shoot up. “My boss?”

“Elliot Morelli.”

“He’s not my boss,” Doc says through a tight jaw. “He’s my partner. And he doesn’t like rats any more than I do.”

Archie holds up his hands. “I ain’t a rat. A chance is all Bill and I are asking for. A chance in exchange for your girl being as pretty and pure as she was before Parker got ahold of her.”

Doc’s gaze finds mine. “Is this true, Tits? Did this ass-clown protect you?”

I think of the kiss with Emilia. How much worse it could have been if Bill hadn’t signaled at me to throw up when he did. I pray that he’s still alive. That Mr. Parker hasn’t taken his temper out on him. “Bill saved me. He and Archie both did.”

Doc sits back in his chair, his fingertips drumming the leather. Long seconds stretch past and just when I’m sure he’s about to tell Archie he’s dead, Doc pulls open a drawer and tosses a deck of Post-it notes at him. “Give me some way to reach you.”

Archie comes over to the desk to write on the pad, a big grin on his face. “Can’t thank you enough, Mr. Valente. You’re bein’ beyond generous.”

“Yeah, you can stop kissing my ass any time you want.” Doc points at the door. “Get the fuck out of here and if you talk to a single woman on your way out I’ll break your knees.”

Archie drops the pad back on the desk and turns to me. “Bye—”

“Keep looking at January if you wanna die.”

“Yes, sir.” Archie addresses the floor. “See you ’round, Kitten.”

Doc hisses at him. As soon as the door shuts, he pushes back his chair. “Sly motherfucker.”

I recoil and Bobby smooths his warm hands over my shoulders. “Don’t be nervous, baby. We’re not mad at you.”

“Speak for your fucking self.” Doc strides toward me, grabbing my chin. His skin is boiling hot. “You okay?”

“I... I guess?”

He lifts my chin, urging me onto my feet. “He hurt you?”

I know he means Parker. “A little. Not really.”

Doc’s eyes narrow. “If he had, you would have deserved it, you reckless, manipulative, two-faced bitch.”

The insult winds me, as all of Doc’s insults do, but before I can defend myself, he jams his mouth onto mine. You couldn’t call it a kiss. It’s a clash of lips, a claim and a punishment. The kind of touch that Velvet House taught me leads to corruption.

My corruption.

Doc’s fingers are bruisingly tight and I can smell Archie’s blood on his face and his raw knuckles. His free hand grasps my right breast and I whine. Doc is disgusting and cruel, but I can’t deny the warmth that floods from his skin and from mine. The last time he kissed me like this was on my wedding day. But that was to show Mr. Parker I’d been stolen. That he no longer had any claim on me. What point is Doc trying to prove now? That he owns me? That even if he hates me, he will have my obedience?

His tongue thrusts into my mouth and the softness of it makes me moan.

You’re repulsive, I think, Repulsive and gross and mean.

But as his tongue flicks expertly against mine, my exhausted body lights up. Suddenly everything between my legs feels like soft ice cream. Bobby’s hand slides to the small of my back and I’m surrounded by both of them. Warm male bodies, so foreign and yet achingly familiar.

“January,” Bobby mutters in my ear. “You’re so beautiful.”

I can’t pretend like I did when I was first kidnapped. I’m so attracted to both of them. Sweet Bobby and evil Doc. I tried to run away, but now that I’m here again, I don’t know if I can

resist. I'm so tired of protecting my virginity, the only thing about me that everyone wants. I could just give in, give Velvet House the one thing I have left. I would have given it to Adriano to see my Zia. Now, if it means staying out of the basement cage, I could just let Doc and Bobby have it.

Doc's hand moves from my chin to fist my hair and it feels like he's pulling it out at the roots. I don't care. After the day I've had, it's a relief to submit to his strength. He yanks my body against his and I feel the thick swell of his cock behind his jeans. Bobby's hand strokes me from my back to my ass. We're alone in Doc's office, just like we were once alone in my bed in the east wing, when Bobby went down on me as Doc kissed my lips.

I'm going to give in. Let them take me, let it end right here, two floors above a strip club. But as soon as I have the thought, Doc pulls away, shaking his head. "Fuck this."

"I... What?"

"Fuck. This." He glares at me, his gaze cold as ice. "You're not getting a nice little reunion fuck from me, Tits."

"Doc," Bobby warns, his hands still cupping my ass.

"Fuck off, Bassilotta." Doc presses his thumb to the cut on my lip, making it sting. "You endangered what's mine, Tits. Your lips, your cunt, and every other fucking part of you. The next time you take my cock it'll be on all fours with tears running down your lying face. I'm gonna make you pay for what you did to me."

I must be broken because his words send a throb down my aching breasts and it runs between my legs like gold flame.

Doc's pupils dilate. "You like the sound of that, don't you, whore?"

"I, um..."

"Christ, you drive me fucking *batshit*."

Doc presses his lips to mine and this time I taste the fear that I saw burning in him when he arrived at Dreams. He was

scared for me, and that fear has turned into bright rage. I go limp as he invades my mouth. If I let Doc take what he wants there's still a chance I can channel his anger into something softer. Something that might free both of us. His hand gropes between my legs, cupping me through my dress. It's rough and possessive but it doesn't hurt. I feel a second's bliss before the office door swings open behind me.

"Vodka?" a woman asks.

Doc pulls away from me. Betty's standing in the doorway, carrying a tray with three loaded shot glasses. She laughs. "Domenico Valente, kissing a girl on the mouth?"

I turn away, my face burning.

Doc ignores Betty, striding to the door and downing a shot in one.

"Let's go," he tells Bobby.

"Sure. Come on, JJ." As Bobby's rough hand closes around mine, I dig my heels into the carpet. "Are we going to Velvet House?"

Bobby frowns. "Of course."

My heart sinks. Some small part of me hoped that we were going somewhere else. That I wouldn't have to confront Eli Morelli and possibly be sent back to my cage.

But that was always too much to ask for. The Velvet House men stick together.

We walk out of the club, Doc blowing on his bleeding knuckles, Bobby holding my hand. I wait for him to let go, but he keeps his fingers locked between mine. I should be grateful to be mostly okay, mostly alive, but every bit of me feels shaky. As though a deep breath could tear me apart.

A sky-blue Charger is waiting for us in the parking lot and when I climb into the passenger seat, something inside me cracks. I press my face in my hands and begin to cry.



CHAPTER FOUR

Bobby Bassilotta

“**I** FEEL LIKE a butler,” Doc growls from the driver’s seat.

“Chauffeur,” I correct.

“Whatever. You ready to stop sobbing, Tits?”

January doesn’t answer, at least not in words. She gasps, fresh tears running down her face. Her eyes are already puffy from crying. I squeeze her as tightly as I dare. “Are you hungry, Jay? Do you want to lie down and get some sleep?”

She shakes her head, staring without seeing. “What... what’s happening to me?”

“You’re in shock,” Doc says. “Grit your teeth and let it pass.”

But January just sobs all the louder.

“We should stop,” I tell Doc. “Get her some food.”

“No fucking way. Parker could have tortured that idiot’s clone. He could already be coming after us.”

January shifts against me.

“What is it, sweetheart?”

“Bill wouldn’t tell,” she says in her sweet voice. “He and Archie want to leave Mr. Parker more than anything.”

Doc finds her gaze in the rearview mirror. “Parker’s planted subdermal trackers in his guys before. He could have turned Archie’s on and traced you.”

January moans.

“Jesus, Valente,” I say. “Is now the time to be telling her shit like that?”

Doc has the decency to look away. “Go to sleep, Tits. Let us deal with everything.”

But January doesn't go to sleep, as the miles pass she starts shaking and her skin goes icy-cold.

“Turn up the heat,” I tell Doc, but even once the car's a sweatbox, January's teeth still rattle. Eventually, I can't take it anymore. “Doc. We need to pull over.”

“Fuck,” Doc hisses, but does what I ask.

The second the car stops, Doc is outside, pulling a pack of Marlboros from his pocket. I stay in the back seat, cradling January. She's still crying, the big sobs racking her body. I think of my sisters and how when they'd get like this, my dad would bring them warm cups of milk and honey. I wish I could do that for her.

Doc pounds on the roof. “Basher, we need to talk.”

“Give me a bit.”

“No. We need to talk.”

January wipes under her eyes. “Go. I'm fine.”

“No chance,” I say, holding her tighter.

“Seriously,” she says in a watery voice. “You know how Doc gets when you make him wait.”

I do, but it's funny that she does too. I get out and see Doc smoking by the side of the road, a second cigarette waiting in his free hand.

“What's up?”

“We can't stay pulled over like this. Even if Parker's not on us, cops could come past. Anyone could call us in.”

“What are you saying?”

Doc points his cigarette at the back seat. “I can sedate her. Knock her out.”

He tries to say it lightly, but I hear the twist in his voice. What he means is he can’t handle hearing her cry and it would be easier for him if she was unconscious. But fuck what’s easier for him. I move, blocking his path to the car. “January’s already at her limits. She doesn’t need drugs.”

“So, what do we—”

“Call it and get a motel.”

Doc groans. “You’re such a pussy.”

“Fine, I’m a fucking pussy, but you’re not taking January any further. And if I see you come at her with a needle I will put you in the ground.”

“Jesus, *fine*.” Doc clamps his cigarette between his teeth and pulls out his phone. “I’ll ring Mother Morelli and let him know.”

Eli’s voice is sharp when he picks up. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Doc says. “We’ve got January but she’s freaking out. Bobby thinks we should get a room for the night.”

“I want her back.”

The possessiveness in his tone makes my stomach knot. When we knew January had been abducted by Parker, Doc, Eli, and I were a united front. But already it feels like we’re back in competition.

“Yeah, well I wanna see the Stones play in 1974. Shit happens.” Doc takes a last drag on his cigarette and tosses the end to the ground. “How’s Adriano?”

“Fine. Text me when you know where you’re staying.”

“Will do.”

“Wait.” Eli hesitates. “You and Bobby aren’t going to sleep, are you? You’ll keep watch over her?”

“I don’t know, Morelli. Do you think we’re fucking stupid?”

Eli hangs up. Doc lights his second cigarette and draws on it so hard, half turns to ash. “Sanctimonious prick.”

I ignore him. I’m not giving Doc an excuse to vent his anger. Archie Baskerville did me a huge favor taking that beating at Dreams. If he hadn’t, I’m sure Doc would be insulting my dead mom right now.

“Fucking twins,” Doc mutters. “You really think Eli’ll want to hire them?”

“Dunno.”

“He can’t. Not once he knows that gangly fuck was all over her.”

I say nothing. I didn’t like finding Archie Baskerville touching the love of my life any more than Doc did. But I wasn’t gonna hurt the guy who brought us our girl back. I’ll put in a good word with Eli about the twins, and we’ll see what happens.

“Dirty fucking rat,” Doc says. “And that fucking *haircut*. He looks like an anime girl.”

I roll my eyes. Archie Baskerville looks exactly like Doc, but again, I’m not dumb enough to point that out. “Can we get going?”

“After I finish this,” Doc says, inhaling.

As Doc smokes, I stare at the night sky, my mouth dry and my eyes heavy. I’m exhausted. When Gretzky called to say January escaped, I felt like I’d been pin-dropped into the ocean. Every time I fought my way to the surface another wave took me under. Adriano was with January. Adriano was taking January to see her Zia. Her Zia was dead. Adriano was shot. January had been abducted by Parker. Whenever I snatched a breath, I was sucked underwater again.

I can only remember flashes of it now, sitting in the car with Eli, typing so fast my fingers hurt. Tracking Parker’s limo

while Doc screamed insults in Italian. My abdomen tight from clenching it as I worked to bring January home. Wishing that I'd done what I'd planned to do and bought plane tickets for the two of us to fly to Montana. Rented a car to drive us across the Canadian border. Rescued her then used all my money and power to cast a digital net over both of us, and take her away.

I could still do it.

“Basher,” Doc says, interrupting my thoughts. “That’s enough.”

“What?” I say trying to sound bored but innocent.

Doc gives me a hard look. “Take her from me and I’ll kill you.”

I don’t bother denying my thoughts. “You haven’t killed Adriano.”

“Yet. And that motherfucker failed on all accounts. I’m giving you more credit.”

“Thanks.” I jerk my head at the car. “Let’s find a motel.”

Doc tosses his second cigarette and crushes the end under his sneaker. “Take her from me—”

“I heard you the first time. Let’s just fucking go.”

I hoped January had fallen asleep but she’s still sitting bolt upright and stiff as a board. I wrap my arms around her again. “We’re gonna get you some food and somewhere to stay, okay?”

She makes a noncommittal noise.

“There’s a motel twenty miles away,” Doc says, looking at his phone. “We should be able to get some drive-thru first.”

I force my shoulders to relax. There’s no bigger jackass than Doc, but he gets shit done. “Sounds good.”

Fifteen minutes later, we’re pulling into a Wendy’s.

“What do you want, baby?” I ask January. “Is there something you usually get?”

She looks blankly back at me. “I’m not allowed fast food.”

“Then this is your lucky day. Want me to order for you?”

She says something that could be a yes or a no so I get her a cheeseburger combo and a strawberry shake and a veggie stack combo for myself. Doc orders two Baconators and tears into the bag as soon as it’s passed through the window. Neither of us have eaten all day and I’m starving, but I hold off on my order and hand-feed January fries instead. She chews methodically, her pretty green eyes unfocused.

“Do you like your food?” I ask.

She swallows. “Yes, but I can, you know, feed myself.”

“And will you?”

She gives a small smile and lets me keep feeding her. When we get to the motel, Doc gets out and deals with the manager. Since he and I won’t be sleeping, we get a single room. It’s cramped and musty, but the bed is big, and the sheets look clean enough.

“This place is nice,” January says quietly, putting her combo down on the small Formica table.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I say, plunking my Wendy’s bag beside hers. “Sit down and eat.”

January rubs a thumb over her lower lip. “Can I have a shower?”

I look her up and down and somewhere in trying to assess how dirty she is I wind up staring at her breasts. God she’s fucking stunning. I’ve tried to avoid thinking about it, but now, looking at her pouty lips and long legs, I’m all too aware we’re in a motel room with a bed. Just the three of us. And this time there’s no Betty to walk in.

“Eat first,” Doc says, possibly oblivious and possibly intervening on my behalf. “You need the energy and your food will go cold otherwise.”

January tilts her head at me, asking if she should obey and all I can think about is how her pussy tasted when she ground herself against my face, having the first partnered orgasm of her life. Doc was there too, kissing her as I gave her head...

“Basher,” Doc snarls. “Quit daydreaming about her cunt and sit down.”

I feel my face burn, but I take a seat at the table. January hesitates and then follows suit. I chew without tasting as January nibbles her burger and drinks her shake in tiny sips. She’s barely halfway done when she gets up again.

“You’re not finished,” Doc barks.

January’s hands jump to her throat but she doesn’t sit. “Please... I need to shower, I feel disgusting. I’ll be back soon.”

I expect Doc to say something about her taking her clothes off, but he glares at her then returns his attention to his burger. By the time we’re done eating, January emerges from the shower, a thin towel wrapped around herself. “I, um, do you guys have any clothes I can change into?”

I almost choke on my own spit. She looks perfect, tousled and fresh-faced and I’m about to take off my shirt and chinos and give them to her when Doc points at the motel mattress. “No. Get into bed.”

Color rises in January’s cheeks. “Do you mean...? Are we going to sleep or...?”

A throb runs down my cock. She’s scared but I hear a hopeful lift in her voice, like maybe she wants us to push for something more. I look at Doc and his jaw is set. “*You’re* going to sleep. Turn out the lights and shut the fuck up.”

She doesn’t move. “You’re not going to... come into my bed...?”

“No,” Doc says flatly. “You’re exhausted and I don’t know about Basher, but I don’t stick my dick in unconscious pussy.”

“Fuck you,” I say, though I’m taken aback. Doc doesn’t go for anything less than screamingly enthusiastic, but it’s not like him to admit the truth when he could scare January with a lie. And it’s equally not like him to be responsible about sleep, especially when it seems January might *want* us in her bed. Still, I’m not going to play the asshole while Doc acts like a hero.

“He’s right, JJ. You should get some sleep. We’ll stay up and look after you.”

January rocks back and forth on the balls of her feet. Her face, scrubbed of makeup, is petal soft and impossibly pretty. “Do you think Mr. Parker is trying to find me?”

The answer is somewhere along the continuum of ‘yes’ and ‘absolutely’ but she doesn’t need to know that.

“Don’t worry about it, baby. Just get into bed and rest.”

Doc and I sit at the scratched motel table and watch as January walks to the bed, and folds back the covers. My cock thickens as she peels off her towel and I force my gaze away, pulling out my phone to text Eli that we found a motel. His response comes at once.

Good. Parker’s in Vegas. Adriano’s fine. I’ll update soon.

I go to show Doc the screen and see he and January are locked in a wordless conversation. Doc’s expression is murderous, and January—sitting up in the motel bed—is crying again.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“Doc hates me,” January says in a soft voice. “He’s going to hurt me.”

“That’s not true, baby. Is it, Doc?”

He doesn’t answer.

“I’m sorry for running away,” she whispers, a sparkling tear dripping onto her cheek. “But I needed to see my Zia. I couldn’t just sit in Velvet House and rot.”

Doc glares at her and even I can tell twisted shit is running through his head.

“It’s okay, JJ,” I say roughly. “You don’t have to explain yourself to us. At least not tonight.”

She turns her tearful gaze to me. “But Adriano... what happened? I heard gunshots.”

“He’s fine. He’s got a couple fractured ribs but the shot to the head only grazed his skull and the one in his side missed everything important. He’s had worse.”

January’s face softens. “Okay. That’s good.”

I frown at the thought of the two of them together, Adriano and January. They left for the hospital like Bonnie and an even uglier Clyde. Adriano did what I couldn’t and took her to her Zia. Has that changed her mind about him? Is he the one she prefers?

“Adriano didn’t sleep with me,” January says, misreading my expression.

“I know.”

“Heard you offered though, Tits,” Doc snarls. “Heard you fucking begged.”

“I did not,” January whispers but pink spots rise on her cheeks. And just like that, I’m thinking of sex again. January’s full mouth against mine, her hard nipples pressing against my chest as I slide inside her...

“Lie down and close your fucking eyes,” Doc snarls. “I’m sick of looking at you.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” I say. “January, honey, go to sleep.”

She doesn’t move. “Do you think Mr. Parker killed any of his men because he’s angry at me?”

Yes, definitely. “Don’t think about it,” I say. “Baby, do you want something to help you sleep or—”

“No! I don’t want to stay awake, but every time I shut my eyes it’s all I can think about.” Her eyes fill with tears again. “He killed my Zia.”

The quiet resignation in her voice cuts me like a knife. “I’m so sorry, JJ.”

The motel fills with silence as the three of us sit there and think about Parker and the people he’s killed. I remember my dad, slumped over his tractor steering wheel, never able to get up, to call me ‘kiddo,’ to cook chilli or watch another baseball game.

“I feel like I don’t have a right to be upset,” January says. “Because she wasn’t really my family.”

“That’s not true,” I tell her. “Your Zia loved you and you loved her. It’s fucking awful that she’s gone, baby.”

January nods, tears sliding down her cheeks. “I met Mr. Parker’s girlfriend.”

Doc and I exchange glances. We know all about Emilia Galloway, the twenty-three-year-old art student that’s somehow survived being Parker’s girlfriend. But we didn’t know January met her, or that she now understands she was never Parker’s exclusive partner.

“What do you think of her?” I ask. “She wasn’t mean to you, was she?”

“No.” January’s face falls. “I feel so sorry for her. Her life is *awful*. That’s how my life would be if I married him.”

“You don’t have to marry him. You never have to see him again,” I say.

January doesn’t seem to hear. “Maybe I should have married him. If I had, Zia would still be alive.”

“JJ, you can’t think that way—”

She furiously shakes her head. “But that’s not right. Parker told me he would have done it anyway, because he didn’t like Zia, and he didn’t want her in his house. So, *screw him*.”

The fierceness in her voice shocks me.

“I would have done it,” January says, her voice still vibrating with strength. “I would have married him and done whatever he wanted to keep my Zia alive.”

“We know you would have, JJ,” I say. “We know how strong you are.”

“I didn’t.” Doc says, balling up his burger wrapper.

January looks at him and I see surprise mingle with relief on her face.

“You think I’m strong?”

“I think you’re less useless than I thought,” Doc says. “And now you’re in the club.”

“What club?”

I don’t think he’s going to say it, but then he grimaces, and the words come out.

“The ‘Parker killed something I loved’ club. Basher’s a member. Adriano’s a member. Eli’s a member. We all are. And since you just joined, I figured you should know about it.”

January’s face goes ash pale. “Parker killed...”

“My sister,” Doc snarls. “Had her strangled in her hospital bed. After his boys ripped her clothes off and filmed themselves...”

He breaks off, looking like he’s going to be sick.

January gasps. The motel sheet falls to expose her breasts. It’s a testament to how fucked up the situation is that neither she nor Doc seems to notice.

“Why?” she breathes. “Doc... how? I... *Doc, I’m so sorry.*”

I’m as shocked as she is. Doc doesn’t talk about Alessia unless he’s blackout drunk. And even then, he doesn’t talk specifics.

“Why did Mr. Parker do that?” January presses. “When did this happen?”

“None of your fucking business,” Doc says flatly. “Go to sleep.”

“Oh, *Domenico*.” January moves as though to go to Doc and comfort him. My chest aches. Even after everything that’s happened today, all the hurt she’s endured, she’s still so pure. So sweet. It’s a goddamn miracle.

Doc not nearly as impressed. “Get out of that bed and I will break every finger you have, Tits.”

For a second she stares at him and then falls back onto the mattress, unravelling the sheets and pulling them over her head.

I look at Doc. “Was that needed?”

He gets to his feet and throws the Wendy’s bags into the kitchenette trash can. “Enough bullshit, we need to do a sweep of the grounds.”

He heads outside, slamming the door. I hesitate, staring at the white lump that is January. I want to climb into bed beside her and hold her close, promise that she’s safe and everything’s all right. But everything’s not alright. Not yet. Possibly not for a long time. Her Zia’s dead, Parker is hunting her, and Eli, Adriano, Doc and I are far from agreement on what to do about her betrayal. Or her virginity.

Doc pounds on the door. “You coming?”

I start to attention. “Sure.”

Doc’s smoking by the ice machine. He hands me a bag of white disks. “We’ve gotta stay awake and I don’t know about you, but I’m fucked.”

I open the bag. “Speed?”

“Caffeine.”

I take a pill and crunch it between my teeth. “January’s asleep. Or close enough.”

“Good.”

“Why were you being such an asshole to her?”

I expect Doc to deny it or make some snide remark, but his mouth goes thin. “I’m gonna destroy her.”

“*What?*”

He takes a vicious drag of his cigarette. “I’m going to destroy her for what she did to us.”

I stare at my brother, this man that I unwittingly know better than almost anyone. From the very beginning Doc argued in favor of keeping January alive, be it as our house pet or a stripper. How the fuck has he changed his mind now? “You want to kill—”

Doc’s hand shoots out jabbing me in the chest. “Did I say I want to kill her? I want to *destroy her*.”

“I don’t—”

“I want her chained in my workshop for the rest of the year. I’m gonna whip her ass and electrocute her tits and shove ice dildos up her twat until she screams.” Doc’s eyes burn over the cherry of his cigarette. “I’ll make her cry until her eyes turn blue. I’ll fuck her until there’s a permeant imprint of my dick inside her. I’m gonna pump so much cum inside her it changes her fucking DNA. I will carve my name into her skin and make her drink my blood and then I will *breed her*. She’ll have my bastards one after a-fucking-nother. And then, when she’s given me ten kids and taken a hundred thousand of my loads, then maybe, just maybe, I’ll *think* about forgiving her for running away.”

A rushing sound fills my ears. In the distance I hear cars whirring along the interstate, an owl hooting in a tree.

“O-kay,” I say, stepping back. “I can see you feel... *strongly* about this.”

“It’s what I’m owed.” He points the smouldering end of the cigarette at the motel door. “That girl in chains. Stand in my way I’ll fucking cut you.”

There's a million things to say but I pick the dumbest one. "You want to get January pregnant?"

He nods grimly. "Tie her to me forever. Show her she can't get away with making me feel... with fucking betraying me. Betraying *us*."

The caffeine pills pick a bad time to kick in, spiking my heart rate.

"Doc," I say, trying to sound reasonable. "January's a scared girl who ran away. You can't be serious about this Machiavellian shit?"

I'm not remotely scared of Doc but the look he gives me makes the hair on my neck stand up.

"I'll keep her pregnant for years," he says. "Blonde babies coming out of her every nine months. Then she'll see. Then she'll understand."

The thought of January swollen with Doc's child is almost as disturbing as the fucked up sex shit he described. "And you think that's the best way to become a dad? To force someone to have your kid out of revenge?"

"Why the fuck not? My old man was a deadbeat alcoholic and I'm fine."

"Yeah, everything about you and this plan screams 'future father of the year.'"

Doc isn't listening. He's squinting at the motel door like it fucked his wife. "As soon as we're back at Velvet House, I'm bending that girl over my rotating bench and—"

"Valente," I snap. "You're not getting January pregnant or imprisoning her in your fucked-up sex den or anything else."

He frowns, seeming to hear me for the first time. "Why?"

"A million fucking reasons. Including the fact *I* want to marry her."

Doc's eyebrows go up. "*You?*"

“How are you surprised? I spent the last month saying I wanted to marry her.”

“Yeah, but that was before the bitch ran away.”

I throw up my hands. “She ran away from me too, you know! You’re not the only one who was affected by this situation!”

“Whatever.” Doc flicks a lighter in front of a fresh cigarette. “It was more fucked up for me. I’m owed revenge.”

“And what am I owed, Domenico?”

“I dunno. Whatever. Just stay away from January until I’m done with her.”

I stare at my friend and not for the first time I want to choke him into an early grave. “Fuck you, asshole. Me and Eli and Adriano aren’t going to dissolve because you don’t know how to have feelings for a girl. Or did you forget this started between all five of us?”

“I mean... sure. But this is now and—”

“And now you want her, it’s suddenly like all you have to do is waltz back into that motel and take her.” I spit on the ground. “After all these years other people still aren’t real to you.”

“Christ, fine other people are real. You and Morelli and Adri are real,” He takes a deep drag on his cigarette. “Look, I get that you’ve got feelings for January. And I’m not saying we’re not gonna do a three-way once I’m done making the bitch pay, but I call dibs. She’s mine.”

I rub my temples, drained to my very limits. “You’re fucking impossible.”

“Thanks.”

“Not a fucking compliment. Why the hell do you always think you should get whatever you want?”

“I don’t. I’ve just never wanted anything before her.” He pauses, seemingly surprised by his own honesty. “Shit.”

“You’re fucking lying,” I say, even though I know he isn’t.

Doc shakes his head. “There’s been nothing until her. No future. But now...”

Now you’re in love, I think numbly. Doc Valente—a man I once saw bite off someone’s ear—is in love with January Whitehall just like I am.

“...Now I’m gonna wring every last drop of blood, sweat and tears out of that little slut’s body,” Doc finishes. He throws his second cigarette end on the ground and grinds it out like he’s stamping a full stop onto a sentence. “Enough talking. Let’s search this place before Parker hits us with a drone strike.”



CHAPTER FIVE

January Whitehall

DOC FISTS HIS cock in front of my face. It's thick and fleshy and I bend forward and give the head a small lick.

“Good girl.” His fingers move through my hair, collecting it in a tight ponytail. “Keep going, sweetheart. Earn my fat cock.”

I moan around him and his grip tightens. “Where you at, Bash?”

I already know. Bobby is behind me, his warm fingers spread across my ass. He squeezes tight and I arch my back.

“Shit. She's showing me her pussy.”

Doc's laughter sputters into a groan as I draw him fully into my mouth. “God, this bitch can suck. Give her ass a slap.”

Bobby lifts a hand, then pauses. “Are you sure, JJ...?”

My mouth is still full of Doc but I jiggle my butt the way I sometimes practiced in the mirror. Bobby's palm comes down on me like fire. “You like that?”

I do. The pain feels clean. Pure.

I suck Doc harder, taking him deep into my throat. There's saliva everywhere but he doesn't seem to mind.

“Spank me,” I tell Bobby.

I don't know *how* I say it, because I'm still sucking Doc, but Bobby slaps me again and heat swirls through my middle.

I'm so dirty. Disgusting. But it doesn't matter. I look into Doc's evil, blond, Elvis face. "Can you please call me names?"

He smooths a hand across my cheek. "Like... 'you're a dirty little slut, spreading for two guys and loving it'?"

It's good, but it's not quite right. I want him to be mean. Mean the way he was when he penetrated me with his knife handle. "More. *More.*"

Bobby draws his cock through my folds, spreading my wetness over both of us. I pray he pushes inside and ends my virginity, so I don't have to worry anymore. "*Please, Bobby?*"

He slaps my right ass cheek. "Meaner, Valente. You know what she needs."

Doc thrusts his cock deeper. "What about what I need? I'm so fuckin' close to busting in her mouth."

I close my eyes. It's hot when they talk over me like I'm not there. I might not need names, after all.

"Go on," Bobby says. "Blow her mind."

Doc's lips brush my ear. "You're a rich cunt, Whitehall. A spoiled whore who's not worth a damn to anyone."

I sigh happily. It's wrong, but everything is wrong. And if Doc's mean to me, I'm already being punished for my sluttiness, so it doesn't matter. Doc's hand closes around my throat. "She's ready, Basher. Put your dick inside her."

Bobby spans me as he enters me. The prickling sting contrasts with the slow stretch between my legs, turning me from one thing into something else. I whimper as he pushes deep, then withdraws. His cock is slick when he slides in a second time and now the feel of him makes my eyes roll back in my head.

"It's good," I pant. "It's *so* good."

Doc's hand is still locked around my neck as he pumps his cock between my lips. "That's it, *puttana*. Keep it up."

Bobby slams into me and yet it doesn't hurt at all. I press back against him, wanting more. My virginity is in tatters. This thing everyone wanted just... gone, and now there's just me, flexing and turning between two men. I shouldn't want them both, but I do. They're so strong, and they want me.

The pressure builds between my legs and goose bumps roll over me in waves. I buck hard against Bobby and he slaps my ass. "That's it. Push back on my cock, you little bitch."

Doc squeezes my throat. "Dump a load in her, and get out of the way. I want a turn."

"No," a new man declares. "I'll be next."

I glance sideways. Eli is sitting by the bed in one of his lovely suits. He smiles, the corners of his amber eyes crinkling. "Hello, *bella*."

"Hi," I mumble around Doc's penis. "How did you get here? And where is here?"

Eli points to the other side of the bed. There's nothing there. Just blackness. Blackness and then a pair of electric green eyes. "Pryntsesa," a low voice rumbles from the dark. "I saw you dancing."

My eyes fly open.

I'm naked except for Eli's ruby necklace, and in a strange room. There's brown and orange wallpaper and the mattress beneath me is spongy. Pale sunlight is working its way through the thin curtains.

"The motel," I say out loud, trying to still my racing heart. "Doc and Bobby brought me here. I'm okay. I'm safe."

Familiar male voices come through the window. The boys are outside. Maybe Doc is smoking? As my breathing slows, I find my fingers between my legs, rubbing softly. I remember the thick feel of Doc pressed against my tongue and Bobby taking me from behind as they called me awful names. A delicious heat courses through me and I rub faster until a howling wall of misery falls on me like a weighted blanket.

Zia Teresa is dead.

I pull my fingers away from myself. Every part of me feels raw and repulsive, like I've been left out in the sun to rot. Zia Teresa is dead and I'm dreaming about sex. About the most disgusting, immoral sex imaginable. I'm the worst girl in the world.

Your dreams didn't kill me. A familiar voice croaks in my mind. I don't need to know about sex, but you're wasting time. Get up and start the day.

Tears burn in the back of my eyes. Zia is right, as always. I didn't mean to dream about sex. I probably just wanted to feel better. And now that I'm awake I have more important things to do than feel guilty. Like get myself ready to return to Velvet House.

I throw on my dirty pink dress and high heels and brush my hair with a comb I find in a plastic package in the bathroom. I don't have any makeup and my skin is dry. Considering how much I get kidnapped I should carry a case of AHA toner and tinted moisturizer with me. I smile at my own silly thought, then remember Zia Teresa and feel mortified. Should I be able to make jokes? Or should I just be in pieces, sobbing and freaking out?

In my heart, I already know the answer. Zia hated crying. She'd want me to focus on what comes next. Zia Teresa was no stranger to death. She talked about it every other day. Whenever she had some advice to give me, she was all, *'when I'm dead, you'll have to remember Aquilina's has the best ricotta, January.'* *'Once I'm dead, you can have this slotted spoon, January.'* *'January, when I die, you'll need to remember to turn your mattress every six months, or it will sag.'*

I always shushed her, but that only made her grumpy. "I'm not going to live forever. You need to be ready to go on without me."

And here I am, going on without Zia. I pick up my St. Christopher medallion from the bedside table and give it a kiss. I imagine the frown Zia would give me if she could see me being so sentimental. I smile to myself and tuck the gold circle under my dress strap.

There's a light knock on the motel door. "JJ? Are you up?"

I remember my dream, the way Bobby labored behind me, his hard hands clamped around my hips. "Um, sure. I mean, come in!"

The door eases open. Bobby smiles but there are dark circles under his eyes. "I thought I could hear you moving around. How'd you sleep?"

I try not to stare at his chest. He's wearing one of his navy blue shirts and he's so big and handsome and cuddly. I want him to pick me up and throw me onto the bed. "I'm... I'm fine. I slept."

"Great," he says, clearly unaware of what a pervert I am. "We didn't have any issues overnight, but it's time to get moving. I got you a latte." He hands me a white to-go cup and a small brown bag.

"Oh, thank you."

"Pop-Tarts," Bobby says. "Eat 'em now. Once Doc has a shower, we'll head off and we won't stop again."

"Where is—"

Before I can finish Doc bursts inside and heads for the bathroom without a word. I can tell he's as furious as he was last night. Maybe more. I think of my sex dream with a guilty throb. There's a chance he'll never want to touch me again and as much as I should be relieved by that... I'm not.

I sit on the clumpy couch and peel back a blue wrapper. It's a cinnamon crunch Pop-Tart and it tastes like pure delicious sugar. I've only had Pop-Tarts once, at Giuseppina's house when I was fourteen. This one tastes even better, but after a few bites, I put it back in the bag.

“You don’t like it?” Bobby asks.

“Aren’t these bad for you?”

“It’s a treat, JJ.”

I gnaw on my lower lip. “I know, but I should, um, I should really eat healthy.”

The lines in Bobby’s forehead deepen. “You should do what feels right. Don’t let your stepmom take up too much space in your brain.”

I flush. I keep forgetting Bobby and everyone at Velvet House knows so much about me. But he’s right. My stepmom would freak out if she saw me having sugar and that’s why I stopped eating.

But why should I care what she thinks? She sold me to Mr. Parker and then she gave him my passport so he could sex traffic me to Thailand. I finish my cinnamon Pop-Tart between sips of latte, then eat a chocolate one. Bobby leans against the kitchen counter watching me, a small smile on his face. It’s so comfortable between the two of us. I wish it could last longer. But even as I think it, the shower stops running.

Bobby straightens. “I’m gonna go check the car.”

“Okay.”

He kisses my forehead. The skin where his lips touched me burns. My stepmom might be angry if she saw me eating junk food, but she’d have a screaming fit if she knew I’d hooked up with criminals. And that I was fantasizing about them—the four men who took me from her control.

The bathroom door swings open. Doc stands there, rubbing a towel through his wet hair. He’s naked, rainbow droplets clinging to his powerful chest and the inked ladders of his abdomen, glistening on his thighs. The sight of him goes through me like a sword. All of a sudden, I can barely breathe. “I... um...”

“Don’t look at me like that, Tits. You won’t like the things I’ll do to you.”

I believe him but I can't stop staring at the golden length of his penis. It's growing before my eyes, bobbing slightly as it thickens. I swallow, imagining that smooth hot flesh pressed against my tongue. I dreamt about going down on Doc. What kind of girl dreams about giving blow jobs?

Doc rubs a palm down the hard planes of his stomach. "You can't fucking help yourself can you?"

I turn away hating how he can read my mind. "Bobby says we need to go."

"Bobby says all kinds of shit." I feel him glaring at me and look down at myself. I'm still in my filthy pink dress and I don't have any makeup on. I bet I look disgusting.

"You've got a world of hurt coming to you once you're back at Velvet House," Doc whispers. "You know that right?"

I nod, my insides tingling with fear. I could beg for mercy, but Doc would like that.

He sucks in a furious breath. "You're such a dirty little cocktease."

I blink up. "I... I don't think I'm being a cocktease. I don't think I look nice at all."

His lip curls in a hateful sneer. "You fucking liar."

He holds up three fingers in a strange salute. "Tell you what, Tits. Seeing as we're not back at Velvet House and you're still doing your sweet little fuckdoll routine, why don't you come sit on these?"

My mouth floods with saliva. "I...?"

Doc gives a crackling laugh I know all too well. It means he's angry and turned on and ready to pounce.

"She's still a shy little virgin," he tells the motel ceiling. "But not for long."

He drops onto the beige couch, patting his thighs. "Don't piss me off, Whitehall. Get over here and ride my fingers or I'll make you wish you had."

I stand frozen to the spot. Does Doc actually want to touch me, or is he trying to trick me? I take a small step backward. “Um, no thanks.”

Doc’s sharklike grin fades. “Don’t act like you’re not gushing for me, you double-crossing waste of pussy.”

The comment is so mean it sends a burst of anger through me. “Screw you!”

Doc smirks, the way he always does when I backtalk him. “Soon. I know you’ve been thinking about me.”

I remember my dream, pleading Doc to call me dirty names as he thrust into my mouth. “I do not!”

“Yes, you do.” He grips his cock. “You want it, don’t you? No matter how mean I treat you, you want this dick.”

I stare at his penis. It’s like a rocket between his thighs—thick and hard and gleaming at the tip. It shouldn’t be attractive, but it is. I want to lick it. I want it inside me. My core flutters. I *could* lose my virginity right now. If I did, Parker wouldn’t want to marry me anymore and my stepmom couldn’t sell me to anyone else. And maybe it *should* be Doc. I hate him so much I wouldn’t be shy the way I would if it was Bobby or Eli or even Adriano. I picture Doc and I together, my hands in his damp blond hair as he rocks me up and down, his tattooed body hard against my pale one. My pussy contracts and I shift on my heels, uncertain whether to move toward him.

“Good girl,” Doc says in a mocking voice, wrapping his fist around his cock. He rubs it hard, squeezing so that a pearly drop appears on the head. “I haven’t jacked off since I came on your tits. I’ve got so much to give you, it’s not funny.”

“That was like... two weeks ago!”

“Yeah, I was too pissed off to nut. Didn’t want to think about you. But now...”

He gestures at me with his cock. It’s obscene but he just looks so *good*. I inch closer to the couch. This is such a bad

idea, but sometimes the whole world seems bad. At least being touched by Doc *feels* good. And why shouldn't my first time be on a bad couch in a creepy motel with a man my stepmom wouldn't let park her car?

"Tits," Doc snarls. "You've got five seconds or I'm gonna come to you. And if I do, you'll regret it."

The skin on the top of my scalp tightens. "I want to," I mumble. "But you're so *awful*."

"Yeah. That's what gets you wet." He pumps himself, his gaze fixed on my breasts. "I know you're a double-crossing bitch but stop lying to yourself. The innocent girl shit won't work anymore. You wanted to fuck Adriano. You still want to fuck all four of us. Stop being a stuck-up bitch and just *give in already*."

More insults, more ugly words and yet I'm still moving closer, the ache between my legs intensifying. I lick my lips. If he can say one nice thing about me, I'll do it. "Doc...?"

"Tits...?"

The front door swings open and Bobby walks in. "Okay, we need to—what the *fuck*, Valente?"

Doc keeps right on stroking himself. "January needs a good old-fashioned dicking. You in?"

I leap backward, away from Doc. "I don't need that!"

"You fuckin' liar."

Bobby rounds on him. "Get dressed, Eli's expecting us."

"God fuckin' forbid we keep Morelli waiting." Doc lets go of his penis and swings to his feet. "You had your chance, Tits. Next time you're staring down my cock, you'll be black and blue and mute from screaming."

He heads back into the bathroom and slams the door.

Bobby sighs, and walks past me to the fridge, avoiding my eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell his back. “I didn’t want to... I mean, I don’t know. I’m so sorry.” To my humiliation, my voice cracks. I press a hand to my mouth.

Bobby turns and I see he’s not remotely angry. His thick brows draw together in concern and he strides toward me, wrapping me in his big cinnamon-scented arms. “JJ, it’s okay. We just have to get going.”

For the hundredth time, tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “You don’t understand, I was thinking about sleeping with Doc.”

“I know.”

“Doesn’t that... I don’t know, make you angry?”

Bobby chuckles. “No. Valente’s a whore, lying on the couch with his cock out. You’re only human.”

I giggle, suddenly a million times lighter. “Thanks, Bobby.”

“Anytime. You sleep okay?”

“Mostly.” I feel the strange urge to keep confessing. To get everything off my chest. “I, um, had a dream about you and Doc. And me.”

Bobby goes still. “The three of us together again?”

I can hear the smile in his voice. I bury my face in his shirt. “Maybe.”

His big hands move from my waist to my hips and back again. “Were we... nice to you, JJ?”

‘Yes,’ I try to say but that’s not what comes out. “You weren’t nice. Actually, you were really mean.”

“Hmm,” Bobby presses his face into my hair. “Sorry, baby.”

“It’s okay... I liked it that way.”

Bobby makes a sputtering sound. I stand in mortified horror, wondering what the hell to say. A loud crash from the

bathroom rescues me.

“Sorry,” Doc calls. “Dropped the hairdryer.”

“Goddammit.” Bobby lets go of my waist. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Sure.” I look around the room for imaginary things I might have forgotten, then follow Bobby to the car. He gets behind the wheel and a few seconds later Doc slides into the passenger seat. I’m alone in the back, like a child. Bobby starts the engine as Doc puts on pulsing dance music. I wait for one of them to talk, but we leave the motel parking lot in silence.

Both men seem tense. I want to ask why but I’m scared of what they’ll say. Maybe Adriano’s injuries have gotten worse or Mr. Parker found where we are or he killed Emilia as revenge...

Doc leans across the console and mutters something to Bobby. His face is tight, and he looks older than usual. When I first saw him I thought he was in his late twenties, but from what I’ve learned about them, all the Velvet House men are in their early thirties. So grown up. Compared to them, I’m a kid.

I clear my throat. “Guys? How angry is Eli going to be with me when we get back to Velvet House?”

Doc turns to look at me. “Huh?”

My face heats. I sound like a thirteen-year-old looking for reassurance. “Um, Mr. Morelli? Is he angry?”

“Not at you,” Bobby says, finding my gaze in the rearview mirror. “Parker’s taking most of his attention right now.”

“And a certain scarred gargoyle on fuckloads of morphine,” Doc adds.

My heart sinks. “It wasn’t Adriano’s fault I escaped. I broke out of my room and made him take me to see Zia. And he didn’t know we’d be attacked.”

“He should have.” Doc’s voice is harsh. “We knew Parker was monitoring the hospital. The idiot knew how risky it was.”

“But I seduced him and—”

“No offense to your porn star rack, Tesorina but members of Velvet House are supposed to be able to withstand a pair of tits. Adri fucked us over, got you kidnapped, and almost died in the process.”

I know I should focus on what he’s saying but I stopped listening after that single word. *Tesorina*. The Italian word for sweetheart. I never thought he’d call me that again. I can’t help it, I smile at Doc. For a second he holds my gaze before he turns back around, muttering under his breath.

I look in the mirror and see Bobby is wearing a grim smile. Is he jealous? Angry? Annoyed?

“Adriano helped me,” I say loudly. “I promised him my virginity. Why are you mad at him? You should only be angry at me.”

“We are angry at you,” Doc snarls. “We’re angry at both of you.”

“But—”

Doc bangs a fist into his car door. “Okay, Tits. Let’s say your little cunt is so powerful it could turn a thirty-four-year-old mercenary’s head. *Did* Adriano help you? Or did he let everything go to shit? Because if we hadn’t been able to track you, there’s every chance you’d be married, knocked up and on a plane to Thailand right now.”

I flinch. “I’m sorry. I never thought Mr. Parker would find me. I was stupid.”

“Enough!” Bobby says. “We’re not discussing this anymore. Doc, shut up. January, think about what you’re gonna say when you see Eli because he’s the one you’ll need to explain yourself to.”

The next hour crawls by. Doc and Bobby talk in hushed voices as I say a mental rosary for Zia Teresa and try to come up with what to say to Eli. The only thing I can think of is begging for his forgiveness and promising not to run away

again, but if I know anything about Eli Morelli, I won't be able to change his mind. If he wants to punish me, then I'll be thrown back into the basement cage and punished.

Eventually we turn off the highway and I watch the landscape become lush and almost unbearably pretty.

"Are we at Velvet House?" I ask, my stomach falling.

"Almost," Bobby says.

Another three songs pass before Bobby turns down a laneway and stops the car at a huge wrought iron gate. He rolls down the window and talks into a black security box. There's a crackle and the gate swings open. We speed along a smooth, curved driveway lined with oak trees. The lawns are emerald green and beyond them is a dark, tangled forest. I peer through the trees and spot a deer. It twitches its white and brown ears and sadness washes over me. Zia Teresa will never see this deer. This deer will never know Zia Teresa, never understand they once shared a world. It just doesn't seem fair.

Nothing is fair. And I do not care about that stinking animal.

I smile as I wrap my arms across my chest, hugging myself. *I love you, Zia.*

And I love you, bella.

"The house is coming up, Tits."

I glance through the windshield and see a huge beautiful mansion. "That's Velvet House?"

Doc grins like a boy showing off his toy truck. "Sure is."

It's the first time I've seen him smile properly since he burst into Dreams and started beating Archie. It transforms him from a movie star villain to a stupidly handsome jerk. I turn away, staring up at Velvet House.

"Shit," Bobby mutters. "He's waiting for us."

A tall, dark-haired man is standing on the marble steps. His gray suit gleams in the morning sun and I feel a rush of

warmth that shocks me. It's like when I was a girl and I saw my Daddy pulling into the driveway after work. *Everything will be okay*, that warmth says. *The adults are here*.

Eli strides toward the car as Bobby parks. He pulls open the passenger door and I have a moment of panic, wondering if he's about to yell at me.

Instead, he practically yanks me out of the car. "January Whitehall."

"Yes?" I whimper, blindsided, as I always am by the symmetrical perfection of his face.

Eli stares at me for a long second then tumbles me into his arms. "*Bella*. Thank fucking Christ."

He kisses me deeply, his stubble rough against my jaw. Brutally elegant, as everything about him is. I melt into his touch, relieved he's not angry. But there's more than relief. The arousal that has been humming through me since my dream is easily ignited by Eli's lips and he knows exactly how to coax it into a flame.

His tongue slides into my mouth and I'm aware of Doc and Bobby watching but still I can't stop kissing Eli. His hands move across my back, stroking lightly, and I want him to do... *something*. Grab my butt or pull my hair, or throw me onto the hood of the Charger and touch me. But I know he won't. He's always so restrained. I've never seen him come close to losing control. As if to prove it, he pulls away, smiling at me with his perfect teeth. "You're home." He traces a finger along my throat. "And you're still wearing my necklace."

I touch the ruby collar. I've come to rely on its weight anchoring me to the present. Then I remember how I ran away with it, accidentally stealing his family heirloom. "I'm sorry I took it with me to the hospital, Mr. Morelli."

Eli's amber eyes crinkle. "That doesn't matter. Not now you're home."

He kisses me again and I'm powerless to stop him. Surely I can't keep doing this, just kissing and touching whoever is

around? I pull away, brushing my fingers across my mouth.

“Is something wrong?”

I watch out of the corner of my eyes as Doc pulls a packet of cigarettes from his jacket and lights one. “You just sucked the life out of her, Morelli. Let her catch her fucking breath.”

Eli grips my shoulders, examining me like a teacher checking a uniform. “Are you injured?”

“No.”

“Then how did this happen?” He brushes a thumb over my lower lip and at first, I don’t know what he’s talking about. Then I remember Mr. Parker slapping me, the thin cut bisecting my mouth.

“It was...” I can’t bring myself to finish. The memory of that slap feels clearer in the morning sun.

Eli’s jaw tightens. “Soon you and I will have a long talk about Zachery Parker. But first you need food and rest. Go to your wing and bathe. I’ll have Harvey bring you something to eat.”

My stomach rumbles. I guess two Pop-Tarts isn’t much of a meal and a bath sounds amazing. Although... “Is everything in my wing... okay?”

Eli gives me a small smile. “If you’re referring to the door Gretzky had to kick down when you locked him in your room, then no, that is destroyed. But the one we’ve replaced it with is just fine.”

I duck my head. “Sorry.”

“It does not matter. Go and bathe, *bella*. Before I decide you’re better off locked in my basement.”

Behind me, Doc growls.

I turn to find him leaning on the hood of the car, his arms folded. “Thanks for looking after me, Doc,” I mumble. “You too, Bobby.”

Bobby gives me a faint nod. Neither of them seem very happy. I gnaw on my lower lip. How am I going to make things right between all of us? I turn to Eli. “Could I maybe cook something for dinner to show you all how sorry I am?”

“Not tonight. Run along, I need to speak with Doc and Bobby in the boardroom.”

My heart lifts. “Are you having a meeting about my kidnapping?”

“That’s none of your concern.” Eli points a finger at the house. “Go.”

I frown at him. “Can’t I know what’s happening with Mr. Parker?”

“We do not say that name here.”

“You mean *I* can’t say that name.”

“That’s correct.”

I raise my hands the way Zia used to. “Mr. Parker kidnapped me and killed someone I love. Why can’t I know what’s happening?”

Eli’s gaze is steely. “Because I say so.”

“But that’s not fair!”

“I decide what’s fair. Go to your room.”

My mouth falls open. He’s sending me to bed like I’m a little girl. “No! I know important stuff. You should *want* to talk with me.”

“And yet I don’t. Walk to the East Wing or be dragged to the cage. That is your choice.”

I shift my weight sideways, dangerously close to stamping my foot. I don’t know why I can’t let this go, just be grateful that Eli is treating me nicely. But now that I’m here, standing at the steps of Velvet House, I’m furious at being dismissed like a helpless victim. Like the girl I was before. “Let me come to your meeting!”

Bobby winces. “Careful, JJ.”

I ignore him. “I’m not your prisoner anymore,” I tell Eli. “And you just kissed me.”

Eli’s nostrils flare. “And?”

“And you obviously still want to sleep with me. And if I’m old enough to sleep with, I’m old enough to talk to.”

“Je-sus,” Bobby mutters.

Doc gives a low whistle. “Give her to me, Morelli. I’ll deal with her.”

Eli doesn’t do that. Instead, his face relaxes into a smooth blankness that’s even scarier than anger.

He takes a step toward me and the bright morning sunshine seems to dim. “Get upstairs or what Parker planned to do to you will look like a trip to heaven in comparison.”

I should be afraid. Terrified. But up-close Eli’s skin is sallow, and he has shadows under his eyes. I don’t think he’s slept. I’m pretty sure he’s spent the night pacing Velvet House, worrying about the three of us and Adriano. My anger is still thrumming through me, but in the face of Eli’s worry, I give in and turn on my heels.

“Good girl,” Eli says in an icy voice. “Shower and dress appropriately for dinner.”

My anger resurges. I raise my middle finger over my shoulder.

Bobby groans and Doc makes a noise like an angry dog. “Disrespectful, spoiled little...”

“Enough,” Eli barks.

I expect him to come after me, push me to the ground and punish me. But I walk into Velvet House unimpeded, though the skin on the back of my neck tingles.

And what is wrong with all of them?

And what is wrong with me?



CHAPTER SIX

Eli Morelli

THE BOARDROOM AT Velvet House is located behind the employee quarters. Its fortified walls mean it doubles as a panic room and it's regularly swept for bugs and recording equipment. I'm the first to arrive. Bobby and Doc requested time to change their clothes and considering their combined scent of cigarette ash, sweat, and fast food, I agreed.

The room has a coffee machine. I make myself a macchiato and find my hands still shaking with rage. Unlike Doc and Bobby, January Whitehall looked like a fresh-faced angel in the morning light, my rubies still around her neck. But the disrespect she showed me... she should have been weeping and begging for my forgiveness, not arguing with me and giving me the finger.

If there weren't fifty messes to clean up, I'd have the brat in my bedroom and be spanking her until she bruised.

I down my espresso in one. I haven't slept, I stayed up all night staring at a screen, ensuring the tracking device in the rubies around January's neck was still live and that she was still safe. My eyes are grainy, and my temper is held back by a thread. True anger is a luxury I can rarely afford, but the last twenty-four hours have stretched me to my limits. When I learned January had been taken by Parker, I was sure she was dead. That man is spiteful to his bones, and I thought Adriano had fucked her before he betrayed us—rendering that beautiful girl worthless in Parker's eyes. Yet she survived and her virtue is uncorrupted.

I swore if I saw her again, I would claim her and not just for myself.

As I stared, transfixed into that dark screen, aware of exactly how lucky I had been, I knew Doc, Bobby and Adriano were feeling the same mix of dread and relief. And I understood in ways I didn't before that all of us want her. And that if we are to have any peace, all of us will have to have her. One love. A new kind of family.

It sounds strange but it feels... correct. Sharing one woman with my brothers isn't unusual, but our feelings for January Whitehall are. Perhaps it was always meant to be this way. There is no one for me but her now, a very different kind of wife from the one I imagined.

There will be pushback from my mother's family, but no man who lays eyes on January will question my decision. Unless her insolence continues...

I hit the button for more coffee, black this time. I can appreciate January has gone through trauma and lost a loved one, but a wife should be respectful and obedient. I will teach her that, just as soon as I've resolved everything else.

Coffee in hand, I take a seat at the polished table. There's a knock on the door and Doc appears, barefoot in ripped jeans and a sleeveless pink T-shirt. He takes the seat across from mine, sipping his own enormous mug of coffee. "What's going on? Have we heard from Parker?"

"I'm not going to discuss it without Bobby."

"I'm here." Bobby rushes in, still buttoning his plaid shirt. "Parker sent us a message? With who? Harrow? Milner?"

"No one. An encrypted file arrived around the time you two were at Dreams."

Bobby takes the seat beside Doc. "You think the Baskerville kid tipped him off?"

"No, but—"

“He’s not a kid,” Doc interrupts. “He’s twenty-six and a rat.”

Bobby rolls his eyes. From his messages, I know Doc almost beat Archie Baskerville to a pulp because he and January hugged. But that’s Doc. All rage and compulsion. The thought of another man touching January makes my blood boil but according to Bobby the embrace was innocent and the Baskerville twins did us an almighty favor. Considering them for a job is on the list of things to address once my main problems are dealt with. Parker. Adriano. January.

“Archie and his brother are in the clear,” I tell Doc. “Bill is in the hospital for his concussion and Archie’s laying low in the Bronx.”

Doc pounds his mug on the table. “They’re scumbag traitors.”

“Traitors to *Parker*. Without them, January would be—”

“Back with us. Because Bobby and I would have tracked the necklace to the airstrip and shot Parker through the head. Then we wouldn’t have to deal with any of this shit.”

I don’t respond. He could be right, but he could be wrong. It’s nice to believe we could have rescued January, but I didn’t become the man I am because of my nice beliefs. The facts are we might have been delayed while tracking the necklace or Parker could have lost his temper and injured January. Or worse. Archie Baskerville and his brother made sure that didn’t happen and we could use new blood on our crew.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I tell Doc. “Bill and Archie are smart, they’ve been in the game for years, they—”

“Want to fuck January.”

“Yes, because they’re human,” Bobby interrupts. “But they’re not suicidal enough to act on it. Having them on the payroll while they’re still working for Parker—”

“And how do we know they won’t fuck us like they fucked him?”

“Enough,” I say wearily. “Aren’t either of you *idioti* interested in Parker’s message?”

Bobby shuts up at once.

Doc scratches his untidy blond head. “What’s the message?”

“No, go on bitching about the Baskerville twins, I’m sure that’s more important.”

Doc rolls his eyes “Sorry, Morelli. What’s the message?”

I stare at him, mildly amazed. “I’ve never heard you apologize. I feel like I should make a wish.”

Doc grits his teeth. “What’s the fucking message? Can we watch it?”

“The file corrupted after the initial play.”

“Fuck.”

I pull out my phone. “So, you’re lucky I think on my feet. I filmed it off Sal’s monitor. The quality’s low, but you can still see everything.”

I slide my phone across the table and my brothers lean in to watch. I’ve seen the video so many times I know it off by heart, Parker on his private plane, his redheaded girlfriend naked in his lap. Her face is blank; his, full of a slack fury I know all too well.

“I’m done with words, Morelli. You’ve got twelve hours from midnight to give me January or I’m gonna kill the bitch’s sister.”

He cups the redhead’s tit and squeezes so hard she gasps. *“This isn’t some bullshit threat. I’ve already shot your bootlicker. Twelve hours from midnight, I want that cunt in Vegas or it’ll be a fucking bloodbath. Margot Whitehall first and then... who fucking knows?”*

Sal's monitor goes black and the video ends.

Doc slams both palms on the table. "Fucker."

Bobby turns to me. "How serious do you think he is?"

"He's already got snipers posted outside the Whitehall mansion. He's not bluffing."

A muscle twitches in Bobby's jaw. "What are we gonna do? Can we get out to Vegas and kill him?"

If things weren't so dire, I'd smile. For the last year, Bobby hasn't wanted to hurt anyone. Now I could send him to Parker with a screwdriver and he'd find a way to decapitate him.

I take a long swig of coffee. "We can't get to Parker. He's holed up in the Palm Casino with the redhead and fifty bodyguards. Twenty-four hour security. People testing his food. It's impossible to get to him."

"Twelve hours after midnight." Bobby checks his watch. "That leaves... *five fucking hours.*"

He looks at me in horror. "You let us shower!"

"You shouldn't make decisions in a state of panic."

Doc barks out a laugh. "Just tell us what the fucking plan is, Morelli."

I have a plan, of course I do. But I won't let Doc bait me into revealing it before they're ready. "I see several options we can pursue. And one that leads to a good outcome."

"What?" Bobby urges. "What is it?"

"I'm going to talk you through the other options first, so you understand—"

"Hurry the fuck up," Doc snarls.

I take another slow sip of coffee. "You know, this isn't bad. We should get a machine for the kitch—"

"*Please, Morelli. Please hurry the fuck up?*"

I take in Doc's pinched face and hollow eyes and feel slightly bad. I've had all night to dwell on this. For my brothers, Parker's threat is new and horrifying. I lay my hands on the table. "Option one. We return Janua—"

"No," Bobby says.

"Not going to happen," Doc snarls. "Next."

"Option two, we keep January and leave Parker to his business. Assuming the threat on Margot's life isn't empty and she is killed, the Whitehalls are a reasonably powerful family. January's uncles have the resources to find Parker and the contacts to kill or arrest him. Hopefully, before he attacks January's brothers."

Doc snorts. "That's a lotta faith in the Whitehalls. We've had January for ages, and they've done fuck nothing."

"They consider January a write-off," I remind him. "She's the youngest member of her extended family and her engagement to Parker caused a lot of guilty consciences. That meant her uncles were reluctant to step in. If Parker kills Margot, it'll be different. She's Nicholas Whitehall's oldest child and assassination looks worse than kidnapping."

Bobby lets out a long breath. "No guarantees, though..."

"No. And I don't need to tell either of you that if Parker kills Margot, we are in a world of shit with January."

Doc frowns. "Why?"

Apparently, I do need to tell someone. "You think the girl will let us touch her once her sister is dead?"

"We're not the ones killing the bitch!"

"No, Parker is. And we'll be responsible for exacerbating the situation with Parker."

Doc swivels his head from side to side as though looking for a way around this. "I don't want to be a scumbag, but by that logic, January's Zia died because of us..." Doc does a quick sign of the cross. "...and January was still giving me sex

eyes this morning. I'm not saying I *want* her sister to die, but ___”

“Her Zia was old,” I snap. “She smoked heavily. I imagine January accepted her time was coming sooner rather than later. Her sister on the other hand—”

“Is twenty-four,” Bobby finishes. “January’ll never forgive us if she knows we could have done something to save Margot.”

Doc’s face hardens. “We’ve all lost people to Parker. People who should still be alive now.”

“Then you shouldn’t want January to go through that!” Bobby glares at him. “There’s being a selfish prick and there’s what you’re suggesting Valente. It’s beyond the fucking pale.”

Doc looks to me. “Option three?”

“We contact January’s stepmother—”

“That cunt,” Doc says darkly. “I wish Parker wanted to shoot her. Talk about two birds, one stone.”

“We contact January’s stepmother,” I say loudly, “And tell her to take her children into hiding. To relocate somewhere until we can gain access to Parker and kill him.”

“That won’t work,” Bobby says glumly. “That woman wants Parker to marry January. She’d sell us out as soon as we hung up the phone.”

“Exactly,” I say. “And she’s already traded one stepdaughter to get out of debt. Who’s to say she’d be moved by a threat on another. So, there’s option four; as discussed, we send a team to Vegas to infiltrate Palm Casino.”

“But we know that’s a suicide mission,” Bobby says. “We don’t have the manpower to stage an assassination while he’s on red alert.”

“Agreed. Which brings us to option five.” I drum my fingertips on the table.

“What is it?” Doc demands.

I open my mouth and find the words won't come. My heart is hammering against my rib cage. The solution arrived as I paced the rose garden at sunrise, so obvious it was impossible to see it before. There is one way to keep January, save her family, and end the conflict with Parker, but it will take everything the four of us have. Doc, Bobby, Adriano, and me. Everything we've worked for and fought for since we were teenagers. But when the alternative is January Whitehall dead, raped, or broken into a million pieces, there *is* no alternative. The others, Bobby and Doc want her too. They'll have to understand. I inhale. "Option five, the only viable option I can see, is a contract."

Doc stands so quickly his chair topples back. "A contract? You can't... A fucking *contract*?"

Bobby presses his palms over his eyes. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph."

"I'm sorry," I say. "It's the only—"

"No." Doc says. "Never. I'll go to Vegas and kill him myself. That's our option. I'll leave now, I'll be back by tomorrow."

"No you won't," I say. "I'm sorry, I really am, but we don't have time to wallow in groundless emotions. Both of you need to listen. Parker is insane, and his resources are almost bottomless. I want him dead, I want him dead more than anything, but revenge is no longer a viable—"

"It is because I'll kill him." Doc picks up his chair and slams it back into the ground. "I'll kill him in Vegas."

"You'll be shot through the head as soon as you get on the strip. We almost lost Adriano, I am not losing you, *idiota del cazzo*. Sit and listen."

"Fuck you! Fuck you and fuck Adriano. It's his fault we're in this shit."

"Agreed. But here we are. We need to play the hand that's been laid in front of us."

Doc tosses his chair into the wall. It crashes to the floor with a splintering crunch. “God fucking damn it!”

Neither Bobby or I move.

“I understand your anger,” I say as calmly as I can, “but breaking things and swearing doesn’t change our situation. We need to come to an agreement.”

Doc shakes his head. “You’re talking about ending *everything*.”

“I know. But there are four hours and forty-five minutes until Margot Whitehall dies and once that door is closed, it’s closed forever.”

“No,” Doc repeats. “I’m. Killing. Him.”

“Then you’re killing Margot. You don’t have time to get to Vegas. You’ll murder January’s sister and put her in the exact position you were in at her age.”

Doc stalks toward me and I raise my hands, sure he’s going to hit me, but he paces across the room and punches the wall so hard it shakes. When he pulls back, there’s blood on his knuckles. “Fuck! Fuck! *Fuck!*”

Bobby looks at me and I see the resignation in his eyes. “A contract makes sense. We can still grow our business and—”

“And Parker walks free for what he did,” Doc snarls. “Unaccountable forever.”

For the first time since he stole January, I wish Adriano was here. He’s Doc’s oldest friend. He would know how to calm him, but he’s upstairs so drugged up on pain medication, he can barely speak. It’s up to me to convince Domenico Valente that this is the right choice to make. I get to my feet and approach like he’s a wild animal. Which isn’t far from the truth.

He eyes me. “Parker killed my sister. Let his men put their filthy hands all over her, then ended her life.”

“I know,” I say in a low voice. “It’s shameful, and it’s shameful that I have to ask you to set aside your revenge, but January’s life is at stake.”

Doc turns away, his jaw working furiously.

“I know you loved Alessia...” I say her name delicately, because saying it the wrong way turns Doc rabid, “...but she’s been gone for seventeen years. Almost as long as January’s been alive.”

“So, I should just forget about her?”

I feel like a bomb defuser. Goddamn Parker for not giving me more time to do this. “No, you’ll never forget her. You *shouldn’t* forget her. But she’s gone and killing Parker isn’t going to bring her comfort.”

“What’s your point?” Doc demands. “What do you want from me?”

I draw a shallow breath. “We’ve built something to live for at Velvet House and whatever happens, you know January is a part of that.”

I place a hand on Doc’s shoulder, and he throws me off. “Who the fuck are you to talk to me about revenge? Bobby, Adri, and I lost family. You lost a fucking *dog*.”

My hands ball into fists at my sides, but a fight is what Doc wants and I will not let him derail me. “It’s your choice, Domenico. Parker won’t agree to a contract without all four of us signing. Are you going to let Margot Whitehall die?”

He stares at me, his skin stretched tight like a muzzle, and I think of the night Alessia died. How I fought to keep him from taking his stepfather’s handgun, knowing he’d go to Parker’s compound and get himself killed.

Earlier that day, men had snatched Dolce while my sister was walking her through Central Park and broke her neck. Dolce slept on my bed every night I was home. She was a mutt of a Beagle and terrier and until Bobby, she was my only real friend. When my mother would unexpectedly fly off to Italy,

when my father would come home drunk and shouting, she was there, soft and friendly and kind. I loved her like I loved nothing else, and Parker's men killed her and threw her away like a toy.

We cried, Doc and I, after I took the gun from him. The two of us curled up on his bathroom floor and bawled, holding each other and swearing revenge. Parker wasn't stupid enough to kill a Morelli, but he did kill something I loved. And in doing that he tied me to the other men he harmed. The day Alessia died, Domenico Valente became my brother. My responsibility.

I hold out a hand. "Doc, I'm sorry."

"You lied to me."

I know what he means. Seventeen years ago, the only way I could get Doc on a plane to Italy—and to safety—was to promise we'd come back and kill Parker. And now I'm telling him to set that promise aside.

"I'm sorry," I repeat. "But things have changed. We don't have a choice."

Doc heads for the door. "I'm leaving."

I block his path. "We need a decision."

"What about Adriano?"

"He's already agreed to a contract."

For a second Doc is dumbstruck, but he recovers fast. "He's cracked out on pain meds!"

"He knew what he was being asked."

Doc pushes a finger in my face. "He fucked us all over! He started all this!"

"You think I don't know that? We don't have time to deal with it, but he's infatuated with January, and he wants her safe."

Doc sinks his fists into his hair and pulls. “This *cannot* be happening.”

Bobby gets to his feet and walks over to a computer monitor. He types briefly then points to the screen. It’s a live feed into January’s room. She’s sitting on the end of her bed in a towel, singing to herself as she combs her long dark hair. Warmth breaks open inside of me, the way I used to feel when Dolce curled up in my lap.

Doc stares at the screen, his blue eyes glassy. What is he seeing? Himself as a teenager? Alessia? Or maybe just an innocent creature we still have a chance to save.

“Doc?” I prompt. “What are you thinking?”

He closes his eyes. “Say, theoretically, we agree to a contract. Who’s gonna draw it up? Who’s gonna enforce it?”

The backs of my knees go weak. Until that moment, I didn’t realize how much I thought he’d walk or how relieved I am he hasn’t.

“John Bianchi,” I say. “He’s the only person with enough power to hold Parker to account if he betrays the contract.”

“And our terms?”

“It’s hard to say,” I begin carefully. “But at its core Parker would be relinquishing his claim to January and we’d agree to set aside our revenge. Call it square.”

“That might not be enough,” Bobby says, tearing his gaze from the monitor. “What about the money Parker spent on January’s stepmother? He’s gonna want compensation.”

“Then I’ll pay it.”

“It’ll be millions!”

“I’ll sell some stock. Some sapphires. We’ll manage.”

Doc stares at me like I’ve lost my mind. “You’re serious, aren’t you? You’ve already picked a broker, you’re gonna hock your mom’s jewelry, you’re completely sold on this.”

“I don’t want the girl to suffer. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I fucking do.” Doc flings a finger at the monitor. “That girl betrayed us, she ran away and had us all thinking she’d been raped and killed. I’m going to take every inch of that disrespect out on her virgin pussy and if you or anyone tries to stop me, I’ll murder them.”

So it’s sexual compensation he wants. To punish January for making him feel things he hasn’t felt since his sister died—if he’s ever felt them at all. That is understandable and something we can work toward. But not now. Now I need to save the girl’s sister and her sanity for all our sakes. “Do you agree to a contract or not?”

Doc looks at the floor. “Do whatever you want.”

“That isn’t going to work, Valente. What’s *your* answer?”

“Fine. Do it.”

Doc moves to duck past me, but I grip his shoulder. “You mean it? You agree to a contract?”

“Yes! Now get the fuck off me.”

I hold him fast. There’s still another blow to deliver. One last barrier to overcome.

“Parker isn’t going to want to negotiate with us. He’s too angry that January’s gone and too stupid to see the benefits of a contract. We need something to bring him to the table. Something he can’t turn down.”

Doc shoves my hand aside. “Give him whatever you want, I don’t give a shit.”

“You will. I’m going to offer him Orchard.”

Doc’s head draws back. “Oh, is that all you want? Is there anything else you wanna take? My Charger? My nuts? You gonna dig up Alessia and grind her into Parker’s cornflakes?”

“I have no intention of giving Parker the formula,” I say, trying to hold his gaze. “But it’ll bring him to the table and give us leverage to negotiate a cease-fire. There’s no other option.”

Doc looks to the monitor, where January sits combing her hair. His face goes limp and his eyes dull. “I’m going.”

“I’m calling Bianchi,” I tell his back. “If you leave, you’re forfeiting your right to make decisions in the initial negotiation.”

The look Doc gives me is just short of hatred. “What the fuck is left for me to negotiate, Morelli?”

It is time for the truth, unvarnished and uncut. “You love January Whitehall. You will not let her suffer willingly and we all know it. Be a man and accept responsibility for your actions and her future.”

There is a moment, a beat, when Doc’s mouth twitches and for a horrifying second, I think he’s going to burst into tears. Then he storms out of the room, slamming the door behind him.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Domenico Valente

I LEARNED TO swim in the sea. My mom never had the time or the money to take me to the pool and I never had the interest. But when I dove into the Mediterranean, I knew if I could only do one thing for the rest of my life, it would be this.

In my first few months in Naples, it was all I did. Go swimming, get drunk, pass out. I guess I was smoking too and getting tattoos. Pain, I liked. Constant little licks of pain. Burning lungs. Burning skin. But mostly it was swimming.

Once I came to shore and some middle-aged guy waved me down. My Italian was good enough by then that I understood he was telling me I had a swimmer's build and to come to some training pool nearby. I told him to fuck off. The other guys made fun of me. Said he was trying to lure me into his van to suck me off, but I knew he wasn't. A few years later I saw him on TV hugging some kid who just won gold at the Olympics, and I thought 'huh, I really could've been Michael Phelps.'

The pool at Velvet House is only half the size of an Olympic, but it's big enough to get a flow going. The walls, ceiling and the bottom of the pool are covered in tiny, green tiles and when you turn off the lights, you feel like you're in a sea cavern.

I was against moving to Velvet House until Morelli showed me the pool. It almost makes up for the fact I'm living in a rich bitch monstrosity with servant quarters and a fucking hedge maze.

I swim a hundred laps in my briefs, chlorine bleaching my hair and stinging my eyes.

Alessia never learned to swim, never lived anywhere but our mom's shitbox apartment. I've got lines around my eyes now, and my knees do weird clicking things when I run, but she'll always be twenty-four. Beckett got married years ago. She and her wife have three kids and five dogs. I'm happy for the bitch. Sometimes.

I swim another fifty laps. My legs and lungs ache, but I keep going, pushing as hard as I can, and when I finally surface, I'm gasping. I slump against the tiled side, air cutting my throat like glass. I want to get out, but I don't have a towel. Maybe I'll stay here and drip dry. Maybe I'll slit my wrists and bleed out in the pool.

Parker.

The idea of him being alive and me not trying to kill him is like the sun suddenly vanishing from the sky. What the fuck am I gonna do? There's nothing *to* do. I'll have to kill him. But if I sign a contract, there's no chance. Violating it wouldn't just mean my neck, it would be the end of Velvet House and Adriano, Bobby, and Morelli. January too. I press my face back into the water and scream, bubbles blasting out of my mouth.

How can the others be okay with this?

“Doc?”

I surface so fast my neck pops. January is sitting at the other end of the pool. She's wearing a tiny blue sundress, her bare legs dangling in the water. I feel like someone's ripping duct tape off my chest. She's too much. Too bright. Too fucking nice. My thoughts return to the black visions that have replayed in my mind ever since she was abducted. Tying her up and bruising her perfect white skin, making her scream around a ball gag as spit and cum run down her face. Hurting her. Making her pay.

I stand, swiping the water from my face. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Her timid smile dissolves.

“Why are you here?” I repeat.

She slides her legs out of the pool, like I might attack anyone in my terrain. “I heard someone swimming and I thought I’d see who it was.”

That doesn’t track. The pool is miles away from the East Wing and her bedroom. I fold my arms across my chest. “You watched me swim?”

Her shy smile flickers then dies again. “You’re really fast.”

I don’t want to appreciate her words. I don’t fucking care she thinks I’m good at swimming. For one thing, the girl doesn’t know shit about swimming, for second, I fucking hate her.

As we stare at one another in silence it occurs to me that this weak, pathetic little rich girl has fucked with me like no one has. She betrayed me, ran away, and got herself kidnapped by a psychopath. The same psychopath that made my sister’s life a nightmare before he took it from her. My vision goes blank, and I remember how it felt when Eli called me to say Parker had January. The helpless rage. After Alessia, I thought I was done feeling that slow, rolling panic but January brought it back in spades. I’ll never forgive her for that. Not if I have a hundred years to take it out on her body.

Before I know what I’m doing I’m swimming toward her. My head is buzzing with the promise of pain. I feel like a shark, hollow and cold. Fucking murderous.

January goes still as a statue, her pretty face a vision of terror. “Domenico...”

The way she says my name pricks at me like a stinging insect. I shake my head. “No, Tits. You don’t get to call me Domenico anymore.”

She flinches. “I, but... what should I...?”

“You could try Master. Or Mr. Valente. Or My Lord and fucking Saviour, considering I haven’t choked the life out of you yet.” I stare her down like the quivering piece of prey she is. “Actually, I don’t need you to say anything. I don’t wanna hear your lying little voice ever again.”

January is awash in pale green light but I can still see the color drain from her face all the same. The insect lands again, stinging the back of my neck harder this time. I ignore it. “What do you think you owe me, for making me believe you were dead, January Whitehall? That Parker had gone and raped and murdered another woman who was supposed to be under my protection?”

“I-I don’t know.”

Her voice is shaking, vibrating with panic and her eyes are already welling with tears. I want to take pleasure in it but the high isn’t coming. I ball my hands into fists. “You don’t fucking know, isn’t that convenient? Then again when have you ever known anything, you dopey little brat?”

She absorbs the insult without so much as a shudder and that’s when I see it. The softness in her stupid, emerald green eyes. The sympathetic pout in her plushy pink lips. She’s thinking about what I told her last night. About Alessia. The little bitch is feeling *sorry* for me.

I swim up to where she’s sitting and grip her ankles like I’m going to pull her into the pool. Her skin is hot under my palms, and I ignore the heat that zaps from her to me. Her face is so pale I wouldn’t be surprised if she passed out, but she doesn’t look away. She just keeps staring at me with her huge pitiful eyes and somehow, I know exactly what she’s thinking. And I fucking hate her for it.

Then she opens her mouth.

“I’m sorry about your sister,” she says in a big rush. “I’m sorry I worried you by running away. I never meant to hurt you or any of the guys. I really like you. I mean you scare me and you’re such a jerk but I feel things for... I mean I used to.”

Her face burns scarlet and something inside me snaps. I press my fingertips into her peachy skin, hard enough to bruise. “Stop. Talking.”

But not only does she not do that she reaches down. She reaches down and brushes a hand over my cheek. “Doc, I know you’re in pain. It’s okay. Whatever you need to do to feel better, I... I can handle it. I want you to feel better.”

Jesus H fucking Christ.

Her touch is like cold fire but I don’t push her hand away. I take a step back, water sloshing around my waist, making me feel like an asshole.

“Fuck you,” I hiss, glaring right in her face. “Fuck you for making me... for trying to...”

I snap my jaw shut, furious with myself. I don’t owe the bitch any explanations and I don’t want to ‘talk this out’ or any of that bullshit. I want to hurt her. I want my fucking revenge. Especially since Morelli is trying to rip away my rightful retaliation against Parker. The thing that’s powered me since I was seventeen and he wants to renege because of January’s safety. January’s innocence.

The realization makes my anger surge and I grip her ankles tighter, tugging her forward. “I’m going to hurt you, Tits. So bad you’ll wish you were still getting gun-fucked by Adriano. So bad you’ll wish you were never born, you get that?”

She nods, a sparkly tear tracking down her cheek.

Don’t fucking agree, I scream inside my mind. Don’t you fucking take this from me too.

I pull her legs apart and stare at the pink cotton covering her virgin pussy. I want to bite into her. Tear her apart like I’m a wolf.

“I don’t have my knife on me,” I tell her. “If I did I’d fuck you with the handle again before I put my dick in you. Or maybe I’d pin you down and cut my name into your tits. Would you like that?”

She nods, tears falling down her front.

Don't, I want to scream, *stop it*.

I let go of her and stand, rising in the water. "I'll knife you, Tits. I mean it. I'll cut you open, then I'll lie you down and jack off all over you. Cum right where you're bleeding."

She nods, more tears raining down her face and I know she's crying, not just for Alessia but for me. For my broken, fucked-up, blacked out heart. Because she's innocent. Because she's pure. Because somehow, even after everything that's happened to her, she's *still* so sweet it could give you diabetes.

I look into her face and feel something inside me well up. Big and clean as a snowball going downhill. I can't hurt her. Not like this. Maybe not ever. If I could, I would already have done it.

I turn and drive my fist into the water. "Fuck!"

January gives a soft little sob that twists in me like the point of a blade.

"Fuck off!" I repeat. "Fuck you and your pretty fucking face! You can't do this to me!"

Her crying becomes muffled, and I know she's put her face in her hands.

I said she couldn't do this to me.

And yet.

And yet the way she looked at me when I first surfaced... Watching me from the other side of the pool, that soft smile on her perfect puffy lips... I could have died and I'd have been happy to go. I grip my hair in my fists and pull it hard enough to hurt.

I hate it. Feelings. Memories. Hopes and fears. I don't know how to care for anyone let alone a soft, weak, little girl. It's wrong that January lives outside my body. Anything could happen to her there. She could get killed by Parker, the

Baskerville twins could snatch her, her stepmom could pressure her back home and sell her to someone else...

As I drove with Basher to collect January from Dreams I had one thought in my mind—chain her to my workbench and make her regret ever even *imagining* she could get away from me. But now she's here practically begging me to hurt her and I can't. What I want is to surge out of the water and pull her into my arms. Take care of her or something equally stupid.

I turn and look at the girl who's torn me apart. January's not crying. She doesn't have her face in her hands anymore. Instead, she's looking at me with that infinitesimal softness. That sweet fucking sympathy that hurts worse than any hatred. I hold her gaze for a second and my chest cramps up.

"You've broken me," I mumble, letting go of my hair. "You've broken me. You've fucking broken my head."

"I'm sorry," she says quietly. "I'm sorry for everything. I really like you, Domenico."

She said my fucking name again. A tiny smile is playing on her lips. To my fucking horror I feel an answering one spread across my face.

It was an excuse. Hurting her. Locking her up. Punishing her. Just a rationalization to do what I wanted, which was to chain her up in my workshop, so nothing could ever get to her.

But you're not supposed to lock girls in cages. Not when you like them.

My arms twitch, and I want to punch something hard enough to break my own bones. Instead, I take a step back into the depths of the pool.

"I'm going to swim," I tell her. "Don't you fucking go anywhere. This isn't over."

She should look scared. Cry again. At least look pissed. Instead, she smiles at me as though she knows every single thought I've ever had. "Okay, Domenico."

I shake my head, amazed and pissed at about a million other things. “You’re a fucking brat.”

Her smile fades. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I wish you were more of one. That way I might be able to fucking hurt you.”

Before I can see her reaction, I plunge back into the water.

I thought I was pretty burned out from swimming before, but I tear through the pool like it’s silk, ripping the water to shreds. Soon my breathing is ragged and my lungs ache but I keep going, pushing harder and faster. Purging myself of my rage. I’m not a man who believes lies when the truth is staring me in the face.

And the truth is I don’t want to hurt January Whitehall. I can’t fucking hurt January Whitehall. She’s too beautiful. She’s too mine. I might want to slap her ass and make her cry around my cock, but actually cause her pain? Inflict revenge on her for the horror she put me through? I don’t have that in me. I gave it my best shot and I failed. Now I need to rearrange the world. Figure out how to live in a place where an eighteen-year-old Manhattan princess has so much fucking power over me.

When the last of my energy runs down and my limbs feel like concrete, I surface again. January is right where she was, staring patiently into the water.

“Hi,” she says shyly and gives me a little wave.

Again, I feel the strange churning contradiction. I want to hurt her for being able to hurt me. I want to wrap her up in clouds and keep her safe forever. I do neither. Instead I watch as she slides her long smooth legs back into the water.

My cock gives a hard throb at the thought of them wrapped around my hips. That might be a good compromise. If I can’t chain her up and I have no idea what I’m doing, then I want to finish what we started on the motel couch. It was hell watching her sleep last night, all her soft sighs as she rolled around. My cock has been hard all day thinking about it. And

I've been nothing but a prick to her, but she still said she liked me. So the odds of me getting some compensatory action are good.

I rise out of the water and let her get a look at my chest. "You lonely or something, Tits?"

Her hand rises to her cleavage. She acts like she hates the name but whenever I call her that, she gets a blush down her cheeks and right into those flawless tits.

"I'm not lonely," she says. "I just don't know what I'm doing. It feels like a hundred things have happened and I don't have brain space to put them anywhere."

So, she came and found me and watched me swim. Another good sign she wants my dick. I'm about to point that out when her big green eyes fill with tears. I get that duct-tape feeling in my chest again. "Tits..."

"Sorry," she says, wiping her eyes. "I know I don't have anything to cry about. I've been rescued and your sister is still gone and poor Emilia is with *him*."

For a second I have no idea who Emilia is, then I remember the redhead getting her tit squeezed in Parker's video. "Yeah. Her."

I have no idea what to say about Emilia. Velvet House has been watching Parker for seventeen years and there's been a long line of corpse girlfriends. With the pressure we're putting on him, the redhead'll be lucky if she sees Christmas. Another woman dead because of Parker. Which means, because of me.

I stare into the rippling green water. Three years ago, when Morelli finally okayed us to kill Parker, I pushed for torturing him first. Adriano could have shot him between the eyes from a mile away, but I wanted bloody, ugly revenge. I wanted to run his business off the rails, to clip off his fingers with bolt cutters, to fuck his fiancée right in front of him. If I'd kept my head, he'd be gone. Alessia avenged. Emilia free. January Whitehall safe.

And now I'm supposed to sign a contract and let him keep fucking up other people's lives the way he fucked up mine?

"Doc? Are you okay?"

She looks at me with more concern than I've ever shown anyone. Maybe that's why she fucks with my head. She's nice. She might be the first actually nice person to exist.

"I'm fine. Sorry about your Zia. She shouldn't have gone like that."

More tears roll down her cheeks. "No, but at least she was unconscious. She always said that's how she wanted to die."

"She said that?"

January smiles. "All the time."

"Well, she was an old Italian broad."

"She was." January dips a gentle hand in the water as though to touch me. "I'm really sorry Mr. Parker killed Alessia, Nico."

Everything inside me goes still. "What did you call me?"

Her shoulders creep to her ears. "I don't know. I feel weird saying Doc sometimes. And if you don't want to be called Domenico, I could maybe call you Nico? It's shorter and it's nice."

My insides feel like I've eaten a bunch of butterflies. God fucking dammit what's wrong with me? I liked it better when I wanted to lock her up and breed her. "You can call me whatever you like, Tits. Name-calling's a two-way street."

She makes a 'whatever' face and even that makes my chest go all fluttery. I shove the feeling aside. "Thanks for what you said about Alessia... or whatever, but you're not allowed to feel sorry for me."

She blinks back more tears. "But I *am* sorry, Nico."

"Huh."

I tread water a couple of feet from her and think about what's coming next. Once Morelli's done with Parker, he's going to move onto the topic of who January belongs to. I know him well enough to guess how his mind will work. He won't want us to keep fighting over her. Some kind of share-January compromise is on the horizon, which means I won't be able to have her to myself. I'm not opposed to keeping her for all four of us, but I'll be damned if that sleazy fuck Morelli thinks he's getting a kid out of the first woman who ever made me feel this way. Or if Basher thinks he can marry her. I'll cut off his ring finger first.

“Do you think Eli will let me stay here?”

I glance up at January. “You mean... live at Velvet House?”

“Yeah.”

I laugh. “You try to leave and find out what happens. There's no other life for you now. You're ours.”

Color floods her face. She's practically glowing. “I don't even know what that means.”

“It means you're ours.”

She looks down at her hands, her cheeks and forehead brick red.

“Do you like that?”

She makes a gesture that could be a nod or just an embarrassed little twitch. That's better than an outright no. Judging by her body language, she wants to say yes, even if she can't admit it. I smile up at the green tiled ceiling. She ran away, but she would have missed us. And maybe she wouldn't have come back to us by choice, but she would have regretted it for the rest of her life. She is ours and when all the Parker bullshit is over, we can figure out some way to share her sexy little body. I just want her to be mine first. I want her virgin cunt. Which means it's high time to salt the earth, as far as my competition is concerned.

I know she's got a crush on Bobby, and she's all googly-eyed for Morelli, and Adriano took her to see her Zia, but she almost fucked me on that scratchy motel couch and she's right here with me now. I swim closer. "Remember before you ran away, you were gonna be our little servant girl? Suck us off and serve us dinner?"

She turns her face away. "That's not true."

"It's pretty true. But that was back when you couldn't be seen in public because we kidnapped you. But now your name is gonna be cleared—"

"How will my name be cleared?"

I ignore her. "Things have changed. Which means you need to decide who's gonna be filling out your dance card around here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, believe it or not, Tits, the four of us generally don't make a rule of sharing pussy the way we've been quadrupling up on yours."

It's a lie, I've been looking forward to running a train on January Whitehall since the day she showed up at Velvet House, but when she's nervous she pays more attention.

January's eyes go wide. "I don't... I couldn't..."

"Sure," I say, cutting off her puritanical sputtering. "Who do you think's the better cherry picker? Me or Bobby—"

"*What!?*"

"—you need to choose a removalist for those V plates, Tits. Your options are me, Bobby the love bug, Richie Rich, or Freddy Krueger. That's it."

She stares at me like I'm talking Greek.

"Lemme give you a hand. If you choose Bobby, he's gonna drag you off to Ohio and keep you barefoot in his homestead. And there'll probably be pigs nearby."

January nibbles her lower lip. Bad sign. She's into the whole farm boy fantasy.

"Here's the thing about Bobby," I say. "He's terrible at fucking. Just ask his ex-wife."

January's face falls. "Bobby's been married?"

No.

"Yup. Actually, he still might be. I don't think the papers've come through. Something about FedEx prices..."

January looks like someone's punched her in the stomach. I kick back in the water so she can see my nice, never-been-married body. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Tits."

"Why did he and his wife break up?"

"I dunno. She did mention him not being able to fuck her because he couldn't stop thinking about baseball scores..."

"Oh my gosh!"

"Yeah," I say sympathetically. "And Morelli's no better. I mean, his dick works allegedly, but he's cheated on every girlfriend he's ever had. Six months in and he starts telling them he's at work when he's off dicking some fashion week model. He wouldn't be my choice for a first time, probably riddled with venereal disease."

January looks at her folded hands. She had no trouble believing that one. Morelli's a dumb fuck for approaching her with all that mistress bullshit. Practically salted the earth for himself.

"Then there's Adriano..."

Her head jerks up. "Are you guys going to punish him for taking me to the hospital?"

I could joke about tying him to a chair and spanking him but she doesn't seem to be in a joking mood. "Not really. We'll probably fine him and give him shitty jobs for the next year."

"That's all?"

“What were you expecting? That we’d cut off his toes?”

“No, I just... everyone seemed so mad at him.”

I float on my back, splashing lazily. “Adriano’s family and family gets one decent fuck-up per decade.”

She smiles. “That’s kinda nice. In a mean way.”

I mentally pull the wings off the butterflies in my stomach. “You wanna know something mean about Adriano, January Joy? He’s obsessed with your pretty pink pussy.”

The girl almost slides into the pool. “Nico! Don’t talk like that!”

More puritanical bullshit, but I don’t get a *‘I’m gonna put a chair behind the door so Adriano can’t come in and fuck me tonight’* vibe from her. She’s into him. Fucking Adriano. He’s put in a lot of groundwork, watching her ballet classes, and taking her to see her Zia. She might think he’s the only one who really understands her, which is fucking delusional. Adriano’s a mute, old-school nutcase who’d amputate anyone who tried to buy her a Coke, but January doesn’t know that. I’m gonna have to work to put this dark horse down.

“You like Adriano, don’t you, Tits?”

Her hand shoots to her hair. “No! He’s super scary.”

“Yeah, but you like that. The ‘creepy pervert panting after the virgin’ thing.”

“If you’re going to be gross, I’ll get up and leave.”

“Okay, I’ll play nice. But you should know Adriano’s got a nasty little habit.”

“Didn’t *you* used to sell pills?”

I laugh. “I’m not talking about drugs. I mean Rossi’s choked five girls to death in as many years. More, if you include vacations.”

“He has not!”

“He didn’t *mean* to. It’s a sex thing. He gets carried away and *pfft*.”

January clasps her throat. “You’re lying.”

“Has Adriano ever choked you, Tits?”

She stares into the pool, perhaps recalling the many times Adriano Rossi has put his hands around her neck.

The best lies have truth in them. Adriano *does* have a thing for choking and the fact he hasn’t killed a girl, doesn’t mean he wouldn’t. Let’s see the scarfaced fuck mope his way into taking January’s virginity when she’s terrified he’ll crush her windpipe when he nuts.

“So, has he choked you?” I press.

“I... Yes. A little bit, I guess.”

“Yeah, you wanna watch out for that. Breath-play’ll kill ya.”

I swim away and complete a few laps, giving my bombshells time to sink in. When I get back to January, her cute face is all suspicious. “You’re making out like you’re the only choice for my first time, aren’t you?”

I spread my arms wide. “What can I say? We look good together.”

“I don’t want to be with someone for the first time just because it looks good.”

“I know, Tits. That’s what I like about you. You’ve got a big heart to go along with that big rack.”

Her mouth falls open. “You’re such a jerk!”

“Yeah.”

She gives me an adorably skeptical look. “Have you ever even had a girlfriend?”

I go to say ‘sure’ but the lie won’t come. Something about the shrewd look on her face stops me in my tracks. “Uh, not really. No.”

Her smile is one I've never seen before. Sly, almost wicked. "You've never been in a relationship?"

"Neither have you."

"I was engaged." Her smile grows wider. "So, you have no boyfriend experience?"

"Nope," I say, swimming up to her. "You can mold me into whatever you like."

She glares down at me, her tits straining against her dress. If she wants to wait to fuck me, I guess I'll live, but I'm gonna be putting my dick between those things every night 'till I'm in her pussy. I push my wet hair out of my eyes. "In all seriousness, Tesorina. You should throw that ass back for me."

She rolls her eyes. "I'll think about it."

"Thanks," I tap her thigh. "Want me to eat you out by the side of the pool?"

Her legs snap together like magnets.

I laugh. "It's cute how much of a prude you are."

"I am *not* a prude."

"True. When I railed you with my knife handle, you came so hard, you fucked up the springs."

She covers her face with her hands. "I hate you."

The way she says it plucks at me like a guitar string. "Yeah, but you love me too."

I expect her to deny it. After all, an hour ago I was terrifying the bitch, but she doesn't.

The pool door swings open. It's Bobby, still in his country boy shirt and slacks. We lock eyes and my smile dies. The meeting with Bianchi must be over, the preliminary contract arranged. Funny how easy it is to forget the outside world when I'm with January.

"What?" I demand.

Bobby ignores me and walks toward January. “How are you?”

Her smile is reserved. “Good, thanks.”

I smirk. My lie about him being married is already putting out roots. Maybe I can convince her he’s only into teenagers next. That’s the kind of thing you can’t deny without looking like even more of a pedo. Then again, I don’t want to put that idea in her head. She might think *I* only want her because she’s barely legal when she could be forty-five and I’d still be gunning for her.

“How did your meeting go?” January asks.

Bobby sits cross-legged beside her. “Okay. Eli’s coming to talk to you both about it.”

My head throbs like a bruise. I dive, letting the water rush the thoughts out of my brain. And there, underwater an idea comes. It’s fully formed down to the final details. A way to have everything I want. Parker dead. January safe. Alessia avenged. It’ll mean bending some rules and breaking my brothers’ trust but as I just told January, family gets one decent fuck-up per decade.

I keep swimming until I sense Morelli’s arrival. I surface and we eye each other, me in the water and Morelli by the door in his three-piece suit.

Reckless asshole, his eyes say.

Entitled prick, I think.

Nothing’s changed. We’ve been looking at each other this way since we were kids. Morelli’s the white king, I’m the black. We’re part of the same chess set but too similar and too different to co-exist comfortably.

“Negotiation around the contract has begun,” Eli says. “We have two weeks.”

“Two weeks to do what?” January asks.

She looks nervous, like she's expecting Morelli to tell her to shut up. But he just smiles at her. "Your ex-fiancé has agreed to discuss a peaceful resolution to our conflict. Until we finalize the details, there's a truce. He will not contact you and we will not confront him."

January half-collapses onto Bobby's shoulder. "Does that mean I might not have to marry him?"

"You *won't* have to marry him," Eli says. "Once the contract is signed, he'll never come near you again."

From Morelli's expression it's far from that simple, but he won't tell January that. But it doesn't matter. This contract's not going to happen because during this truce, I am going to fly to Vegas, invade the Palm Casino and murder Parker.

"What's a contract?" January asks. "How does it work?"

Morelli paces the edge of the pool, his shoes clicking on the tiles. "I don't know that it's appropriate for you to hear this, *bella*."

"Please?"

He sighs. "I will say this once. Afterward I want no further discussions. An innocent girl should not be occupied with such things."

"Yes, Mr. Morelli," January says, her eyes wide as marbles.

I manage not to mime throwing up.

Eli resumes his pacing. "In the world Velvet House and your ex-fiancé occupy, there are rules—limitations. A man, or an organization, can't go around doing whatever they want or they'll be held accountable by larger, more powerful forces. Do you understand?"

"There's like... a mafia police?"

I laugh at the look on Morelli's face. He hates talking about *la famiglia*.

“Something like that, Tits,” I say. “Morelli’s gone to the head of a big New York family. He’ll broker an agreement between us and Parker and once it’s in place, it can’t be reneged.”

January goes still as she absorbs what we’ve told her. I like that about her, the way she quietly processes things.

“If Mr. Parker agrees to let me go under this contract, what does he get?”

Morelli’s brows pull together. “We won’t kill him. Now or at any point in the future.”

January presses her hands to her pretty face, and I can tell Bobby and Morelli are thinking they’ve made the right choice. And maybe they have. It’s just not the choice I’ve made.

“What happens if Mr. Parker breaks the contract?” January asks.

“He dies,” Morelli says flatly.

“And we’d get his assets,” Bobby adds. “His buildings, his businesses. His money.”

“All of it?”

I look into the wavering green water. If I had time, I could bait Parker into kicking January or something so we could lay our hands on his money *and* have the Bianchis waste him. But I’m not going to fuck with a contract. I’ve got two week’s ceasefire to kill Parker while everyone hammers out the details. I’ll hit up the girls at Dreams and find a dancer with a friend at the Palm Casino. Then I’ll dig up my Michael Shore passport and take a commercial flight to Vegas. I’ll drink in the same bars as Parker until he goes to take a piss somewhere and I’ll garrotte him. Easy as pie.

“So, once the contract is in place, all is resolved,” Morelli says. “Soon Parker will be gone from your life forever.”

“Here’s hoping,” I say.

January lets out a laugh. “I can’t believe this is real.”

Bobby lays his hand on top of hers. “You’ll be free. You can go anywhere.”

She smiles, but subtly slides her hand away. “Mr. Pa—*you know*, still has my passport.”

Morelli pulls out his phone. “I’ll put that on the list of things he’ll be returning when the contract’s signed.”

“That’s amazing. God, I have no idea what I’ll do when I’m free. See my family, I guess?”

She looks around at us as though asking permission.

“You can,” Bobby says. “Your sister, your brothers. Your, uh, stepmom, I guess?”

January’s smile dims. “My stepmom gave him my passport.”

Bobby scowls and even Morelli breaks his tall, dark and serious routine to bare his teeth. I watch hurt ripple across January’s face like wind on a lake and I want to commit homicide. If it was just the two of us alone, I’d offer to kill her stepmother, and looking at Morelli, I know he feels the same way. Both of us know something about clingy, abusive mothers, and Corinne Whitehall is going to be a millstone around January’s neck for as long as she’s alive.

“*Bella*,” Morelli says. “You’re eighteen. Your stepmother can try to manipulate you, but she’s no longer your legal guardian. Which means you don’t have to see her.”

January brushes a tear from her cheek. “But since my marriage didn’t happen, the money will have stopped coming.”

“Cry me a fucking river,” I say. “Maybe your stepmother can sell one of her ten-thousand-dollar dresses.”

Bobby shoots me a dirty look. “Your stepmom will be fine, JJ. She can always remarry.”

“She always said she wouldn’t. That once was enough.”

“That’s fucking charming, considering what she did to you,” I say.

January looks like I slapped her. Bobby puts an arm around her. “Enough, Doc.”

I splash water at him.

January gives a gulping sob. “Eli, can I please ask you a favor?”

My stomach goes cold. She wants to move back home, go to another country, to get Archie Baskerville’s number—

“Can I live here for a little while? Just while I figure out what to do?”

All three of us laugh, our voices bouncing off the water and the green tiles.

“What?” January asks, confused.

“*Bella*, you are living here,” Morelli says. “It’s not a question.”

“Oh, thank you.” She frowns. “But I can go, right? I’m not...?”

“We’re no longer holding you prisoner,” Morelli says lightly. “Soon, we’ll sign the contract and get your passport back and you’ll be able to properly consider your future.”

“I... what do you mean?”

“Well,” Morelli says slowly. “Whether you’d like to go to school or work or... anything else.”

January stares into the water, seemingly lost in the possibilities. Morelli toes off his oxfords and rolls up his suit pants. I watch as he sits on January’s right dangling his feet in the water. Bobby is still on her left, his thigh pressed against her. A tension fills the grotto, but a nice tension. I kick back and watch the three of them. My friends, my rivals, and this infuriating perfect girl. I picture Adriano, upstairs cracked out on pain medication. We’re together again. Under one roof if not physically close. The thought unknots something tight

between my ribs. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, sharing a girl. God knows we're together all the time, devil's threesomes are hot and no matter what happens we're never going to find another January Joy Whitehall.

Morelli turns to her and gives her one of his fuck-me smiles. "I don't want to put any pressure on you, but there's another aspect of your future you need to consider."

"What do you mean?"

"The four of us are interested in you, and you're obviously interested in us."

January ducks her head. "I... I don't know."

"You are," Morelli says. "And since you're no longer our captive, you need to understand your position in this household has changed."

She stares wordlessly at him.

"We're willing to be patient with you," Morelli explains. "But you need to get used to the idea that you belong to all of us."

"All of you? But I thought you wanted me to choose?"

Eli and Bobby exchange glances. Bobby's hand slides onto January's leg. "You don't need to stress out about this right now, baby. You're tired and you've got a lot on your mind."

"But..." January looks from him to me. "You can't want to share me all the time, I mean, what would that even look like?"

Bobby, Morelli and I hold eye contact for a moment. It's not going to be easy, winning January over. But if anyone can do it, I can. And these other assholes too, I guess.

"It would look like you being the obedient little girl you are," Morelli says. "Beyond that, we would make our plans as we go along."

"But what about you wanting a wife?" January asks Morelli. "What about having kids and me not being good

enough and—”

Morelli takes her hand. “I was a fool. I dearly regret ever saying—”

I whistle. “Hey. Monologue on your own time. This is the group audition.”

Morelli shoots me a dirty look but drops January’s hand. “*Bella*, I’ll take you to dinner tonight and we’ll discuss this further.”

He looks at me, daring me to contradict him, but I don’t. I’m glad he’s taking January out first. She’s so tired and traumatized all she’ll do is cry into her linguini.

“Okay,” January says shyly. “Will it be like... a date?”

“Of sorts.” Morelli’s phone rings. He pulls it out and makes a face. “I need to go.” He kisses January’s cheek. “I’ll see you tonight, Miss Whitehall. Dress beautifully.”

January, Bobby and I watch as he pulls his legs from the pool, grabs his shoes and answers the call. “Good morning, Patrizio, yes, I read your amendments, and I think...”

He walks away, leaving the pool door ajar.

“There he goes,” I tell January. “First rule of being our girl, Tits? Prepare to be ditched for business calls on an extremely regular basis.”

January frowns. “But you can’t really... I mean we’re not actually all going to date are we?”

“Sure,” I say. “We’ll date you.”

She looks even more shocked. “*You* want to take me on a date?”

No. I wanted her crying in chains and Parker’s brains all over the Vegas floor show. But if I’ve learned anything against my will it’s that you have to compromise in this life.

“I want your virginity. If I have to buy you a few ice cream cones and let my friends watch, that’s a price I can pay.”

Bobby makes a face like he's going to yak and I mentally give him the finger.

"I don't think..." January begins.

"What, baby?" Bobby says in his simplest tone. "Whatever you want to tell me you can."

"Well, um... I think that while we're dating... um, you guys know how I'm still a virgin?"

I grin. "We sure do."

"Okay, then I think that I shouldn't sleep with any of you, while we're getting to know each other. Or whatever this is."

Bobby's face falls.

"Okay, but can we fuck you when we're all together?" I ask. "Like a time-out?"

January looks at Bobby as though expecting him to tell me off. He raises his eyebrows. "Can we?"

"No!"

"Goddammit." I swipe the water.

"No sex," January says firmly, pulling her legs from the pool. "Not for anyone."

"Where are you going," I ask. "This was just getting interesting."

"Maybe for you it was. I'm going to get something to eat."

I smirk. "I could eat."

She frowns. "You said you wouldn't hit on me!"

"No, I fucking didn't."

She gives me a small smile and leaves. I watch her go, her ass swaying in her tight dress. My anger at her re-abduction is still rippling inside me, a rage and resentment I couldn't swim off if I stayed in the pool all year but there's something else too. The knowledge that she's safe, that she's mine, that she's all of ours.

It gives me a weightlessness that has nothing to do with water.



CHAPTER EIGHT

January Whitehall

I CHECK MY teeth in the mirror before I leave for the dining room. I've put on dark crimson lipstick, and I want to look pretty for my date—or whatever it is—with Eli. I'm wearing a long gold dress I found in the closet and I've piled my hair on top of my head. I'm a little overdone, but Eli told me to 'dress beautifully' and I've never seen him in anything but a suit, so at least we'll match.

I tuck Zia's St. Christopher under my dress strap and make sure it's firmly in place. When I figure out how to access my savings, I'll buy a gold chain and wear it around my neck. Eli's ruby collar sparkles accusingly at me from the top of the dresser. It would look lovely with this dress, but I'm scared that wearing it will send the wrong message while I try to figure out what I'm doing with these four men. I still can't believe that all of the Velvet House boys want to be with me. That it's a possibility they would even entertain.

And yet from the start they've always felt like a unit to me. Like they belong together. Whether I belong with them, I'm less sure of.

I'm attracted to each of them, but they've also hurt me. Badly. And how am I supposed to keep any of these vicious men in line? Although if I didn't have to choose between them, I suppose they'd keep each other in line. Like Eli does with Doc and Bobby does with Adriano. Maybe it would be easy to have four boyfriends.

You're so greedy, a voice in my head snarls. You're a nasty little slut.

It sounds like my stepmother. God, if she knew what I was thinking about... Then again, she gave Mr. Parker my passport. After that kind of betrayal, she shouldn't be allowed to take up space in my mind. I give my hair a last pat and leave the bedroom. I make my way through the mansion, catching glimpses of my reflection in the darkened windows. I look different. Older and more serious.

I shouldn't be surprised. The last few weeks have been like an escalator, moving fast and taking me with it. I've done nothing but look around and go *'oh no!'* but the pressure and new experiences must have changed me all the same. Shaped me into someone I couldn't have been if I'd stayed in my stepmom's house.

My palms itch as I enter the dining room and find not only Eli, but Doc and Bobby sitting at the table, deep in conversation. There are laptops and glasses of red wine in front of each of them and I hover in the doorway feeling silly. "Hi, everyone."

Eli gets to his feet. "January. You're ready."

Bobby and Doc stand too. The way they're looking at me makes me feel like I did my makeup properly.

"You look incredible," Bobby says.

"Yeah, thirteen out of ten." Doc jerks his head at Eli. "You sure you wanna go out with this clown?"

"Enough," Eli says. "This is my time with January. Leave."

I expect them to refuse, but Doc swaggers out of the room without so much as a snarky comment—although he does wink at me. Bobby lingers over the table packing his laptop into a leather bag. Looking at it, a thought occurs to me. "Bobby, could I maybe borrow a computer?"

Bobby glances at Eli and a look passes between them.

“I won’t talk to anyone if you guys don’t want me to,” I add quickly. “I just want to check my bank account and organize things now I’m... Now things have changed.”

“Sure,” Bobby says carefully. “I’ll have a laptop on your bed when you get home.”

“Great.”

He flashes me a smile. “We’re going on a date tomorrow by the way. Nice and early. You’ll have to wear sneakers and jeans.”

“Oh.” I glance at Eli, who smiles benignly. “You’re not worried are you, *bella*? I told you we intend to share you.”

The way he purrs the word ‘share’ makes my face heat. “I, um, whatever you think. I don’t mind.”

Eli gives me a slow look up and down. “I’m glad to hear it, but that’s tomorrow. Right now, Bobby has to leave.”

I watch as my former math tutor crams the last of his things into his bag and exits without another word. Why are the guys all being so calm and respectful? And why will I need to wear sneakers on a date with Bobby? I don’t know if I have any. My entire East Wing wardrobe seems to be high heels and tiny dresses.

Eli extends a hand to me. He’s wearing a navy suit and a blindingly white shirt. It makes his amber eyes so intense it’s hard to look at them. I place my hand in his and tingles shoot up my arm. I decide whatever happens tonight, I’m going to pretend this isn’t a trick and Eli Morelli really does want me. That all of this is real.

Eli weaves his fingers through mine and steers me toward the entrance hall. “You look perfect, Miss Whitehall.”

“Thanks. Do you... do you pick out all the clothes in my room?”

He gives me a small smile. “No.”

“But you seem to like everything I wear, and it all fits me so well...?”

“That’s because I gave your measurements to some girls I know at Saks,” he says promptly. “They’re more than happy to spend my money.”

“Oh.”

I don’t know why I’m so disappointed. I’m sure Eli doesn’t have time to pick out dresses. But if he did, it would seem like he was thinking of me. Now it just seems like he’s sleeping with the staff at Saks.

I see a liquid black limousine parked in the circular driveway. “Are we...?”

“Of course,” Eli says.

I move to the passenger door, but he puts a hand on my waist. “One moment.”

I wait as the chauffeur gets out from the driver’s side, tips his hat to Eli, then opens the passenger door for us. As we settle into our seats, Eli catches my eye. “You think I’m too formal, don’t you, *bella*?”

“No,” I lie.

“It’s fine. You’re not thinking anything Doc hasn’t told me.” He gives me a smile that makes my insides twirl.

“Do you know what a hedonist is?” Eli asks.

“Not really.”

“It means I like luxurious things and I make no excuses for that. It’s what drew me to you.”

“Me?” I ask, confused. I’ve been described as a lot of things, but never ‘luxurious.’

“Yes.” Eli studies me. “Beauty is everywhere, but it’s rare to discover something flawless. Something that grows even more fascinating the longer you’re in its presence.”

My mind whirls. Does he mean me or is he just being charming? Eli draws a bottle of wine from a nearby ice bucket. “Champagne?”

“Yes, please.”

I watch as he expertly peels off the foil and extracts the cork, pouring us glasses of sparkling wine. He hands me a delicate flute then taps his glass to mine. “To your freedom, *bella*.”

I sip the champagne. It fizzes in my throat like melted gold and as warmth spreads in my belly I feel something close to euphoria. Once upon a time, all I hoped was that Mr. Parker would be nice to me. Now, I’m in a limousine with the most handsome man I’ve ever seen, who I think just called *me* ‘flawless.’

I give Eli a goofy smile and to my surprise, he grins back. “It’s good to see you so happy.”

“It’s amazing to be happy. Thank you for arranging my contract.”

Eli’s face hardens. “You’re welcome, but now isn’t the time to discuss things like that.”

My spine stiffens. “I’m sorry, Mr. Morelli.”

Eli instantly relaxes. “Thank you for saying sorry.”

It’s not a sexy sentence, but the way he’s looking at me, it’s like I’m taking my underwear off in front of him. My stomach gives a bright squiggle. “What should we talk about?”

Eli leans close and I smell his faint lavender cologne. “Your lipstick is *bellissimo*.”

“Thanks. I remembered you like red.”

“I do.” He rubs a thumb gently across my lower lip and my skin tingles.

“You’ve made it impossible to kiss you,” he says in a low voice.

Eli wants to kiss me? I said ‘no sex,’ but kissing isn’t sex and if he leans in I don’t think I could stop myself from kissing him back.

Eli takes the champagne flute from my hand and sets it aside, his amber eyes gleaming. “We shouldn’t, *bella*.”

“I know.”

“We really... really shouldn’t.”

I don’t know what comes over me, but I part my lips, practically begging him to make a move. Then he does.

Eli Morelli kisses like it’s art. His tongue slides into my mouth, and I feel luxurious. Like all the champagne and silk dresses and pretty suits aren’t as fancy as the way he’s kissing me. My breathing goes shallow and my nipples go hard and soon I’m arching my body against his, practically begging for more but all he does is kiss me. And when I’m so turned on I’m panting, the limousine pulls to a stop and Eli backs away. “We’re here.”

I almost scream. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” He gives a shocked laugh. “*Bella*... your face.”

I raise a hand to my chin. “Is my lipstick ruined?”

I can already tell it is. It’s all over Eli. Not only his mouth but his chin and cheeks. There’s even some on his neck.

“Oh no!” I lean forward and try to wipe it away, but he gently restrains me. “Don’t worry, I came prepared.”

He pulls a pack of baby wipes from a side cabinet and proceeds to remove all the lipstick from his face while I sit feeling like a complete dork. When he’s done, he pulls out his phone and checks his reflection. “Perfect, now do you want to see yourself?”

“No,” I say, but he shows me anyway. My face is covered in stains and my makeup is ruined. I press a palm to my cheek. “Wherever we are, I can’t go inside!”

“Of course, you can.” Eli holds out the wipes. “First, use these.”

Miserable, I scrub away the red stains and remove the last of my lipstick.

“Now, you use this.” Eli pulls a pale pink something from the cabinet. A handbag with interlocking C’s on the front.

I gasp. “Is that...?”

“It might be.” He hands me the baby pink Chanel bag. “For you.”

I stroke the soft leather. It feels like a cloud. “Eli, thank you...”

“Open it.”

Inside the bag is a tube of Urban Decay lipstick. It’s redder than the one I had on, but it’ll work. I fake glare at him. “You tricked me into ruining my makeup just to save the day, didn’t you?”

“Perhaps. But you look just as beautiful barefaced.” Eli holds up his phone, the camera focused on me. “Here is your magic mirror.”

I reapply my lipstick and pretend not to notice the way Eli stares hungrily at me, pretend it doesn’t make heat pool between my legs. When my lips are as glossy as they were before, I put the gold cap back on the tube. “Are we still going on our date?”

My voice comes out all silky, as though I’m teasing Eli. His dark brows shoot up and for a second, I think he’s going to pull me into his arms and kiss me again. Instead, he pushes open the limo door. “You’re too tempting for your own good, Miss Whitehall. Hold on to your new purse and let’s go.”

I step out of the limo and see a tiny restaurant dotted with fairy lights. The wide windows show a dozen beautiful people eating pasta in a warmly lit interior. The sight makes my insides shift. This place could have been pulled directly from my childhood fantasies of owning a restaurant.

Eli slides a hand around my waist. “Do you know where we are?”

I shake my head.

“I thought maybe you would, being such a gourmand. This is Argyle.”

I gasp. “My stepmom came here!”

Eli scowls. “Your stepmother is another topic we will avoid this evening.”

I nod. I don’t want to talk about her either.

A young host almost chokes at the sight of Eli. “Mr. Morelli, welcome, welcome. Please follow me to your table.”

He leads us to the dining room where the scent of roasting pork makes my mouth water. The wooden tables are even more cramped from inside the restaurant. Is it difficult for big people to eat without hitting everyone around them with their elbows? Adriano couldn’t do it. But to my surprise, we don’t stop at one of the tiny tables, but continue up a flight of narrow stairs into a separate room. It’s almost as large as the dining hall below but there’s just one table, laid for two.

Eli removes his jacket as the host pulls out my chair. I hover awkwardly, unsure what’s happening. Just beyond the room is a balcony covered in winding green vines and white roses, like something out of *Romeo and Juliet*.

“Sit, January,” Eli urges. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“Um, sure?”

I take my chair as Eli sits across from me and turns to the waiter. “Please bring a bottle of Sangiovese Fresco.”

“Very good, Mr. Morelli.”

The host rushes away and Eli’s gaze finds mine. “Alone again, *bella*.”

With his dark hair shining in the candlelight, he reminds me of a panther, sleek and pretty. He looks like you could curl up into his side and cuddle him, but if you did, he'd eat you. I need to remember that.

“How come there's no one else here?” I ask.

“Because I reserved a private dining room.”

I've never eaten in a private dining room. “Are we...? Do we order downstairs? Is there a menu?”

“No. At Argyle, you eat what they bring you. You don't have to do anything but sit and look pretty.”

The host returns with the bottle of wine and a wooden board of warm bread and salted butter. He unfolds my napkin and lays it across my lap, and I feel Eli watching him closely. What would he do if the host touched my legs? Slap him? Demand that I come and sit in his lap instead? It seems like something he would do.

I think of the time he made me give him a blow job while he smoked a cigar, and the memory makes me shiver. After all I've been through, I shouldn't be so attracted to danger and meanness, but it's all I can think about. To distract myself, I sip my wine. It's rich and dark and perfectly suited to the evening.

“Now,” Eli says when the host leaves again. “Tell me about your friends.”

I frown. “What friends?”

“Your bridesmaids, your cousins, your friends from school. Any of them. All of them.”

“W-why?”

“Because I'm interested.” He gestures at me with his wineglass. “Go on.”

“Um, my sister Margot and I have always been pretty close...?”

Eli smiles encouragingly.

“...We’re, um, different though. She got expelled from school when she was sixteen and I was so jealous because I couldn’t imagine ever doing something that bad.”

“And what did she do?”

I’m still telling the story of Margot and the field hockey captain when the first course arrives. A charred leek soup dotted with garnet pomegranate oil and stracciatella. I try to eat and talk without spilling the delicate soup on myself.

“...so, Margot bribed the science teacher not to tell anyone what she was doing and she had to keep buying him weed until she graduated,” I finish.

Eli laughs. “Margot sounds like my sister. A born troublemaker.”

“A little bit,” I say defensively. “But she’s very sweet.”

“Well, she is your sister. So, who’s next? What about your bridesmaids? What are they like?”

“Are you sure you—”

“I won’t reassure you again,” Eli says sharply. “I’m asking because I want to know.”

And so, I tell him about Giuseppina, Darcy, and Quinn. I keep to the most interesting details, like how Darcy’s dad is a music producer and Giuseppina once catfished an NYPD detective. As I’m talking, the host returns with plates of swordfish, sprinkled with saffron and mandarin segments.

Eli refills my wine, and urges me to keep talking. By the time I’m done telling him about my cousins, the host has served handmade garganelli with roasted pancetta and aged parmigiano.

“I feel bad,” I say to Eli. “I’ve been talking so much, I don’t think I’ve been appreciating the food.”

He smiles. “Then why don’t I tell you about my family for this course?”

“Sure,” I say a little nervous. The only thing I know about Eli’s family is that his mom and dad had an ugly separation. But Eli doesn’t talk about divorce. Instead he tells me about his childhood running wild in Naples, about his Nonno and Zias and Zios and cousins. I’m free to listen and laugh and enjoy my meal and by the time dessert comes, Georgia peaches soaked in dark rum, I’m tipsy on wine and because Eli and I are actually having fun.

As I lick chocolate semifreddo from my spoon, I think of Doc and Bobby and Adriano. As much as I’m enjoying myself, I want everyone to be here, laughing and telling jokes the way we did when I made brodo. Will we ever all go on a date? Or is that too weird, even for Velvet House?

“Miss Whitehall?”

I look up to see Eli refilling my wine. “Yes?”

“You interest me.”

I laugh, but Eli doesn’t elaborate. Doesn’t even smile. “And as you’re the most interesting woman I’ve ever met, I’d like to reiterate my desire to bring you into my household and keep you for myself and my brothers.”

I feel a flush creep across my cheeks. “Like a mistress for all of you?”

Eli’s gaze goes cold. “Like a wife to all of us.”

The suggestion, so naked, almost sucks the air from my lungs. For a moment I can almost picture it—the five of us around one table, travelling in one car, sharing Christmases and retiring to the same bedroom to...

But the idea of what might come next snaps me to reality. I try to smile at Eli. “I, um, thought being a Whitehall wasn’t impressive enough for your family? Aren’t I like... beneath you?”

“I’ve changed my mind,” Eli says like it’s set in stone.

“But why?”

“I don’t need to know why. When I discovered you had been taken from the hospital, I knew. You’re a magnificent woman and there is no one for me but you now. And I know the others feel the same way.”

I look but there’s no trace of humor in his eyes. His expression is intense and so lovely, I have to turn away. “Maybe that’s just... fear talking?”

Eli sighs, steepling his long fingers together. “I’m not used to explaining myself. But I will try for you. You’re beautiful, exceptionally beautiful, and I want to be the first man to slide my cock into your pristine cunt...”

I choke on my wine but Eli carries on. “...but more than that, I like the way you think. The day I released you from your cage, you went into my kitchen and cleaned my house and cooked for my men. I don’t understand why you did it, but it fascinated me. I’m not someone who sees a lot of new things, but you... you are new to me.”

He looks at me as though there’s an obvious response to this that I’m not giving him. “I... appreciate that you can say ‘I released you from your cage’ without it sounding weird...?” I venture.

Eli laughs. “That’s something else. You’re quite funny, *bella*.”

I duck my head.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Surely, you’ve been told this before?”

“Sometimes. I guess Margot and my friends laughed at things I said, but that was mostly because they didn’t make sense.”

“Hmm.” Eli sets his jaw. It makes him look like a forbidding TV show dad and that realization makes another hot squirm go through me.

Our host returns with a tray of espresso and sugar-dusted biscotti. He sets a balloon-sized glass of brandy in front of Eli.

“Would you like anything else, Mr. Morelli?”

“No, thank you,” Eli says, his eyes on me. “We would like to be alone now, Miguel.”

“Of course, sir.”

The host glances at me as he backs away and I notice he’s red in the face. “He must be tired from climbing the stairs all night,” I say.

Eli grins. “I promise I make it worthwhile in tips.”

He picks up his brandy and swirls it into a golden whirlpool. The liquid is the exact same color as his eyes. “Come here, Miss Whitehall.”

“You mean... sit in your lap?”

He nods.

It might be awkward, sitting on his knee like a child, but after all the talking and laughing, the idea seems nice. I select a biscotti and walk to Eli. He pulls me into him, tucking me close. “*Ecco la mia brava bambina.*” *That’s my good girl.*

I sit in his lap and nibble my biscotti. His body is warm at my back. Warm and powerfully hard. Beneath his suit, he’s as muscular as any of the others. I imagine him being bossed around by a gargantuan personal trainer and the thought makes me smile.

Eli strokes my cheek. “There’s that smile again. Are you enjoying yourself?”

I open my mouth to say yes and out of nowhere comes the blank, freckled face of Emilia. Who am I to be having fun with a guy while she’s trapped with Mr. Parker? The biscotti turns to dust in my mouth.

“What is it, *bella*?”

“I am having a good time, but it’s hard to enjoy myself when I remember my Zia and Emilia and Adriano and everything else.”

“I see.”

“Sorry.”

“Do not apologize for being a sweet girl.” Eli presses his nose into the side of my neck. “There is a zen poem. It goes, *‘the clouds above us join and separate, the breeze in the courtyard leaves and returns. Life is like that, so why not relax? Who can stop us from celebrating?’*”

I think on the words Eli just recited. Zia Teresa wouldn’t have said anything like that, but she lived her life that way. Easily. Aware the future could be scary, but never afraid of it. “That’s pretty.”

“It’s true,” Eli says, kissing my cheek. “And now you are smiling. I’ve cured you with my wisdom.”

I laugh. “I’m just amazed to be on a date with a man who quotes poetry.”

“Tease me if you have to, but the poets are right. You can control little in the world, and life isn’t fair. But you do not make it fairer by cursing your bad luck. You accept the present and enjoy as much as you can.”

“It’s that easy?”

“Sometimes.”

I purse my lips, considering. “I never expected you to be so open-minded. Of the four of you guys, you seem the most... strict, I guess.”

Eli’s hands slide down my waist. “That’s because I am. The things I can control, I take great pleasure in controlling. And I meant what I said to you when you were in my cage. You need a father figure.”

“Are you going to marry my stepmom?” I joke.

Eli’s full upper lip jerks to reveal a pointed tooth. “I told you not to speak of that whore.”

A chill goes down my spine. “Sorry.”

He turns my chin so I'm looking back at him. "You need a man to belong to. Someone to care for you and allow you to be the delightfully naïve woman you are. I believe that man is me. Do you agree?"

I stare into the warm depths of his eyes. Part of me does. The rest sees Doc, hovering in emerald water. '*He's cheated on every girlfriend he's ever had.*'

"I... I'm not sure," I say. "I guess it's hard to know what our long-term relationship would look like."

"I'm not going to lie to you, January, I work a lot. And when I'm not working, I source gems for my mother's family and do Muay Thai several times a week..."

That explains the abs.

"...so, I would be away from you for most of the working day, but I would eat dinner with you every night and take you to shows and parties on weekends and you would come with me if I traveled anywhere. And when it's time for us to have children, I'll take a sabbatical to help you care for them."

Cold, heartless Eli Morelli staying at home and helping with the babies? The idea kind of blows my mind. He stares at me, waiting for my response.

"What about the mistress thing?" I blurt. "I don't think I could... I mean I definitely don't want to share, even if that makes me a hypocrite."

"That is not an issue," Eli says calmly. "You alone interest me, *bella*. There will be no one else."

"But what about your parents' marriage and the whole 'let's be realistic' thing?"

"I think it's realistic to say I'll turn you over my knee and spank you every night until I'm dead."

I smile but refuse to be side-tracked. "Doc, um, says you've cheated on all your girlfriends...?"

Eli stiffens. "He *what?*"

“Please don’t be angry.”

“That fucking *cafone*.” Eli lets out a hard breath. “Tell me, do you think he had an ulterior motive in talking to you about my relationships?”

“I know he’s not... honorable—”

“Honorable? He’d spit on an old woman for cigarettes. He’s bitter about your escape and he wants your virginity for himself so he’s corrupting your perception of me. I should slap him in his disrespectful face.”

I don’t say anything. Doc telling me about Eli’s relationship history doesn’t change the fact that it might be true.

“*Bella*,” Eli cups my cheek. “Surely you don’t believe Domenico Valente’s lies?”

“I don’t know,” I say slowly. “You’ve all told me a lot of things. Now you’re telling me that you’re comfortable sharing me among the four of you and being exclusive... It’s just a lot to believe.”

He shifts beneath me. “I won’t lie and say I haven’t made mistakes in the past. When I was a young man, I did stupid things. But I’m not interested in childish relationships. When I say I will be faithful to you, I’m giving you my word.”

“I want to believe you, it’s just...”

He gives another belabored sigh. “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

“Say what?”

“I was wrong. I didn’t believe it was possible to feel this way about someone, to be consumed by them the way I am consumed by you.” He touches my cheek. “You will be my everything, *bella*. My mistress, my wife, my whore, and my princess.”

My insides go all melty and I turn like a flower towards the sun, lifting my mouth to his.

Eli kisses me hard, his lips firm and insistent, and then he urges me to my feet. “Move everything from the dining table to the floor.”

“The floor?”

“Don’t question me. Just do it.”

I bend to pick up the espresso glasses, my hands shaking with anticipation. Once the table is cleared, I look to Eli. He’s rolling up his shirt sleeves to reveal his muscular forearms. The sight of them almost makes me swoon.

“Good girl,” he says, fixing his right sleeve. “I understand you don’t know if you have romantic desires for me yet. That’s fine. I understand this is all new to you. That you’re still learning what you truly desire. I intend to make it easy for you. Lie on the table and lift your dress to your waist.”

I look at the staircase. I can hear people below, waiters and chefs shouting orders.

“No one is coming,” Eli says. “And even if they do, that’s not your concern. Your concern is pleasing me. Lie on the table.”

My heart pounding, I grip the wood and slide myself backward. Eli lays a hand on my thigh. “Good girl. Now pull up your dress.”

The thin material makes underwear impossible, but I’m sure Eli already knows that. I drag the dress up my legs, the air cool against my flushed skin.

Eli leans forward in his chair. “You’re already wet. Your pussy is glistening for me.”

He strokes my calf, sending heat snaking between my legs. He isn’t going to lick me. A man like Elliot Morelli wouldn’t do that, surely... I watch as he picks up his brandy. “Hold still.”

I obey as he hovers the glass over me. “I want to drink from your cunt, *bella*. Are you going to let me?”

“I... Yes?”

A few droplets fall onto my aching lips, and I gasp as the liquid trickles into my pussy.

“Does that feel good?”

I nod. It’s a strange sensation, hot and cold at once, but it doesn’t hurt. In fact, it feels amazing, tingling and burning like the start of an orgasm. Is being with men always like this? None of my friends said so, but none of my friends have dated men like the ones at Velvet House.

“*Bella*,” Eli runs a finger up my inner thigh. “You’re close already, aren’t you?”

I am, I’m swollen and the alcohol has only heightened my desire. Eli pulls away and just not having him touching me, even for a few seconds, is painful.

“I don’t know what’s happened to me,” I pant. “Ever since I got away from Mr. P—from *him*... I’m so turned on all the time.”

Eli flashes me a smile. “Of course you are, sweet girl. When there’s death, we look for ways to feel alive.”

He licks a fingertip and strokes it through me, slowly, tauntingly. My inner muscles clench. I’ve thought about sex for years, but I’ve never wanted it as much as I do right now. Eli’s finger toys with my entrance, dipping in and out of me.

“Beg me to lick you.”

The sentence is so unexpected I almost bolt upright. I was shocked when Adriano went down on me, but I couldn’t imagine Eli doing it. He always seemed too... fancy. Too elegant. “I... What?”

Eli removes his finger and I whine.

“Greedy girl,” he says in his velvet voice. “You might be my princess, Miss Whitehall, but you’ll still serve me.” He touches me again, in that wet aching place. “Beg me to make you come with my tongue.”

“Please, Mr. Morelli?”

He slides his hands under my hips, bringing his angular face towards the cradle of my thighs. “Please, what?”

“Please, um...” I feel his breath on me, the heat of it tickling in ways that make my eyes roll back. “Please just...”

He kisses my inner thigh, and a moan hums in my throat. “Can you lick me? Please?”

Eli kisses my other thigh. “Ask again. And call me ‘Mr. Morelli.’”

My stomach tenses, sending ripples of pleasure to my pussy. “Please go down on me, Mr. Morelli?”

Eli makes a deep satisfied sound and lowers his mouth to me.

Eli’s tongue isn’t like any of the others. He doesn’t lap at my clit but licks the outsides delicately as a painter, developing a masterpiece. I arch my back into the table, lifting my hips towards him. He wraps his hands around my thighs but continues his slow, tender pace. His tongue feels as expensive as his taste in wine and clothes. He says he likes luxurious things and right now I feel luxurious. Another pretty object he gets to enjoy.

“*Bella.*” The sight of Eli’s face between my legs makes me vibrate.

“*Yes?*”

“You need to concentrate,” he says, dragging a lazy fingertip through my folds.

“Um, why?” I ask, horny spots bursting in front of my eyes.

“Because I’m not going to stop licking you until you come, and I have a feeling our host will return with more coffee.”

I shoot a panicky look at the stairway. “What!?”

Eli lowers his head and resumes his slow, torturous strokes. Fear zaps through me but as scared as I am of getting busted, the thrill only makes the sensations better. I close my eyes and imagine the nervous host bursting in, the shocked look on his face when he sees Eli going down on me on the table where he brought us such wonderful food. I imagine Eli parting my knees, pushing my thighs wide, to display me proudly, practically ordering the man to watch as he brings me to orgasm. And then the host becomes Bobby, Doc, and Adriano. All of them staring at me, waiting to take their turn...

I'm moaning, my fingers deep in Eli's hair. I'm so close and it's like every light in the room is extra bright. "Please, Eli! Please?"

I didn't know what I was asking for, but he gives it to me. He raises his mouth to my clit, suckling me. Wave after wave of pleasure radiates through me and I shove my fist in my mouth to keep from screaming. I shake, rattling the table like an earthquake, and for a moment, everything is gone. Even me.

"Good girl," Eli purrs. "I'm so proud of you." He sits back in his chair and watches as I struggle to collect myself. Aftershocks thrum through my fingers as I pull my dress down. "That was..."

"*Perfezione.*" *Perfection.* "You're very responsive, Miss Whitehall."

I push loose strands of hair off my face. "That makes me sound slutty."

"You are slutty," he says matter-of-factly. "It will be interesting to see how many times I can finish you with my cock. You're the kind of girl who gets more aroused with every orgasm."

I avoid his gaze. I never thought I was that kind of girl. Yet his words make everything between my legs feel tight again. "Doesn't that make me a whore?"

Quick as a flash, he slaps my leg. "Never say that again."

“But—”

“Never. You’re a beautiful girl who does what she’s told. Someone who deserves the best this senseless world has to offer. What you do in bed for me or my brothers is beyond labels. Understood?”

I nod. He believes that, and somehow he makes it easy to believe him.

“Good. At times, Doc or I might call you filthy names while we’re fucking you, but that’s because it makes your pussy ache. Is that also understood?”

I nod again. He adjusts himself and I see the strain at the front of his suit pants. I touch a hand to my lips. “Eli... Mr. Morelli, can I... do something for you?”

For a second his face goes rigid with lust, then he gives a half smile. “No. Come with me.”

He leads me to the balcony where there’s a big, cozy chair with a blanket on it. The air outside is clean and cold, perfumed with the scent of white roses. Eli wraps the blanket around my shoulders and sits, pulling me onto his lap. I lie snuggled into his chest as he lights a cigar. We sit in silence as he puffs, breathing the sweetish smoke into the night sky.

Minutes pass and the heat of my orgasm flushes into a warm, even glow. Muscles I didn’t know were bunched, unknot, and my breathing slows. Eli holds me. Everything could be okay. Everything *is* okay. At least for now.

The clouds above us join and separate, the breeze in the courtyard leaves and returns...

Doc’s face appears in my mind. Should I be here with him instead? Or what about Bobby who gave me a chain for my St. Christopher and held me as I cried in the car? Or Adriano? The man who almost died trying to help me, the man I first begged to take my virginity. Guilt turns in me like a spiny fish. I can’t have feelings for all of them. That’s crazy. This must just be because I’m so inexperienced. If I’d been allowed to date and be normal at school, I wouldn’t be so overwhelmed.

Now it feels like whatever I do, I'll hurt people I've grown to know and understand and maybe even like...

Eli strokes my head. "That's enough thinking for tonight, *bella*."

His words send relief washing through me. It feels so good to obey sometimes. To just follow orders from someone strong enough to give them. A bird makes a noise nearby. And as I try to think what kind it could be, my eyes drift closed.

I don't know when Eli shakes me awake but the moon is high and bright in the sky.

"Time to go," he says, kissing my forehead.

The whole limo ride home I debate what I'll say if Eli asks me to his room but when we pull up at Velvet House, he untangles himself from me. "Go upstairs. I need to make some calls."

My heart hits the floor. Is he going somewhere without me? Because I said I wouldn't sleep with any of them?

Eli smiles. "I'm going to call some ugly old men to discuss business then go to bed alone. Now run along, and don't forget your new purse."

I smile so hard my face hurts then I kiss Eli's cheek and run inside, hugging my Chanel bag to my chest like it's a puppy. I practically float upstairs to the East Wing replaying the whole evening in my mind. When I get to my room, I find a Mac laptop on my bed. Taped to the screen is a note.

Enjoy tonight, JJ. Tomorrow, it's my turn. Meet me in the dining room at 10am.

Love, Bobby

Excitement curls inside me, as strong as anything I felt when I was with Eli.

"Oh no," I tell my empty room. "What am I going to do?"

The room doesn't answer.



CHAPTER NINE

January Whitehall

I STARE AT the laptop screen for a long time. I can tell because the numbers on the little clock keep ticking over. All my money is gone. Every dollar. I didn't have much, just the fifteen thousand my daddy left me when he died and some birthday and Christmas gifts from my uncles, but my current bank balance is zero. My account was emptied two weeks ago. The contents transferred to Corinne Whitehall. My stepmother.

I burst into hot, furious tears. I've cried a lot since I was taken at my wedding, but this is different. The sadness pours from deep inside me and a howl comes ripping from my throat. Two weeks ago, I was in a cage under Velvet House. No one knew where I was, or if I was even alive and my stepmom used that moment to steal my money. I knew she sold me to Mr. Parker, but I thought that was to save our family. But taking my money wasn't to save my family. It was because she hates me for being Daddy's daughter. She always has. My whole life, she's been mean and controlling, and now she's stolen from me too.

I was going to use that money to rent an apartment while I looked for a job. I don't have any qualifications, but I thought I could be a barista. Stand behind the counter at a nice café and laugh with customers. Now I don't know what I'll do. I can't get to a café from Velvet House. I can't drive and I don't have a car and as far as I can see, we're surrounded by spooky forests.

"Everything is ruined," I whisper.

For now, bella. But what will you do next?

Zia Teresa's strong, scratchy voice is like latte warming my insides. I wipe my eyes. "Are you always going to be able to talk to me, Zia?"

I don't see why not. Now, enough whining. How do we make this better?

I lie back on my bed. "I don't know."

My gaze falls on the Chanel bag Eli gave me last night. I could sell it and some of my nice clothes and then I'd have plenty of money. But that wouldn't be right. The bag was a gift. Besides, if I sold the bag, I'd only have money because men want to be with me. Everything about my life has been about men wanting to be with me. I want to do something on my own.

And I want to live in a castle and have little piggies do the laundry. What are you going to do?

I glance at the clock on the laptop. There's only twenty minutes until I'm supposed to meet Bobby downstairs. "I don't know. I'll have to figure it out while I'm on my date."

Zia Teresa laughs, a loud throaty chuckle that reminds me of Doc. *Then go get ready. Roberto is the boy I like best.*

I think about that as I shower. If the Zia in my mind likes Bobby best, does that mean *I* like Bobby the best? The Zia who speaks to me when I need help feels so separate from me. Yet if she was still alive I'm sure she would like Bobby. He's more well put-together and kinder than the others. But Zia doesn't seem to know he might be married. I'll have to ask him about that today.

I find a pair of jeans in the massive wardrobe and pair them with a pink T-shirt and sparkling white sneakers. As I pull my hair into a high ponytail, excitement bubbles in my stomach. I can't help it. When Bobby was my math tutor, I used to fantasize about going on a date with him. Now it's happening.

With a last glance at myself in the mirror, I grab my Chanel bag and head downstairs, loving the feel of my sneakered feet bouncing off the floor. My stepmom hated sneakers, so I wasn't allowed to wear them. Well, I'm done doing what she wants. When I'm a barista, I'll wear sneakers every day.

Only, even if I find some way to commute to a café, I don't know if being a barista will pay enough for me to move out of Velvet House. I'll need a job that pays well and doesn't require a lot of experience.

I remember Dreams, the girls strutting around in lingerie, and my stomach flips. I could dance at Dreams. Then again, the Doc that offered me a job there isn't the Doc who almost beat poor Archie to a pulp for hugging me. I can't imagine he'd want me giving out lap dances.

As I approach the dining room, I overhear men's voices.

"...you're askin' a lot, Mr. Morelli. Maybe too much."

The voice is familiar, but I must be wrong. I was just thinking about Archie, he can't actually be—

"That's our price, Baskerville," Eli says sharply. "You and your brother can take it or leave it."

"And if we leave it?"

"That's your choice. But you boys won't be welcome here again."

My stomach swirls. It *is* the twins. They've come to Velvet House and I can finally thank them for rescuing me. I knock on the dining room door. "Hello, it's um... me?"

"Come in, *bella*," Eli says.

I enter and see Doc, Eli, and Bobby sitting at one end of the big table. At the other is Bill and Archie Baskerville. Their blond heads turn, identical smiles spreading across their faces.

"Hey, Kitten," one of them says. "Ain't you a sight for sore eyes?"

Doc barks something at them, but I don't hear it. Suddenly I can smell the truck stop restroom again, feel Emilia's clammy lips on mine, Mr. Parker is saying he and I'll be married in Vegas by nightfall. He's laughing at me...

Then I'm flat on my back, my brain ringing like a bell. Someone has a hand to my forehead.

"She's okay," Doc says. "It's shock. Get her sugar. Soda or candy or something."

"There's orange juice in the kitchen," Bobby says. "I'll be back in a second."

Doc's fingers dig into my neck like he's taking my pulse. Is he a real doctor? He said his nickname came from dealing pills, but he's always doing medical stuff and when he does, the others listen to him.

The ringing in my head gets louder and I force my eyes open. Doc, Eli, and the Baskerville twins stare down at me. "Urgggghhhhh?"

"Everyone back off," Eli says sharply. "Bill, Archie, come with me. Doc, you stay."

Eli leads the twins out of the dining room as Doc removes his fingers from my throat. "Your heart's going apeshit. You dizzy, Tits?"

I nod, glad he's still calling me that gross name because it means he's not scared I'll die. "Did I pass out?"

"Sure did."

"That's so *embarrassing*."

"You had, like, six traumatic experiences in a row. It'd be more surprising if there weren't aftereffects."

"It was seeing the twins. It reminded me of being in the limo with Mr. Parker."

Doc's jaw tightens. "I should just kill them for touching you and get it over with."

“Don’t,” I say. “Be mad at me if you want, but don’t hurt the twins anymore.”

Doc’s nostrils flare. “I’ll do whatever the fuck I want, Tits.”

His tone is so sharp I flinch. “Get away from me.”

“No.”

Then the way he’s staring down at me changes. Goes all soft. “Goddamn, you’re pretty.”

My head is spinning from my fall and this strange turn in the conversation. My mouth opens without my permission. “You’re pretty, too. Even though you’re rude.”

The corner of his mouth kicks up. “Let’s be pretty together.”

He’s lowering his lips to mine when the door bangs open. Bobby enters carrying a tall glass of orange juice.

“How’s everything going?” he says.

“Great,” I say, a little too quickly. “I wanted to say thank you to the Baskervilles. Are they staying for lunch?”

Doc snorts. “Only if it’s poison.”

“Valente,” Bobby warns, handing me the juice. He smiles at me. “The twins have business in Manhattan, JJ, but they know how grateful you are.”

“Do they?”

“That depends,” Doc says, a dangerous glint in his eye. “How grateful are you?”

“*Valente*,” Bobby repeats. “Shouldn’t you be leaving?”

Doc’s lip curls. “Yeah, typical. Get rid of me as soon as she’s conscious.”

Bobby ignores him. “We’re just gonna have a picnic, JJ. There’s no pressure.”

I sip my juice, willing the sugar to work quickly. “A picnic sounds nice.”

“Enjoy it,” Doc says. “There’s not gonna be nothing nice about our date.”

“I said no sex.”

“That didn’t stop Morelli from licking you senseless at a fine dining restaurant.”

I gape at him. “You know about that?”

Doc’s smile is pure evil. “Who doesn’t?”

I glance at Bobby, who winces. I press a hand over my mouth. “You know too! How do you all know?”

“We have a group chat,” Doc says. “It’s called ‘*January Joy’s Tits and other natural wonders.*’ Bobby can show you if you want.”

“Don’t listen to him.” Bobby takes my hand. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

“If she sucks your dick, I want video,” Doc calls after us, leaving me to wonder how he can get so jealous at the twins for looking at me but be fine with the idea of Bobby and I hooking up.

Just like my date with Eli, there’s a car waiting for us in the driveway. This time a shiny red truck—big and American like the man beside me. Bobby opens the passenger door for me. “I kinda can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Me neither,” I admit. “Run away before someone stops us?”

He grins. “Definitely.”

I slide inside the truck. It smells nice, like winter fire and peppercorns. It’s also intensely familiar. The same scent that used to waft across the library table whenever Bobby tutored me. That, along with his big brown eyes and cuddly good looks, made me wish he was my boyfriend.

“Did you used to drive this car to Trinity Grammar?” I ask as he hops behind the wheel.

“Ah, no. It would have looked weird for a tutor to have a Benz.”

“Oh.”

There’s a beat and I’m sure we’re both thinking about when I first arrived at Velvet House and discovered my mild-mannered math tutor was actually a criminal bad boy. I still kind of can’t believe it, but so many things have happened, I guess Bobby seems more normal. Except for the fact he killed Kurt, my bodyguard. I thought doing that made him evil, but seeing what Mr. Parker is capable of, I don’t know what to think.

“What’s on your mind?” Bobby asks, as we drive down the gravel path to the front gate.

“My old bodyguards... were they bad men?”

He gives me a sidelong glance. “You’re already having a hard day. Maybe now isn’t the right time, JJ.”

The nickname makes me smile. Bobby always calls me ‘JJ’—like Margot and my brothers. But then there’s always been something homey about him. It’s probably why Zia likes him best. “I guess I just want to know if there was a reason why you killed Kurt?”

The corners of Bobby’s mouth turns down. “I appreciate you trying to make excuses for me, but I’m done justifying my behavior. I think it’s more important you know I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry for what?”

“For the way we met. For the things I’ve done since we met. For the things I did before we met. For the fact you’ll never look at me and see the guy who tutored you in math anymore. That I’m not the good guy you wanted me to be.”

“You are what I wanted you to be!” The words come out involuntarily, but they’re true. Back at Dreams, Bobby wrapped his arms around me and even though I’d made a

mistake and got Adriano hurt, he still treated me like I was precious. He bought me dinner and Pop-Tarts and he just brought me juice. The other guys all look after me in their own way but Bobby takes proper care of me.

I touch a hand to my burning cheek and see Bobby's blushing too. It's so cute, my face gets even hotter. Then I remember Doc telling me he's married. *'Actually, I don't know if he's divorced. I don't think the papers've come through.'*

I lick my lips. "I kinda need to ask you something."

He grins at me. "Go ahead."

"Are you... married?"

The truck brakes hard. I grip the door handle as Bobby stares at me in horror. "What the fuck? No!"

"Oh," I say, releasing the door. "That's good. Are you, um, divorced?"

"No! I've never been married! Who told you I was?"

"Um..."

"*Valente*," Bobby grinds out. "That fucking swine."

For a moment he looks murderous, then he makes a conscious effort to calm his furious expression. "I've never been married, JJ. I've never even come close."

"Okay," I say carefully. "Although, I was almost married, so it's fine. I know life is complicated."

"It's not." Bobby takes my hand. "I like you. I want you to trust me. No matter what happens with Eli or any of the others, I want you to see yourself as mine."

My insides give a squiggle. It's not the first time he's said it, but it's lovely to know he still feels that way.

"Thank you, Bobby." I say, before taking a big breath. "But, are you really okay sharing me with the others?"

He gives me a soft smile. "If it means I get to be with you, then I don't see it as an issue."

My stomach contracts. I want to make some kind of joke, but my brain has snagged on the idea that Bobby, sweet sensitive Bobby, also likes the idea of sharing me.

Like a wife to all of us, Eli said.

Bobby clears his throat. “While we’re getting things out in the open, JJ, I want to tell you the story of what happened with Parker.”

I blink. Since I was abducted, no one at Velvet House has ever willingly given me any information about Mr. Parker. In fact, everyone implied it was impossible, something I would never get to find out. “Won’t Eli and the others be mad?”

“Things have changed. You’re not our prisoner and the contract releasing you from Parker is being drawn up as we speak. If there’s any future for me and you, for you and any of us, I think you need to know the truth.”

“Will you tell me *anything* I want to know?”

“Of my story, yes. But I can’t talk about things that belong to Doc or Eli or... Adriano.”

A weight drops into my stomach. Adriano. The Baskerville twins aren’t the only people I haven’t thanked. I need to go to Adriano’s wing and tell him how grateful I am he took me to see my Zia, but I’m scared the others will be angry. And if I’m being honest, that he might attack me. That the wounded minotaur who confessed his feelings for me in his bed is even more dangerous than the one who roamed around Velvet House openly threatening to kill me.

“How... is Adriano?”

“He’s fine. Would you like to hear my story?”

I sit up straighter. “Of course.”

“Okay. When I was fifteen, my mom died.”

I manage not to make a noise. My birth mom died when I was little, and I always felt awkward when people gushed over how sad that was. Sure enough, Bobby shoots me a grateful

smile. “It was an accident. She was heading home and a drunk driver T-boned her.”

This time it’s harder not to make a shocked noise. Poor Mrs. Bassilotta. Poor Bobby. I put my free hand over our joined ones. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it sucked. But my dad got a life insurance payout. Enough to send me to Pembroke Prep.”

“That’s where my brothers went.”

“It’s where Eli and I went. I applied for a scholarship in middle school, but it wasn’t enough to cover the fees. I felt guilty as hell about profiting off my mom’s death, but I knew it was my shot at being able to get into a good college.”

“Bobby! I’m sure your mom would’ve wanted something good to come out of her accident.”

He gives me a wry smile. “You didn’t know my mom. Anyway, I had a rough time in New York at first. I wasn’t rich like the other kids. My dad was a farmer, and I didn’t have a fancy phone or a car... it was hard.”

He says it lightly, but looking at his face, I can see the sweet, lonely teenager he must have been, and my heart aches. “That sounds awful.”

“It was okay. In my second semester, I made the baseball team and I sat next to Eli in bio. Everything got better.”

I picture the two of them, Bobby all shy in his blue sweaters and Eli in some fitted T-shirt and designer jeans. “What was Eli like?”

“Exactly the same. Everyone liked him. All the girls. All the guys. He seemed older than us in a lot of ways. He knew things about wine and clothes and he’d lived in Europe...” Bobby shoves a hand through his short hair. “I’m dancing around what you need to know, but it’s hard to talk about this stuff.”

“That’s okay.”

His face softens. “Do you like baseball?”

“I don’t know a lot about it.”

“It was my dad’s thing. He was first generation Italian, and he wanted to prove he was a good immigrant.”

I smile. “Zia Teresa was the kind of immigrant who makes everyone feel bad for *not* being Italian, but I get what you mean.”

Bobby laughs. “My dad and I went to baseball games together, threw the ball whenever he had time. I missed him a lot when I went away to school but watching games on TV gave us something to talk about on the phone.”

“That’s really nice.”

We hold hands in silence as more pretty country scenery rushes past. It’s peaceful. The most peaceful I’ve felt in... I’m not sure how long. Bobby lets go of my hand and I feel a flash of nerves. I know him well enough to know he doesn’t want to be touching me while he says whatever’s coming next. That he’s ashamed.

“At the end of our senior year, Eli looped me into this deal he had going,” Bobby says. “Some local guy and his muscle invented a pill that was selling like crazy.”

“Doc and Adriano,” I say. “And Orchard.”

“Yup.” Bobby pulls in a deep breath. “Eli was putting up cash for them to expand and he asked me to make a secure website so they could set up drops. I wanted money, so I helped out.”

He glances across at me. “This might be hard to understand, but I never saw it as a long-term thing. I had a full ride to play ball at UCLA. I was gonna help Eli out, send most of the cash home to my dad, and head to California.”

“So... what happened?”

“At first everything was great. I liked the guys, Doc and Adriano. We got along well. Like we’d known each other our

whole lives.”

All these years later, he still sounds surprised.

“...Soon we had big plans. We were making street money, but Eli was setting up meetings with Provalite and Osemer, these huge drug companies. He kept saying we had the female Viagra and if we could take Orchard mainstream, we could make millions, maybe billions. I didn’t know about that, but I figured I didn’t need to know. I was getting ready for UCLA and Adriano was talking about the Marines and Doc was thinking about going back to school and getting his GED and everything looked good...”

I so badly want to believe everything worked out. That Doc went back to school and Adriano joined the military and Bobby played baseball in California.

“...then Parker showed up.”

My mouth dries over.

“Has anyone told you his dad was a drug boss?” Bobby asks.

I nod, my throat clacking.

“Parker was getting out of the game at that stage, trying to break into tech, but he heard about Orchard and set up a meeting with Doc. He wanted the formula. Offered a lot of money for it.”

“And Doc didn’t want to sell?”

“We’re getting to parts of the story that aren’t mine to tell, but no. Doc didn’t want to sell.”

“Wasn’t he offering enough?”

“He was offering a ton.”

“Then why—”

Bobby’s brow pinches. “I can’t, JJ.”

I’m disappointed but I don’t want to be a brat. “Okay.”

Bobby slows the car, and we turn off the main road. I see something in the distance. “Is that a football field?”

“Baseball.”

“Of course.” I smile. “Are we going to watch a game?”

“I thought maybe we’d play. I’ve got a bat and a couple of gloves in the back.”

My smile grows wider. “That sounds fun. As long as you don’t mind I’ll probably be terrible.”

“I don’t mind.”

We pull into a dirt track behind the stadium. There are no other cars around, but that doesn’t surprise me. Bobby would have figured all this out, tried to make it as romantic as possible. He parks the truck and undoes his seat belt. “Ready for our first date?”

I shift in my seat. “Your story... Isn’t there more?”

“There is, but we’ve had a lot of heavy stuff. How about we go outside and have some fun?”

Part of me wants to say yes but I know I’ll be distracted if I don’t hear the rest. “I think I’d like to know now, if that’s okay?”

Bobby exhales. “Alright.”

He stares into nothing for a moment and then closes his eyes. “For me, it was my dad. Parker sent guys to our farm and shot him through the head while he was on his tractor.”

My heart sinks, and all at once I can smell that rest stop bathroom smell again. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Why would he do that? How did he think you’d sell him Orchard after he killed your family?”

A humorless smile curves Bobby’s mouth. “Parker wants compensation for any inconvenience he goes through. Even when it doesn’t make sense.”

I think of Zia Teresa lying unconscious in her hospital bed. “I know. Do you... Do you miss your dad?”

It’s a stupid question but it gets Bobby to open his eyes. “I do. He was a great guy. Quiet and smart and nice.”

“Like you.”

“I don’t know about that. But thanks.”

Something about the conversation snags something in my mind. “You said you didn’t give Mr. Parker Orchard, but he gave me some when I was fifteen. Did he steal it from you?”

Bobby gives me his stern tutor look. “That’s one of the things we can’t talk about.”

As far as I’m concerned, that’s a ‘yes.’ “Does he have more? Has he given it to anyone else?”

“Enough, JJ.”

“But you said I could ask questions!”

“And now I’m saying we should return to here and now.” He reaches beneath his seat and hands me something. A baseball. “Let’s go outside and play.”

I open my mouth to tell him I want to know about Mr. Parker and Orchard but then I see his smile. Bobby has a great smile. All the guys do, but his is exceptional, crinkled eyes and little boy dimples. He looks so cute, I want to squeeze him. “Okay...”

“Great. Wait here,” Bobby practically dashes out of the truck to open my door for me and as I emerge into the morning sun, I think about Mr. Parker’s tree safe. The one he mentioned on the phone when he thought I was just some naïve girl. I don’t know if he still has Orchard, but if he does, I bet it’s in there.



CHAPTER TEN

January Whitehall

THE AIR OUTSIDE is clean and fresh with a hint of damp. It seems extra pure after the dark stories Bobby told me in the car. I watch as he lifts a baseball bat, a picnic rug, and a huge red cooler out of the back of the truck.

“Can I carry anything?” I ask.

“Sure.”

He tosses me a leather glove. It looks brand new and when I put it on my left hand it fits perfectly.

Bobby smiles. “Come on, beautiful. Let’s play.”

The stadium’s metal gate is unlocked, though there’s no one around. Has he rented out the whole field? Inside, Bobby puts the cooler down and leads me onto the diamond. “Have you ever played before?”

“I’ve watched ‘A League of Her Own’?”

“Close enough.” He picks up the bat and a huge white grapefruit of a ball. “Head to the home base and I’ll show you how to swing.”

I’m nervous as Bobby strips off my leather glove and arranges me over the plate with the bat. “Shouldn’t I wear a helmet?”

“It’s okay, I’ll pitch slow.”

Bobby’s a good teacher. He got me to understand math, kind of, and baseball’s even easier. I miss the first two times

he throws the ball but on the third, I hit it with a satisfying ‘thwack!’

Bobby jogs after it and I notice how nice his butt looks in his jeans.

“You’ve got strong arms,” he tells me. “Let’s try it again but this time turn your hips more when you swing.”

He pitches to me again and again and soon I’m hitting every ball and they’re going all over the place. “I feel like I should be aiming more,” I tell him, breathing hard. “But it’s so fun!”

“Good.” Bobby tosses the ball in the air. He looks relaxed, sweat shining on his freckled brow. This is where he should have been. Playing baseball. Maybe professionally, maybe just for fun with his friends. If he’d gone to UCLA like he was supposed to, he’d now live in California, in a house with huge sunshiny windows and he’d hike and surf and never be interested in a girl like me.

My mind flashes back to Bobby’s proposal in the cage. He might say that he wants to share me with his brothers. But once upon a time, all he wanted was to marry me. Does he not see me as worthy of him the same way anymore?

“What’s on your mind?” Bobby asks.

I press the end of the baseball bat into the ground. “I don’t know, I guess I was just thinking about how different things could have been if Mr. Parker wasn’t around.”

Bobby frowns. “Different in what way?”

“Well, you probably wouldn’t be in something like Velvet House. You’d probably be working for Google.”

He gives me a small smile. “You don’t need to feel sorry for me, JJ.”

“But if you’d never lost your Dad, you wouldn’t have stayed in New York, right?”

“Maybe not, but I take responsibility for staying.”

“But—”

“There aren’t any ‘buts.’ I wanted in on the deal with Orchard. I agreed we shouldn’t sell to Parker. And after my father died, I went to Italy with Eli and Doc and Adri and I worked for Eli’s Nonno. I did that willingly.”

I stare at him. “You guys went to Italy?”

“Naples. Right after Parker did what he did. It was the safest place we could think to go.” Bobby has a faraway look on his face. I imagine the four of them landing in Italy as teenagers. Handsome and totally out of their depth.

“Were you safe in Naples?” I ask.

“Yeah. Eli’s Nonno had ties to the Camorra. Even Parker wasn’t stupid enough to fuck with them.”

I don’t know what the Camorra is, but I can guess. “Could you speak Italian?”

“Not a word. That was the first thing we did. Or I did, anyway. Learn the language.”

“So you speak Italian, too?”

“*Certo che sì, bellezza.*” *Yes I do, sexy girl.*

I flush and for a second Bobby holds my gaze. Then he ducks his head, embarrassed by his own sleazy comment. I remember the night in Eli’s bed, how it felt to have Bobby behind me, spanking my ass as his cock slid between my thighs, rubbing me to orgasm. I stare at the grass. Bobby has so many sides to him. He’s wholesome and filthy; stern and silly. A million different things. I like all of them.

“What were the others doing while you were learning Italian?”

Bobby looks up, smile gone. “Drinking. Plotting.”

I almost ask what, but the answer is obvious. Revenge. The revenge that led to me being kidnapped. The revenge they will have to give up to keep me safe.

“Is everyone really mad about the contract?”

“I really don’t want to talk about this, JJ.”

“I know, but it feels better out here than in the car. Like nothing can really hurt us.”

“I guess.”

I study his handsome, clean-cut face. “You don’t seem like the others. You don’t want to be like this... dangerous, criminal guy, right?”

Bobby throws the baseball into his glove then pulls it out and does it again. “There’s a part of me that still wants you to see me the way you used to. As someone normal. But when you were abducted by Parker, there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t have done to bring you back. It’s only because of the Baskerville twins that I didn’t kill every man that stood between me and you.”

He says it lightly, as though he might be joking, but his chocolate brown eyes are steady. A shiver goes down my spine. He’s so much stronger than I thought when he taught me math, but scarier too.

“So that’s the truth. Every man has a dark side. Maybe if I’d gone to UCLA, I wouldn’t have met mine, or lived in it as long as I have. But I’m not sorry. I’ve hurt men, I’ve ruined lives and I’ve killed, but I’ve also built a billion-dollar company with men I love, men who are closer to me than any blood brothers could be.”

“Even Doc?”

Bobby doesn’t smile. “Even Doc. It’s rare to meet people who are willing to sacrifice everything they have to keep a person safe, JJ. But I’ve found three. Until you, I’ve had few regrets.”

The morning seems to grow colder, the sky dimming though there are no clouds. I think about the bullet Bobby put in Kurt’s brain the night Velvet House abducted me. “Do you regret killing Kurt?”

“I regret scaring you. I regret you seeing him die, but he was a selfish incompetent asshole.”

“He wasn’t!”

Bobby gives me a stern look. “He let you get abducted then sold you out to save his own skin.”

“I don’t blame him for that.”

“I do,” Bobby’s voice is hard. “I would die before I let something like that happen to you. And I would kill before I let something like that happen to you. Kurt did neither, and I’m glad he’s gone.”

My heart twists. It feels wrong to find such a terrifying promise romantic, but I do.

“January?” Bobby’s voice is rougher than usual. “Have I scared you?”

“No. I guess I just want to believe you’re still a good guy.”

He takes a step toward me. “I can’t tell you whether I’m a good guy. But I wish I hadn’t betrayed your trust. If I could go back and change anything, it would be that.”

I can smell his clean cologne scent, the same one that made me swoon when we were together in the library. I touch my lips, they’re swollen and sensitive. I want to kiss him, but how am I supposed to act on it? Bobby’s so grown up and handsome and I don’t have wine pulsing through my blood the way I did last night with Eli...

“JJ,” Bobby says in his new rough voice. “I know you said no sex, but can I kiss you?”

The bat slips through my fingers, falling with a dull thunk on the grass.

“Do you want that?” he asks. “Because if you don’t, we can just eat and—”

“I want you to kiss me. I want that so badly.”

Bobby tosses away his ball and glove and strides toward me. He puts his hands to my face and kisses me, soft and sweet. His stubble brushes my jaw, a sharp contrast to the tenderness of his lips. My breath hitches as his tongue sweeps my mouth and I press myself against him. He's already rock-hard beneath his jeans.

"Bobby..." He understands my plea, laying me down so my back is in the grass. He braces his big body over mine. "No one's around. It's just you and me."

That's all the encouragement I need to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him. We grind together on the grass. I rub against him shamelessly, torturing my body with his.

"January," he pants. "You're gonna make me take this too far."

My muscles vibrate in response. I don't care. I rub harder against him, the chafe of his jeans making me ache. When his hands slide under my T-shirt, I gasp. His fingers are blunt and callused, and I imagine them buried inside me, stroking my pussy the way his erection is stroking between my thighs. "Bobby? Can you...?"

His mouth finds my ear. "You want me to get you there, JJ?"

"Yes. Yes, please."

He unbuttons my jeans. "You want me to do it with my fingers?"

"Yes!"

He slides his hand down the front of my panties and the restriction of the cotton and my jeans makes it a hundred times hotter. His rough fingerpads brush my pussy, hovering just above my clit. I press my head back against the grass. "Bobby...?"

"That's it. Say my name." His fingers move downward, stroking against my soaking entrance. "*Jesus*, January."

I whimper, half-proud and half-embarrassed at how wet I am. “Sorry. Is it... too much?”

He drags my wetness upward, spreading it across my clit in tight circles. “It’s taking everything I have not to tear off your jeans, and bury myself inside you.”

Liquid fire surges through me. “Oh.”

“Yeah. ‘Oh.’” He dips his rough fingertips inside me. “I want—I *need*—to be a good guy and respect your boundaries, JJ. So please just lie still and let me make you come like the decent man I pretend to be.”

The desperation in his voice practically pins me to the grass. I lie still as he curls his fingers inside me, sliding in and out with soft, swishing noises. It feels so good I could scream. Being with a man is strange. Almost disgusting in some ways, but overwhelmingly perfect in others. A cool breeze ruffles my hair and all at once I’m terrified someone might see me riding Bobby’s hand on a baseball diamond. Yet, the thought of him stopping hurts. If someone wandered in, there’s every chance I’d grab Bobby’s wrist and beg him to let me finish. I might still be a virgin on paper, but my innocence has burned up in the heat of the four men pursuing me.

“God, you’re tight,” Bobby mutters. “I can hardly pull my fingers out of you, you’re so tight.”

I whimper as my body hurtles toward orgasm. When I do this to myself, it takes so long that my hand hurts. But with Bobby, I’m already there. There’s so much power in sex. In being taught what someone else can do to your body. Maybe that’s why men like Mr. Parker want virgins, so they have nothing to compare them to.

I stare at Bobby, at his boyish face and wide muscular shoulders, and something sparks in me. A naughty instinct I don’t want to fight. “Did you ever get turned on when you tutored me?”

A frustrated huff of laughter. “Did I? It almost fucking *killed me.*”

“Did you hate me?”

“Never.” He pumps faster, fingers pulsing deep within me. “I knew you weren’t cockteasing. You just have no idea how gorgeous you were, did you?”

My climax swells, gold tendrils curling around me like vines. “I... I don’t know.”

“You are. You’re fucking sexy. I used to imagine you sitting in my lap while I taught you fractions.” His teeth scrape my neck and the sensation shimmers down my body. “I wanted to slide my hand under your little school skirt and stroke your pussy. Keep my other hand over your mouth so the librarians wouldn’t hear it when you came. I was *infatuated* with you.”

I squirm against the grass, delighted and seconds from orgasm. “I thought it was just me. I thought you were too grown up for me.”

“And I thought you were the most delicious thing in the whole world.” Bobby slides his free hand over my mouth now, as though we’re back there, in the library. “It killed me that you were engaged to another man, let alone someone so fucking vile. It killed me, January. I just wanted to wrap you up and take you somewhere safe. But you’re mine now.”

His fingers plunge, curving into some rough place inside me that I didn’t know existed. “Oh my God!”

Bobby’s mouth latches onto mine, absorbing my cries. The pressure between my legs rolls, contracting at my clit like a point of light.

“Focus,” he says as though this is a trigonometry equation. “Think about how deep I am in your virgin pussy.”

I contract. He is deep. Deeper than any man has been inside me so far. And his fingers feel good. *Too* good. My thighs twitch, clamping and unclamping. I’m enclosed in my jeans, and I still have shoes on, but I’m so, so exposed. I look into Bobby’s brown eyes and something in his strained, brutal expression sends me to the edge. My toes curl, my eyes screw

shut, and my mind is blank except for one thought—*my math tutor is inside me.*

And then.

A murderer is making me come again.

And because I'm all wrong inside, that's the thought that sends me over. I come hard, bucking so forcefully against Bobby that the waistband of my jeans cuts into my spine.

"Fuck," Bobby pants, his hand sliding from my mouth. "Fucking hell."

"I know, I know..."

"You don't know." He withdraws from my body and pulls his hand from my jeans. "It's been ages. Fucking *months* of torture. I used to have to sit there, smelling your perfume, watching you chew your lip while we talked about math. I got hard under that table ten times an hour. Afterward I used to..." His face goes tomato red and I know exactly what he means. "...just so I could fucking *think*."

It shouldn't be sexy, picturing Bobby in the stalls at Trinity Grammar, stroking himself. But it is. I imagine him pressed against the door, his thick cock in his hand, rubbing and pulling until he...

"Show me? Bobby, please show me?"

"Show you what?"

"What you did after our tutoring sessions. I want to see."

Swearing, Bobby sits back on his knees and unbuckles his belt. He flicks open his jeans, pulling his flushed erection into his hand.

I stare greedily at his cock. The thick shaft, the round purplish head, the patch of neat dark hair at the base.

"Sometimes I'd beat off before and after I saw you," he mutters, fisting himself. "That's what you reduced me to. Jacking off in the bathroom like I was fifteen."

He gives his cock a slow stroke and heat flushes from my nipples down the line of my stomach and into my clit. A place Bobby licked the night I had Orchard, bringing me to a grinding orgasm while Doc and I kissed...

“Look at me,” he commands, and I obey, relieved to have orders. He moves his hand along his shaft and I watch, my insides fluttering. How would that huge thing feel inside me? Would it hurt, or would I go so slippery he slid into me like a knife through butter?

I’ve wondered it before, but now it’s a tangible ache. I want Bobby to press inside me and tear my virginity apart. To complete my transformation from the sheltered girl I was into something shiny-new.

“Watch,” Bobby says, his breathing ragged. “Watch me come, January. Imagine me doing it a hundred times while I pictured fucking you against every shelf in that goddamn library.”

A mewling cry splits the air. It’s me. I’m kneeling on all fours on the grass, staring at Bobby and moaning. And I know I could come closer, take him in my mouth...

“Stay,” he warns, reading my mind like always. He lifts his T-shirt and his tight abdomen flexes. But I can’t take it anymore. I bend and suck the head of his cock into my mouth.

“January! Fuck, January...”

Bobby’s hand comes into my hair, but his tug is half-hearted. I look up as I draw him deep, trying to seem as innocent and eager as possible.

“Jesus, look at you taking that dick.” He groans. “I’m gonna finish in your mouth, JJ. I’ve got no choice.”

Good, I think as he surges into me. He isn’t as big as Eli or Doc but he’s so much wider. I let him push to the back of my throat and try not to choke.

“You’re such a good girl,” he chants. “Suck it deep. Suck it nice and... *fuck!*”

He comes in my mouth. I swallow then keep sucking, cleaning his shaft, making him all smooth and wet...

“No, baby, you have to stop!”

I continue, smiling wickedly until Bobby gently pushes my forehead away. “Fuck me, you’re a bad girl...”

I sit back, wiping my mouth. “Was that okay?”

“Christ, yes.” He gives me a dazzling smile as he rezips his jeans. “You broke my brain.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You little liar. C’mere.” He wraps his arm around me and tumbles us both onto the grass. I put my head on his chest and listen to the rapid thump of his heart. I’m alive. Bobby’s alive and it’s a lovely day.

We lie side by side for a while looking up at the sky, then I feel Bobby shift. My skin prickles and I somehow know he’s going to say something scary.

“January, I’m in love with you.”

I open my mouth to say... I don’t know what, but Bobby presses a finger to my lips. “I don’t need you to say it back. I don’t want you to feel any pressure, I just need you to know I worship the ground you walk on and I want to be in your life, any way you’ll have me. Is that okay?”

I feel like reality is slipping away from me, pulling me up into the clouds. I nod.

“Great,” he says with relief. “Let’s eat.”

Bobby retrieves the picnic rug, unfurling it in the middle of the baseball diamond before unpacking the cooler. He’s brought a huge amount of food—crusty bread rolls with tomato and bocconcini, cold egg and chive frittata, potato salad, pesto arancini, and a thick slab of chocolate cake. Bobby drinks beer but he brought me a bottle of pink lemonade. I like that he got me sugary soda. I like that he knows me so well.

“This is all vegetarian,” I say, opening a tub of roast pumpkin and rocket salad.

Bobby winces. “I... Yeah”

“Are you a vegetarian?”

“Sometimes. Most of the time, really.” He gives me a mortified look. “Please don’t make a thing of it with the guys?”

“Of course not.” My mind races with things I can feed him. “I’ll cook vegetarian for you from now on.”

“No, you don’t have to. I know it’s annoying.”

“It isn’t! There are so many Italian dishes that are vegetarian. Pasta e lenticchie, polenta with mushroom ragu and puttanesca without the anchovies—”

Bobby practically launches himself across the picnic blanket and kisses me until my lips hurt.

“Wow,” I say when he pulls away. “You haven’t even had my Parmigiana di Melanzane.”

Bobby shakes his head. “I never even dreamed a girl like you existed.”

I’m so flattered I can’t speak.

As we eat, I find myself imagining a future with Bobby. Unlike the future I dreamed up when he was my tutor, this one is realistic. He would still do a dangerous criminal job and there would still be nights when I worried about him, but we’d also have romantic picnics and long talks and amazing sex. I could work as a barista and Bobby would come visit and compliment my coffee and be nice to my co-workers.

The problem, I think, as I try to eat the sticky cake without spilling it down my front, is that I can’t separate Bobby from the other guys. I can’t imagine living with him and not having Doc bursting in, teasing both of us and trying to smoke indoors. I can’t imagine making love to Bobby without Eli showing up and directing us like his perverted puppets. And I

would always be wondering where Adriano was and if he still thought about me dancing. If he ever watched us through our bedroom windows...

There's an easy solution—just be with all of them, and yet that feels utterly impossible and—no matter what Eli says—slutty.

I swallow my mouthful of cake. “Are you going to tell the other guys about what we did?”

Bobby shifts awkwardly.

“Oh my God, you are! You're all so perverted!”

“It's not like that. We're not trying to be assholes. We just have this group chat that's been going since we were teenagers and we... talk about things.” Bobby's cheeks flame. “Sorry, it's just how things have been for a really long time.”

“I guess I understand, I can see how close you all are. It's just a little uncomfortable to be a part of it the way I am.”

Bobby takes my hand. “You're special to all of us. No one wants you to feel uncomfortable.”

Looking at him, it's easy to believe it, but I've also met Domenico Valente and Eli Morelli. Neither of them has any problem with me feeling uncomfortable. They seem to like it.

After the picnic is done, Bobby and I clean up and walk back to the truck. My muscles are sore from the exercise and the orgasm, and my mind is sore from all the new information.

“I have a present for you,” Bobby says when we're seated in the truck.

“Another present?”

He opens the driver's side compartment and hands me a smooth rectangular box. It's a new iPhone. I make a squeaky mouse sound. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. You can watch videos and play games but don't get on social media or call your friends for a little while. You have to wait until the contract's drawn up and signed.”

I pull open the box and stare at the black screen in awe. “What will happen once the contract’s signed? Where will I tell everyone I’ve been?”

“Our current plan is for you to say you were abducted by a gang who ransomed you back to your stepmother.”

I let out a breath. “I don’t know if my uncles will believe my stepmom had the money to pay a ransom.”

Or that she would give it up for me, even if she did.

“That doesn’t matter. Parker will be forced to back you up, which will give you credibility. Then he’ll tell everyone he ended your engagement so you could focus on school.”

I trace my finger across my new phone. It’s such a simple, pretty lie. I want to believe it will work, but it feels too easy, like a Halloween prank or something.

“Hey,” Bobby says, sliding his hand over mine. “You can trust us, JJ. We’ll look after you.”

I force a smile. I do feel like I can trust Bobby, but as my stepmom and Mr. Parker showed, I’ve never been good at trusting the right people. All I can do is put one foot in front of the other and have faith everything will work out okay.

I slide my new phone into my Chanel bag and try to enjoy the ride home. When we arrive at Velvet House, Bobby walks me to my room.

“Take a nap,” he suggests. “It’s been a big day.”

“What about you?”

“I’m off to work.” He kisses my cheek. “I’ll be thinking of you, baby.”

Feeling a bit lost, I push open the door to my bedroom, examining my new phone as I go. The camera looks really good. I now have a designer purse and a new phone. What the hell is Doc going to give me for our date?

I don’t have to wait to find out.

There's a strange collection of items on my bed. A pink wand I'm sure is a vibrator, a bottle of French perfume, a box of truffles, and a bundle of what looks like cash. I pick it up, sure it's fake and Doc has somehow managed to print money with his face on it or something. Instead, Benjamin Franklin's eyes stare back at me. It's real. I drop the money like it's a hairy spider and spot the torn piece of yellow note paper lying on my bed.

Dear Tits,

*Sorry if these gifts suck. I don't know what girls like.
You make me feel like my head is on fire. See you
tomorrow.*

Doc. Nico. Whoever.

Ps. I'm going to destroy your pussy.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Domenico Valente

JANUARY HOVERS NEAR Eli's Maserati G-Class right where I instructed her to be. She's wearing a red dress and looks so good I want to pick her up and bite into her porcelain skin. She must hear me coming through the underground garage because she turns, her big green eyes blinking at me.

"Hi, Nico," she says in her sexy voice, and I want to drag her upstairs to bed, tuck her into my side and fall the fuck asleep. Address all the sexual tension and murder and bullshit when I'm well-rested because I know I'd sleep fantastic with her beside me, and I'm exhausted. Fucking smoking. You don't know how bad a vice has you until you give it up. Not the best timing considering my dual 'seduce Tits and kill Parker' plan, but I can handle it. I have to. When I found out January was abducted I made a promise with a God I don't know exists. I said that if she was safe, I'd quit smoking.

The second she was rescued I bailed on that promise because what was God gonna do? Hit me with lightning? And then I got out of the pool two days ago and hacked up my lungs like never before. I almost puked into Morelli's little tiled grotto like a freshman at a frat party.

I knew the big man was holding me accountable. If it was just me getting cursed, I might have kept smoking, but there was this voice in my head telling me 'January's gonna get hurt again. Worse this time.'

So the cigarettes had to go. I just wish it could have been next week. Next year. Next lifetime.

January tugs the hem of her dress, all eager and nervous. She's still scared of me and that turns her on, which means I need to fucking concentrate. I've got a heart and body to win before I fly to Vegas and put my life on the line for revenge.

"Hi, Tits," I say, flashing her my best smile. "What do you wanna do today?"

January frowns. "Are you okay?"

No, I need cigarettes. Cigarettes, a blow job from you and Parker's head on a spike. "I'm flawless."

Her gaze drops to my hands, and she clocks that my left fingernails are bitten ragged. I hold them up. "Gnarly, huh? Lady tobacco and I are having a rough break-up."

"Um... pardon?"

"I quit smoking for you, Tits."

"Oh..." She doesn't believe me. I can't blame her. I've hardly been a boy scout up until this point. I push my mangled hand into my pocket. "Anyway, we're not here to talk about me. What do you feel like doing today?"

She purses her pretty lips. "I thought you were taking me somewhere?"

"And I thought that after a month of being dragged around by your hair, you might like to make your own plans."

January's eyes widen. "Do you mean it? We can go wherever I want to go?"

She sways on the spot, her red dress twirling around her luscious hips. I bite back a groan. "I don't say shit I don't mean, Tesorina. Now hurry up and decide because there's a growing chance you're gonna get fucked on the hood of Morelli's car instead."

"Then... I guess I know somewhere, but I'm not sure you'll want to take me there."

"Is it outside the continental US?"

“No.”

“Then spit it out.”

A shadow crosses her face. “Today is my... it’s my Zia Teresa’s funeral.”

I make my face a mask. “Where is it?”

“St. Peter’s Church in Brooklyn. Is that... Can we go?”

We’d need a car, new clothes, a veil, a faraday case...

“Nico?”

God, the way she says that makes me want to drop her in caramel and suck her clean. I grab her hand and drag her toward my Charger. “Of course, we can go. What time’s the ceremony or whatever?”

Her face lights up. “One. Can we actually go?”

“Yes. Now get in the fucking car.”

I drive out of Velvet House and onto the highway as fast as I can without attracting cops, making calls the whole way. January sits beside me like a hot lieutenant. Morelli would kill me if he knew what we were doing. But he won’t know and neither will anyone else.

When I’m done making the calls, the car falls into silence. January’s twisting her hands in her lap, adorably nervous or scared or whatever.

“You can pick a radio station if you want?”

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them and I immediately regret it. I hate everyone’s taste in music. I’ve killed because one of Adriano’s guys wouldn’t lay off the deathcore.

January scrolls through stations and I wait for whatever twinkly teenage shit she’s into to pollute my eardrums. Then a low, familiar voice fills my ears. “Is this the Black Keys?”

She takes her hand away from the dial. “Yeah. Is that okay? I feel like it’s good traveling music...”

“It’s fine, Tits,” I say, settling into the driver’s seat. I don’t know how she keeps surprising me, but she does.

An hour later, we pull into my buddy Dave’s chop shop. I’ve arranged to switch the Dodge for a tasteful old black beamer.

“Get out but stay near the car,” I tell January, then walk to the counter where Dave’s waiting for me with the keys.

“You got the faraday case?” I ask.

“In the back. And there’s a full tank of gas,” he says, staring through the office window at January. She’s perched on the hood of the Dodge, looking hotter than any of the calendar girls plastered on the walls. “Where the fuck did you find her, you lucky asshole?”

I smirk. “You don’t wanna know.”

“I’ve gotta get to Dreams again. Whatever she charges, I’ll pay double.”

“Then you’ll need two lives. January doesn’t work at Dreams, she belongs to Velvet House.”

Dave looks like all his nightmares have come true at once. “Fuck! Sorry, Doc.”

“I’ll be back this afternoon. Keep the Dodge safe.”

“On my life, Doc! I swear!”

I lead January to the shiny BMW and hold out my hand. “Gimme your phone.”

I expect her to whine, but the little lamb just hands it over. I love this new, uncaged January Whitehall. She’s so much brighter and less annoying. I slip her phone and mine into the faraday case and toss it in the back seat.

“Let’s go, Tits.”

“What’s the case for?” she asks, as we pull out of the lot.

“It blocks electromagnetic fields. Means people can’t track our phones.”

“People like Mr. Parker?”

I punch the church address into the car’s GPS. “People like Roberto Bassilotta.”

“Bobby? Why?”

“Because he’ll be tracking you like the hairy pervert he is. And I’m not having him fucking up our big day out.”

“Why don’t we just turn our phones off?”

“He can turn them on remotely, but there’s no way that slippery fucker’s getting through the faraday. We’ll get to your Zia’s funeral, Tits, don’t you worry about that.”

“Oh.” She slides her hand into mine. “Thank you, Doc.”

My heart goes all fluttery and I try to squeeze her fingers, but it’s like holding a block of ice for too long. I pull away. “We need to talk disguises. You can’t walk into the church looking like Tits McGee Whitehall.”

January purses her lips. “You know, you don’t have to be mean to me just because you’re stressed.”

I lift my fingernails to my mouth then force them away. If I’m feeling anything, it’s exposed, like she can see into my filthy head. “If you don’t watch your mouth, you’ll be feeling a lot of things. I don’t give a damn what Morelli and Basher have done, your ‘no sex’ rule doesn’t mean shit to me.”

She flushes but doesn’t say anything. I’m glad, but I also feel like a shitheel. I don’t want her to think I’d take her virginity in a stolen BMW on the way to her mother-figure’s funeral.

But it’s too late, I’ve already been the asshole. I always am. Like when I kicked the shit out of Baskerville at Dreams instead of holding her or threatening her by the pool when she was just trying to be nice about Alessia. After Parker’s dead, things will be better. I’ll have time to get a hold of my temper. I’ll be able to let January take my hand without thinking of the million and one ways I don’t deserve to have her like me.

Soon we arrive at the tiny tailor shop outside New York. I lead January around the exposed brick walls to where dozens of Italian wool suits and shirts hang beside rows of belts and racks of shiny leather wingtips.

“What is this place?” she asks.

“A friend of Morelli’s from the old country. We get a permanent discount on suits.”

The wizard who owns the place appears out of nowhere, clapping his gnarled hands. “*Buongiorno*, Mr. Valente,” he says in his heavily accented voice. “And you, *signorina*. How are you?”

January lowers her head into what’s almost a curtsy. “*Io sto bene, signore. Lei come sta?*” *I’m well, sir. How are you?*

The old guy gets so excited to hear a hot girl speak Italian, his cock probably gets hard for the first time in years. I browse the suits as they make small talk, him nattering fluidly, her responses sweet and hesitant. I’m a little in awe. Usually, the old guy says only two words and they’re *‘hold still.’*

Maybe Parker wasn’t the stupidest fuck in the world to try and marry her. She’s got that Jackie O thing, all pretty and polite and genuinely interested. And she’s got a body like Marilyn Monroe. JFK’s two girls in one.

If I get a chance, I’ll mention that to Parker before I choke the life out of him in Vegas. By tomorrow, I’ll know if Jessica—the cousin of one of my dancers—is able to sneak me into Palm Casino. If she is, I’ll fly to Vegas and tidy up this Parker thing before the contract’s signed.

I check my watch. Only two hours until the funeral, we need to hurry.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I tell the old guy. “But we gotta get moving. I need a black suit appropriate for a funeral and a dress and veil for her.”

The old man makes a spitting sound as he gestures to January. “You’d cover this magnificent face?”

“Fraid so. Quick as you can, old man.”

Ten minutes later, we’re back in the BMW, me in a penguin suit, January in a tight black dress. In her lap is a hat with a thick veil. She touches the rim. “Won’t everyone think I’m a total freak wearing this?”

“Sure, but you’ll be a freak they can’t recognize and that’s the point.”

“But who will I be? What will I say if someone asks who I am?”

“You’ll shut up and leave it to me.” I catch a glint of gold between her fingers. “What’s that?”

She opens her hand to reveal her St. Christopher medallion. Something about it all small and gold in her palm makes my chest hurt. “Your Zia gave you that?”

“Yeah, I wish I could wear it.”

“So why don’t you?”

“I don’t have a chain.”

“Okay.” I look around. We’re driving through a dinky nothing town, but I can see an ancient pawn shop next to a box store. I pull over in a screech of tires. “Lemme have the medallion, I’ll get you a chain.”

She shakes her head. “Can I please... it needs to be me. Or at least I want it to be.”

I remember the tattoo gun in Naples. How Adriano was the only person I could stand drilling ink into me. After someone you love dies, you’re entitled to be weird about shit. I flip open the car locks. “Fine, but hurry. And don’t talk to anyone you don’t have to.”

January nods, taking a few hundred dollar bills out of her pink handbag. I smile to myself. That’s the cash I gave her, so it’ll still be me who buys her the chain.

A few minutes later, she slides back into the car.

“How’d it go?”

She shows me the medallion, now hanging from a thin gold chain. “It’s lovely.”

It’s not but looking at it makes my insides hurt all over again. I start the car. “Put it on and hide it under your clothes, Tits.”

She obeys, tucking the chain under her dress with a sigh, like some big burden has been lifted. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” I gesture to my lap. “I’ll take my payment now.”

She stares at me in horror, and I laugh. “What? You don’t wanna give me road head? My suit isn’t nice enough or something?”

She shoves my side. “You’re so gross!”

I laugh even harder. “It’s okay, Tits. You blow me later. I heard you’re pretty good at it.”

She flushes, no doubt thinking about her roll in the grass with Bobby. “I still can’t believe you guys talk about that stuff.”

“Believe it. How are you feeling about the funeral anyway? We’re not far.”

“I’m nervous, I guess.” January gives me a sidelong look. “I can tell you had a sister.”

The statement sucks the air right out of my lungs. I see Alessia, opening the oven, getting out tots. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, you’re all... cheeky, the way guys who have big sisters are.”

I snort. “*Cheeky.*”

“What was she like? Alessia?”

The bottom falls out of my brain. It’s so wrong to hear her say the name... yet part of me likes it. Part of me wants to talk

about how funny and annoying and weird my big sister was, but my jaw feels wired shut.

“It’s okay,” January says quietly. “Maybe you can tell me some other time?”

“Maybe.”

To my relief she stops pressing and stares out of the window as Bowie sings around us. Anger prickles through me. She wants to get close but she’s yet to apologize to me for running away and I’m yet to forgive her. But at the same time, I want to talk to her.

Soon, I tell her in my brain. Let me kill Parker and tie you up and torture you for a while and then I’ll talk to you about Alessia.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Domenico Valente

“**D**ON’T SPEAK,” I remind her, as we power walk to St. Peter’s. “Under no circumstances are you to say a word.”

January nods, her thick veil shifting. “I’m just glad to be saying g-goodbye.”

Her voice cracks and I shove my hand in my pocket to stop myself from reaching out to her.

A middle-aged couple is standing at the front of the church. The man nods but the woman gives me a confused look. “Sorry, this is a private funeral.”

“*Si*,” I say in a thick accent. “I’m Antonio’s nephew, Enzo. My wife and I are here to pay our respects to Teresa.”

The woman’s expression melts. “Of course. Please, sit anywhere you like.”

I smile and usher January inside. It’s a big church but the pews are packed. The old girl’s getting a hell of a send-off.

“That was Zia Teresa’s daughter, Anna,” January whispers. “How did you know she knows an Antonio?”

“Because she’s Italian. Stop talking.”

“Sorry.”

We find an empty pew and sit. January’s shoulders are shaking and she touches her medallion through her dress. The curve of her breasts is visible through the thick material, and

I'm torn between wanting to comfort her and copping a feel. I do neither.

Pretty soon the priest sways in, accompanied by half a dozen altar girls and boys. Altar-children. The ceremony is brief. In between the bible verses and propriety, I catch glimpses of the tough old bird who was always smacking people with spoons and smoked and loved celebrity magazines and slot machines.

January shakes like a leaf the whole mass and I manage to wrap an arm around her. It's easier to touch her when it feels clinical.

We both stand to take the Eucharist and I feel January watching me through her veil, probably wondering if I'm a big enough asshole to blaspheme the Catholic Church on top of all the other shit I've done.

"Don't worry, Tits," I murmur. "I'm a murdering shitlord, but I'm fully fucking confirmed over here."

"Oh my gosh," she mumbles, turning away.

The best part of the funeral is the end where there's a picture slideshow. You see the old girl, all smooth and pretty in her wedding dress, wearing party hats at her kid's birthdays and dancing at their weddings. Then I see tween January, arm in arm with her Zia in some park somewhere. She looks so young and pretty, it nicks at the side of my neck like a razor.

"You're beautiful," I murmur into the side of her veil. "Your Zia looks so proud of you."

January lets out a sob. I hold her closer and wish I really was Enzo or whoever the fuck I'm pretending to be. That life had been different for both of us.

When the ceremony is done, I hustle January from the church. Even in a veil she's got the body of a sex demon and I look cute as fuck in my black suit. Between the two of us, we're attracting way too much attention.

"Sorry, can I please go to the bathroom?"

“Make it fast. And no fucking talking.”

“I won’t.”

I wander outside to wait for her. I pull off my jacket and throw it over one arm as I roll up my sleeves. I sweat like a sinner in suits, especially with the collar all done up. It’s almost enough to make me wish I was a chick. There’s a cluster of four old guys standing around an olive tree and smoking like nicotine gives life. I always enjoy watching old boys smoke but today it pisses me off. I can just imagine the first drag, the fire kick-starting my lungs.

But I won’t smoke. When I make my mind up about something, it’s done.

Seventeen years ago, I looked in Parker’s psychotic face and knew I wouldn’t sell my drug to him. Not for all the money in the world. Morelli told me not to make an enemy of such a fucked-up dude.

“You’ll create more things,” he said. “Better things. Put aside your pride and let Parker have this.”

But I didn’t want to. There were the flaws in the formula that sent Alessia to the hospital, but there was also the fact that I didn’t like Parker. Didn’t trust what he could do with a drug that turned women on.

My pride—my conscience—is what got Velvet House into this mess. I denied Parker Orchard and even Morelli couldn’t have predicted how nuclear he would go. He killed Bobby’s dad. Adri’s mom. Morelli’s dog and Alessia. He stole our adult lives and torched our futures. He took everything from all four of us and if we hadn’t run, he would have taken more.

As I watch the old men smoke, grief rises in me like a stone monolith. Ancient and unmoving and right behind it is the anger. Red hot flames, tall as a skyscraper, twisting and demanding action, violence, revenge. *Anything*.

My plan to fly to Vegas to kill Parker has about a million unpatchable holes. There’s every chance I’ll be killed the second I get to the hotel.

But what am I supposed to do? Let Parker live? Spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder for him, praying he's not coming for January. Whatever Morelli might think, I know better—no contract will ever stop Parker. He'll hunt the girl until the day he dies.

The old men are still chattering in Italian, lighting their second cigarettes, and taking covert swigs from a silver flask. Their tone is energetic but there's something relaxed about them. The way they gesture at one another, like they have all the time in the world to explain their points. I imagine it's us, Adriano, Bobby, Morelli and I. All in our seventies, our fighting days behind us. Enjoying the sunshine as we commiserate an old friend passing.

As I watch an older woman approaches the men. Her grey hair is short and her face, though lined, is small and pretty. One of the old boys says something and she swats his arm, chiding him in a Neapolitan dialect I know all too well. My heart lurches in my chest like a fish.

I can't go to Vegas.

I can't kill Parker.

I need to protect my brothers.

I need to protect January.

The anger inside me twists higher, howling in protest but it might as well be the wind. My mind has locked and bolted.

I can't go to Vegas.

I can't kill Parker.

I can't have my revenge.

I need to protect January.

"Nico?" a voice whispers. "Can we go?"

I turn and see a veiled January hesitating on the steps and all of my anger redirects itself, locking in on her. I grip her upper arm. "Oh, we can fucking go alright. Follow me."

I practically drag her past the old guys, all of whom turn to stare at her ass.

Take a good fucking look, boys, I think, my teeth gritted tight. That's all you'll ever do.

January seems dazed as we head back to the car. Out of it. I don't fucking care. I'm giving up everything for her. My whole fucking world.

I unlock the BMW and practically shove her into the back seat. She doesn't protest, if anything she goes easily. I climb in after her yanking off her hat and veil. After an hour of looking at black material, the sight of her perfect face makes my heart ache. I ignore it and I reach for the chain around her neck and pull it over her head. I don't need Zia Teresa judging what I'm about to do. January blinks up at me, mute and perfect. Perfect enough that I have to fight to keep my anger in place. I toss the necklace into the driver's seat and grab her chin. "Here's what's about to happen, Tesorina. I have to give up something important for you. So you're gonna give up something important to me."

She stares at me. Her dress has ridden up, exposing her creamy thighs to the afternoon sun. "I don't... what is it?"

"I think you can figure it out from context cues. Pull down your panties."

Her eyes go glassy as she complies, shimmying her pink thong down her legs. But the few seconds it takes her is enough for me to lose all my remaining control. I grip a fistful of her hair and pull her face close to mine. "Kiss me. And make it good, not like the high school bullshit you've done so far."

I expect her to slap me. Instead, she launches herself at me like a horny demon. When she presses her lips on mine, I'm so surprised, I don't kiss her back. "Tits..."

She grips my hair and goes in again, sliding her sweet little tongue into my mouth. She's all over me, tugging up her long skirt and grinding her hips. I can't fucking believe it. I was

going to take whatever I could from her, but this is wild. It feels like she's gonna sit on my cock and ride me to hell.

Her fingers fumble at my tie and she practically tears my shirt open. She runs her hands across my chest, scratching at my tattoos. "You have such an amazing body."

She's humping up against me and her pussy is soaking, I can feel it through my suit pants. I make an animalistic noise, something that sounds crazy even to my own ears and she licks the side of my neck. "Nico..."

What the fuck is going on? Did I leave some Orchard lying around or something? I grip her face and stare into her eyes. They're full of unshed tears. This isn't passion. This is the need to think and feel anything but what she's thinking and feeling, and that's fine with me. I let go of her cheeks and press a hand to her throat. "You're gonna give me whatever I want or I'm gonna hurt you. You got that you, little nymph?"

She nods and I force her back onto the car seat. As I unbutton my pants I glance through the windshield. There's no one around but that's no guarantee people couldn't come past. And the windows are tinted but not so tinted you couldn't see through them up close. But fuck it, let them watch. Let everyone fucking watch me make January mine.

I slide two fingers into her willing cunt and January gives a yelp that turns into a moan. She contracts around me, her pussy as desperate as the rest of her. "Doc. *Nico*."

"Domenico," I correct, pistoning inside her. "That's the only thing you call me when I'm in your cunt, understood?"

She nods, pushing against my fingers, a look of pure ecstasy on her face.

"Oh my God, I'm so full. I'm so *full*."

My fingers are drenched to the palm, my dick aching like it's never been touched before. I could fuck her, ram my cock inside her and make her grind up against the base until she creamed all over me... Instead, I slip a thumb onto her clit and

watch her face light up. “You like that, you slutty little virgin? You like getting finger fucked outside a church?”

Her look of tortured misery combines with a flood of girl-juice. I laugh and pump her harder, faster. “You’re so twisted. I fucking love it. Now come. Show me what a whore you are.”

She closes her eyes to concentrate but at the last second I change my mind, pulling my fingers away. She’s not allowed to come. This isn’t about her. “You’re gonna get dick now, okay?”

She nods, still adorable despite the inferno she’s thrown me into. “I want to feel it, Domenico. Pleaaaaase?”

She purrs the word like it’s got nine extra syllables, her eyes are narrowed, her cheeks and forehead flushed.

Some part of me is aware I shouldn’t do this, take her coveted virginity in the back seat of a probably stolen car, but I’m already shoving down my briefs and pulling out my cock. She wraps her hand around me and my eyes roll back in my head. Her sloppy tugs reignite the anger boiling in my gut and I lean down and sink my teeth into the side of her neck.

Again, I expect a slap, again all I get is a gasping cry.

“I’m gonna eat you alive,” I snarl, hardly aware of what I’m saying. “I’ll kill you, then myself and everyone else in the whole fucking world.”

She pumps me, sending every blood cell in my body to my shaft. “Why don’t you just... instead?”

I can’t. She can’t even say what she wants me to do to her. It’s wrong. It’s so fucking wrong, but then she’s settling over me, sliding her slippery pussy across everything. My cock is toying with her unfucked entrance. One good shove and I’d be in her, ending it all.

Why can’t I do it? Why haven’t I already done it?

But I know. The others will forgive me for taking January to the funeral. They’d forgive me for shooting Parker before the contract’s signed. They’d forgive me for running Velvet

House into the ground with Nick Cage level spending, but if I jack this girl's virginity in a stolen car in Brooklyn, they'll never look at me again. Not Bobby. Not Morelli. Especially not Adriano.

With monumental effort, I wrap my hands around January's hips and lift her off me. "No."

Her face contorts. "Doc!"

I slap her ass. "Domenico, and if you wanna fuck the pain away, that's fine, but your first time won't be like this."

"But—"

I slap her again. "Keep pushing me and I'll spank your ass purple. I won't stop until you bleed."

Her mouth twists. "I'm sorry, I just want to feel bad."

I examine her, so light and lush she might be a dream, and a filthy, *putrid* idea occurs to me. "You really wanna get fucked?"

She nods frantically, the pain inside her held back by a thread.

"You don't mind if it hurts?"

"I *want* it to hurt. I want to feel bad."

And that's all the answer I need. I lower her onto my lap. "Hold still."

She makes a soft mewling noise and screws her eyes shut.

I spit on my fingers then pause. Am I *really* going to do this? It would easily make the top five worst things I've ever done; banging a virgin's asshole after her Zia's funeral...

But it wouldn't be *the* worst thing that I've ever done. And surely, that's what counts?

I rub my slippery fingers against January's asshole and she lets out a yelp. "What are you—"

"Shut your mouth." I grip her hair in my free hand. "I call the shots from here on out. You got that?"

“Yes, *Domenico*.”

I groan, my throat vibrating with satisfaction. “Except that. You’ve got permission to say that as much as you like, Tits.”

I shift her into my lap, lining up my cock with her tiny rosebud. January whimpers, but there’s no hesitation on her face. I draw a quick breath then push. The tip slides into her tight ass. She’s hot and wet, resistant and willing at the same time. She gasps as I withdraw, taking it easy, listening for any sign that she’s in pain.

“More,” she pants.

I ignore her. She’s so fuck drunk she doesn’t know what she’s saying. I press forward even slower this time and the whole head of my dick glides into her. I clamp my hands on her ass to stop myself from ramming the rest of the way in. “*Motherfucker...*”

It’s like warm velvet wrapped around my cock and as I struggle to hold still and give her time to adjust, the little bitch *rocks against me*. I slide in another silken inch and stars pop in front of my eyes. “January! For fuck’s sake!”

“I’m sorry,” she pants, bouncing up and down. “Can you do more? Can you do it faster?”

Jesus fucking Christ, I’m dying. I only planned on giving her the tip, but this perfect slut of a girl is so dripping, so fuck starved, so ‘letters to Penthouse’ horny, she’s trying to jam more of my dick into her asshole. I close my eyes and offer God the second genuine prayer I’ve thought this week. *Dear Lord, I don’t deserve for this to be happening, but since it is, I have to thank someone.*

I’m not really fucking her, just rolling a little, but as we move together, it all slides in. I’m no Adriano Rossi, but my cock isn’t a small thing, yet it’s all inside January Whitehall.

Her fingers limply clutch my shoulders. “*Domenico...*”

She sounds drunk. Drugged. Utterly taken over.

Her virgin walls squeeze my shaft and I can't remember the last time I felt this alive. When I accidentally made Orchard maybe, or never. I shift my hips, setting a slow, rocking pace. I wait for her to tell me to stop, that it hurts, or that she hates me, but she just keeps pushing down on my cock. She's fucking *into it*.

I tighten my grip on her hips. "That's it, let me fuck your cute little asshole in public."

"Yes, Domenico."

I press my hand to her slender neck and squeeze so tight, her eyes fly open. "Those sweet slutty noises are gonna make me blow in your ass."

January makes a garbled sound, but her eyes say, '*do it, you dirty bastard.*'

"...but you're gonna go first."

I angle her backward. Her pussy is dark pink, as flushed as her cheeks.

"*Soon,*" I tell it as I lay a thumb on her clit. "Very soon, I'm going to fuck you."

She grabs at me. "I don't think I can come like this."

I grip her wrists, pinning her tiny hands in my free one. "You're just not used to anal orgasms. You're barely used to any orgasms, so why would I listen to you?"

"But—"

"But you don't get to decide what happens to your body anymore, Tits. You gave that up when we stole you, didn't you?"

"Yes."

I thrust upward, bouncing her as I rub small circles around her clit. "You belong to us now. And if you think you like it in the asshole, you've got no idea. Me and the boys are gonna split you open, three on one. Bobby in your cunt, Morelli in

your mouth, and me right where I am now, balls-deep in your ass.”

She lets out a desperate moan, contracting around my cock. I should still be going slow, but I’m pounding into her and I can’t fucking stop. January’s empty cunt is gushing all over my cock. The dirty talk is sending her into orbit and I’ve never been above cheap tricks.

“Oh, you like the sound of that, don’t you?” I pant. “You wanna get railed by all three of us? Or do you want us to make it four? Adriano likes going last. He’ll fuck you in all your holes and try to breed you when he’s done. Push his cum inside you and knock you up.”

January’s limbs shake as her walls milk my cock. “Oh God, *Nico!*”

I clench my jaw to keep from nutting and pray she doesn’t need any more to tip her over because I’m done. She screws her face up and goes still, her whole body locking with pleasure.

Swearing with relief, I let go too and as she closes around me, part of my mind pushes out of my head and explodes, never to return.

“Oh, *fuck!*”

I’ve never heard her swear before. Something about that realization coupled with what we just did makes me want to wrap my arms around her. Instead, I pull out as slowly as I can. There aren’t baby wipes, but there’s a handkerchief in my pants pocket. I grab it and help January clean herself up.

My head spins like a fairground ride. I was the first man to come in January Whitehall. Well, unless you count her mouth... Whatever, I was still the first to fuck her. And the first to kiss her. What more could a man want?

“I’m sorry,” she pants, and I know she means for making this all happen.

“Don’t be. That was fucking life-affirming.”

I lift her into the passenger seat and help her clean up. Once she's done, we collapse against the leather. It's the same afternoon in the same lonely side street. The world is probably the same, even though I just fucked January Whitehall in the ass. That doesn't seem right. There should be a parade. Or at least a blimp.

"You didn't make love to me," January says. "Even though I asked you to."

"I know," I say, still mildly amazed at my self control. "Good for me."

"It just keeps happening. First Adriano and now you."

The miffed note in her voice makes me grin. "Maybe we're just trying to do right by you."

She gives me a look. "By doing what you just did to my..."

"Asshole," I finish. "You've gotta start saying it, Tits. I fucked your asshole, and it was unbelievable. Like... I literally can't believe you let me do that."

"Isn't it normal?"

"Maybe for porn stars, not Park Avenue virgins."

She giggles, I can tell she's proud of herself. My heart does the weird flipping thing again. I touch a hand to my sternum, trying to get it to stop.

"Nico?"

I look into the side mirror. What the fuck is happening to me? I suck in air and the ache in my chest eases a little. I turn back to January. "We need to get home."

"Okay," she says lightly.

We climb into the front seat and I start the car and pull away, my body still pulsing with pleasure, paranoia, and nicotine withdrawal.

"Are we going back to the clothes store?" January asks.

“No way can I give this suit back to the old guy after what we just did. I’ll drop you off at Velvet House then circle back for the Dodge.”

January shifts around until she finds her necklace. “That’s a long drive.”

“I like driving, Tits. Driving and swimming. It relaxes me. You can put more music on, by the way.”

She fiddles around with the radio and settles on some alternative station. A female voice comes through the speakers, gritty and soulful. She sings about love healing you from the ground up and my skin feels too tight. My heart feels too big. I keep my gaze away from January. I think I know what’s happening, but Christ I’m not ready to admit it.

You’re a sulky bitch, Dom.

The ache in my chest rips wider. It’s still so easy to imagine her. My dead big sister, the psychotic blonde. I imagine taking January to Alessia’s house for dinner. Chinese takeout or maybe fish sticks. Alessia’d make fun of me for dating someone so young. She’d be divorced a million times by now. Or maybe she and Beckett would have made it. Had a bunch of kids and a house by the water.

“What should I tell the others we’ve been doing?” January asks.

I snort. “You can tell them I fucked you in the ass and you loved it.”

“Not that. About where we’ve been today.”

“Oh. Say whatever you want. Tell the truth.”

“It wouldn’t matter?”

“We’ve gone now, so no.”

“Is that how it works at Velvet House?”

“Basically.”

She frowns. “Is that why Adriano took me to the hospital to see Zia Teresa? Because you’re allowed to get away with things if you get away with them?”

It’s a good way of putting it, but I don’t want to talk about Adriano. “Do you think I’ll get away with doing you from the back again when we get home?”

January presses her hand to her lips and I’m sure it’s to cover a smile.

A decent song comes on the radio, and I turn it up. We drive along, not talking for a bit. Is this how other people feel when they’re with their girlfriends? If so, I get the whole relationship thing a lot more. It’s... nice.

“Doc,” January says in a fluttery voice. “Is Adriano okay?”

I say nothing.

“I wouldn’t bring it up, but I know he’s been your friend ever since high school—”

“Elementary.”

“Wow.” She blinks. “It’s so hard to imagine Adriano as a kid.”

“Lose the beard and it’s about the same.”

She doesn’t smile. “Where is he, Nico? This morning I heard Harvey telling Sal that he’s not in the house. Has he... run away?”

I grin at the thought of Adriano loping down the street with a red handkerchief bundle on a stick. “No.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know.”

She looks up at me through her thick black lashes. “Nico, please?”

“You can’t just look at me like that and whisper my name every time you want something, Tits.”

She gives me a couple of slow, cutesy blinks and I sigh. “He hasn’t gone anywhere. He’s out living in the woods like a yeti.”

“What?”

“He built a cabin out in the forest near Velvet House,” I explain. “Whenever he gets sad, he stays out there. But he’s less than three miles away. Fishing in the stream.”

“Oh.” January toys with her gold medallion. “He made a cabin? Like he built it himself?”

She sounds way too impressed.

“It’s a shithole. And by that I mean he’s literally dug a hole to shit in.”

She wrinkles her nose. “But how does he eat and drink and stuff?”

I shrug, because the truth—he shoots deer and drinks out of the stream—will only play into whatever shirtless ‘man of the woods’ thing she’s imagining.

January sighs. “I wish you’d all forgive him for taking me to the hospital. I thought your friendship was bigger than that.”

“Hey, you don’t get to go putting that on me. He went out there on his own.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a nutjob.”

“I don’t think Adriano’s a nutjob.” She rubs her St. Christopher, polishing the surface with her thumb. “Has he really strangled any women to death?”

I burst out laughing.

“Nico!”

“I’m sorry, you just make shit way too easy.”

“So you lied to me?”

The wounded look on her face makes me feel like an asshole. I reach across the center console and grab her hand. Touching her still feels like touching dry ice, but I force myself to keep going. “I’m sorry, Tits. After that gold star fuck, I should be worshiping your little body, not making you sad.”

Her mouth lifts. “Thank you.”

I hold her for a second longer and then pull away, resisting the urge to shake out my fingers like when you have a sprain. How? How is it so easy to fuck her in the ass and so hard to touch her gently?

January loops her St. Christopher chain over her neck and holds the tiny medallion in her hand. “I know you love him.”

“Huh?”

“Adriano. Even if you won’t admit it and you’re always rude to each other, I know you love each other. Eli and Bobby, too.”

I open my mouth to say something but decide not to bother. Let the girl have her ideas. A lively bluegrass song comes on the radio, and I turn it up again.

“Nap if you want to, Tits. I’ll wake you up when we get home.”



THERE’S A WELCOMING committee back at Velvet House. Bobby and Morelli, standing on the front steps glaring at us.

“Oh no,” January mumbles. “What do we do?”

“Test how strong our brotherly love is,” I tell her. “You make a break for it. I’ve got this.”

But she stays and gets out of the car when I do, her head bowed like the pretty little schoolgirl she is. Bobby takes her arm and checks her over like the mother hen *he is*. Morelli’s face is like thunder. “You took her to her Zia’s funeral.”

“I did.”

I could tell Morelli I fucked January in the asshole, too. But why make the guy's head explode? Besides, telling him would be tacky. And nothing about what January and I did in that BMW was tacky.

“You.” Morelli rounds on January. “Upstairs. Now.”

This time she doesn't protest, just nods meekly and skips away. I watch her go, glad what we did doesn't seem to have hurt her. A half-smile curls my lips.

“Don't you fucking smirk, you *pezzo di merda*.” Morelli points a finger in my face. “Did you ever, in your pestilent, rotting brain, consider I might have agreed to let you take her to the funeral if you'd discussed it with me?”

I rub my forehead, suddenly as tired as I was this morning. “Do you ever think that maybe it's none of your business what I do?”

Morelli glares at me and I sense he's not going to let up until I admit I was wrong.

“Fine, I fucked up. Send me to the gulag. Do whatever you want.”

His nostrils flare. “And the money?”

“What money?”

“The money you gave Teresa Calderoli's daughters. A hundred thousand dollars each. Bobby found them raving about it in some email. It came from Velvet House.”

A small gasp makes me look up. January is hiding behind one of the marble pillars, a hand pressed to her mouth. That brat.

I return my gaze to Morelli. “I didn't give the daughters shit. January and I went to the funeral and left. That's all.”

“Then who...?”

The answer occurs to him at the same time it hits me. We turn to look at the forest edging the grounds of Velvet House.

“Adriano,” Bobby says. “Holed up by the river like the fucking Unabomber. Does he have power out there yet?”

“Nope, but he’ll have his phone.” I scratch my head. “It makes sense he’d pay out. He feels responsible for getting the old girl killed.”

“That’s on Parker.” Morelli sighs. “Do you think he’ll ever come back to the house?”

“I don’t know. And after what happened when his mom died, I wouldn’t risk going out there to ask.”

“He needs to be here for the contract signing. Parker won’t go along with it unless we’re all present.”

The front door slams and Morelli swears. “The girl was still here, wasn’t she?”

“Yup,” I say. “Wanna bet she’s changing into comfortable shoes?”

“She can’t go after Adriano,” Bobby says. “She’ll get lost. Eli, should I stop her?”

Morelli grimaces. “Dealing with you people will make me lose my hair, then where will we be?”

“In the same place,” I suggest. “But you’ll be less vain?”

He gives me a hard look. “I need you both in the dining room in fifteen. We have a thousand things to discuss. Leave the girl. She won’t be able to find Adriano, anyway.”

He turns on his heels and Bobby trails after him, leaving me staring at the forest. I gnaw at one of my fingernails. I sort of told January where to find Adriano. Three miles from the house by the stream. She’s not a girl scout, but I’ve underestimated her before. Christ knows what Adriano will do if she finds him. I pull out my phone and type.

January knows you gave her Zia’s kids money. Ready or not, here she comes, big guy.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Adriano Rossi

THE KNIFE SLIDES cleanly through the deer's belly, cutting along the pubic bone. It's a good deer, fifteen hands with short horns. It's late in the day to be field dressing, but the deer wandered up to the cabin to drink from the stream and when life hands you those shots, you take them. The bullet wound in my side stings as I work, but I ignore it. It'll heal eventually. Everything does. When Parker's shot only grazed my head, I wasn't surprised. I survive while the people around me die. It's always been that way.

The afternoon sun ruffles the stream, making it spark silver and gold. I stop dressing the deer and watch it. The others can think I'm unreasonable all they want, but this place is my home now.

It's only when I'm out here that the hard music in my head fades away. It's where I can sleep, where I can breathe without feeling like concrete is pressing on my skull. I only left the forests of Italy to help my brothers build our business and avenge our loved ones. While Parker lived, I needed to be in the world. That's not true anymore. Soon the contract will be signed and the vengeance I've dedicated my life to will be null and void. It stings, but only until I remember the girl. Her cameo pale body beneath mine, her green eyes pleading for everything I could never give her.

It's a fair price, my revenge for her safety. And living here is a compromise I'm willing to make. I have enough money to stay here for a hundred years. To let time become as

meaningless as the rest of my life. The girl will marry Eli or Bobby, and Doc will manipulate the situation to suit him somehow. And I'll hunt and fish and watch the leaves change color.

The others can compete for the girl's heart. I only want to watch from a distance and think about her.

I turn and look through the trees that lead to Velvet House. There are more remote places, but I don't need to strike out into the wilderness and get shot by some asshole sport hunter. I'm comfortable here. I'm near my friends. Near her. On still nights I'll hear music coming from the house, laughter and parties and all the shit Eli loves. And one day I'll hear her children playing on the grounds and that won't be so bad either. They won't be mine. But I can imagine.

I cut the hide away from the abdominal lining, lifting it so I don't nick the stomach. The meat won't be ready until tomorrow but there's no reason why I can't—

“Adriano?”

The voice is as soft and sweet as the sunshine in the water. I remember her gasps as I licked the soft petals of her cunt. The way she came on my face, grinding her hips as hard as she could, both hating and craving the release I could give her. I've dreamed about her coming to find me. Pumped my cock to thoughts of her climbing onto me in the dark. *'Please, I need it. I can't sleep without you.'*

I turn.

She's too beautiful to be real. Too small and slim. Her skin statue white, her dark hair pouring down her shoulders. She should be an oil painting hanging in some museum, but she's real. I know because there's always movement. The light glinting off her green eyes, her small hands knotting at her sides. She stands there in a floaty white dress and sneakers, rocking back and forth as though she expects me to come after her with the knife in my hand. The thought stirs my blood. I could hold it to her throat and take her, fuck her until she

screams my name. Breed her sweet body with my child so that when her stomach curves and her skin glows, I'll know I've made myself a part of her.

“Adriano? Is it okay that I'm visiting you?”

I watch her worry her plush lower lip with her teeth. She's terrified, but I can see her tits through her dress and her nipples are hard.

I get to my feet, bloody knife still in my hand. The girl's pupils dilate, and I think of the unknowing deer drinking by the stream an hour ago. An innocent creature I killed because I could. Because I wanted to.

“You still scared of me?”

She shakes her head. Little liar.

The afternoon she tried to seduce me, she was terrified, too. The thought of it brings the scent of grappa and clean skin to my mind. We were in my bed, her body under mine, and she was panting and telling me to take her innocence. To rip it open and make it mine. And I wanted to, my cock was so hard it felt like the only real part of me, but I couldn't. Couldn't corrupt her. Couldn't take something offered in desperation.

“Is your side feeling better?” she asks.

I continue drinking in the sight of her in the dappled afternoon sun. The most beautiful thing in my favorite place. January Whitehall.

In another life, we're lovers. I'd lie back and tell her to hurt me. To use her fists and teeth and nails. To give me everything she has. I'd feel the stinging little blows and watch it dawn on her pretty face that she can never protect herself against me, but that I will never again use my strength to harm her. But that experience belongs to some other place and time. She'll always be mine, but I gave up the pleasure to use her when I gave up my right to kill Zachery Parker. She belongs to Velvet House now.

“I'm fine,” I tell her. “Go back to the house.”

She stares at my middle and when I glance down, I see my T-shirt is covered in blood and hair. I look like an animal. A killer. Heat spreads across my face. I never realized how cold my baseline is until I see her and everything scorches hot. “Go.”

She doesn't move. “You gave Zia's daughters money.”

“I didn't do it for you.” My voice is raspy from disuse. I clear my throat.

“I just wanted to say thanks. Zia's daughters paid for a wonderful funeral and now they can put money aside for college funds or whatever they need. Their lives are changed forever because of you.”

“Their lives were already changed because of me.”

The girl's face falls. “I hope you don't blame yourself.”

I squat beside the deer, and resume cutting its abdomen.

“Mr. Parker was always going to punish me for ruining our wedding,” she says. “He told me in the limousine. Even if you hadn't taken me to the hospital, he wouldn't have let her survive.”

I cut away the hide, careful not to damage it. I don't need Parker explained to me by a child. Especially since he'll walk free now. Live a long, profitable life making hell for anyone who crosses his path.

“Adriano...?” Her voice is closer. She's closer. “Can I help you?”

For a second I think she means emotionally, then I look at the knife in my hand. “Help cut up a dead deer?”

“Yes.”

I turn and look at her. I expect to see nervousness, but there's just mild curiosity. “Why?”

“Butchering is an important part of the cooking process,” she says as though we're in school and a teacher just called on her.

I look at the animal. The thing is half her size. “You’ll fuck up your dress.”

“I’m sure Eli will get me another one.”

I don’t know why I do it. Maybe some crazed loneliness, or her beauty, or just the cool clear afternoon. I turn the knife and hand it to her, handle first.

She takes it eagerly, crouching beside me. “What should I do?”

“Hold it firmly,” I hear myself say. “If you cut yourself, it’s your own fucking fault.”

She doesn’t flinch as I guide her hand, showing her how to slice upward through the hide so you don’t get hair on the meat and avoid the stomach and lower colon. She’s not strong enough to saw through the pelvic bone so I take over, slicing the deer wide and pulling the guts into a bucket to throw away. I cut out the heart and liver, tossing them onto a clean patch of grass. January watches in fascination as I wash the deer’s insides with river water then string it up along a tree branch.

“Aren’t you going to pull off all the hair and cut out the venison?” she asks.

“No. You need to leave it for at least a day, so the rigor mortis wears off and the meat goes soft.”

She looks away. I’m sure the phrase rigor mortis made her think of dead people. Probably the ones I’ve killed.

Good. Run away and leave me alone.

Without something to do, I’m far too aware of her body, her breasts, her lips, her shy smile. She only came here to thank me. Whatever happens, I will not reveal any more of myself to this girl.

She stands and wanders closer to the water. “Did someone teach you to hunt?”

“No.”

She toes off one of her white sneakers. “You taught yourself?”

“No.”

“Then how...?”

“The men who worked for Eli’s Nonno hunted boar. Sometimes, I went with them.”

Not that they wanted me to come. I was big and young, and I was an outsider. I barely spoke Italian and what I knew I confused with English and Ukrainian. Doc told me they’d shoot me in the back of the head when I wasn’t looking, but they didn’t. They let me camp with them. As I began to bring down boar and red stag and roe deer, they stopped laughing at me. Instead, they passed me bottles of homemade grappa, the glass already blurry with greasy fingerprints.

The girl is looking at me and I sense her curiosity and longing. I might not be the only one remembering our turn in my bed. But what the fuck am I supposed to do about that? Invite her into my cabin? Give her flowers or kisses or whatever the fuck normal men do?

She shifts her weight, pushing off her other sneaker then bending to pull off her sock.

“What are you doing?”

She blinks at me. “Cooling off.”

“I told you, you’ll ruin your dress.”

She smiles sweetly and then in a long, heart-stopping moment, pulls the floaty material over her head.

She’s naked underneath, her porcelain skin shimmering in the sun. My mouth dries over. “Are you fucked in the head?”

She moves toward the water, her ass swaying in a confusing mix of the refined and the erotic. “I don’t know, maybe?”

She steps into the stream, gasping at how cold it is. I wait for her to dive, my cock hard against my leg, but she turns in a

slow circle. "It's so nice."

I can't talk. I can't blink. I can't move.

She scoops up a palmful of crystal water and splashes it across her breasts. My head squeezes like it's in a vise. "I don't have anything to dry you with."

"That's okay, I can use my dress."

The fading sunlight dots the stream with flecks of gold. They dance around January Whitehall like they're drawn to her. But of course, they are. Everything bright should be.

She raises her arms above her head and turns in a half-circle, humming a song that's almost familiar. Then she lowers her arms and lifts a leg, diamond droplets clinging to her shoulders. She's dancing for me. Dancing the way she used to dance in her ballet studio when I was pretending to be a janitor. Only now she's not in leggings and a leotard, she's naked in every way she can be.

She holds her hands in front of herself and then spins. Our eyes meet for just a second and I understand. She's thanking me, letting me watch without having to touch. Without having to force things or hurt her the way I would if we fucked.

That's another reason I didn't take her virginity. Fear that I'd break the honey sweetness that radiates from every inch of her. But like this... with her in the water, I can't get to her, and I don't want to.

I sit on the stream bank and unbuckle my belt. Her ballet outfits were always tight but now I don't have to imagine her bare tits swaying, the flashes of her pink cunt. I can see it all as she spins for me.

My cock hurts when I take it in my fist. It's as big and ugly as I am, as marked with scars and tattoos. The girl's breath catches in her throat as I tug, but she keeps dancing, pretending to be oblivious. We're both pretending now. I shouldn't be doing this, I swore I'd let her be happy with my brothers, with some other, less damaged man. But here I am, stroking off to her, letting her see exactly how I feel.

I pull myself tight and fast. I can almost taste her rose-pink nipples, almost feel her sweet breath at my throat. Her dancing slows. She runs her hands over her tits, and I make a guttural sound like a wounded dog. That's all I am, a filthy beast panting after a beauty I could never possess.

Our eyes meet again, and I look away, pain and lust rising in me like a tide. I disgust myself, but I can't stop pumping, can't stop making myself come to her. I think of her on her knees with my gun in her mouth and my balls tighten up.

“More. Keep moving.”

She does. When she danced ballet, she was so scared she'd get something wrong and disappoint her teachers. Now she's moving like the water around her, rippling like the afternoon sun. In my dreams, she's always dressed as a ballerina, one leg on the barre as I fuck her. But this is better. This is everything.

I come with a grunt, striping white across my hands. I look up and the treetops spin. Stupid. Reckless.

A whimper makes me open my eyes. The girl is standing stock-still in the water, a hand pressed between her legs. My semi-hard cock pulses. “You liked that, huh?”

She doesn't say anything, but her head gives the slightest incline. I scrape out a laugh. “Are you gonna rub your little cunt? Show me how much you liked it?”

Her soft lips part and she mumbles something.

“What?”

“Would you... do it for me?”

I look at her, a glowing goddess in the crystal stream. I look at myself, at the mess of cum and scar tissue and ink and deer blood on my hands. “You deserve better, Pryntsesa.”

Pink tinges her pale cheeks. “I like when you call me that.”

For a second I feel my lips curving upward, then my stomach plummets. All at once I feel like I do when I'm in public without a gun. Naked. I turn, wiping my palms on the

grass. “You need to leave. Get your slutty dress on and go back to the house.”

The girl’s face falls. She takes her hands away from her pussy. That small sacred place I’ll never corrupt.

“Adriano... Can’t I just like you?”

That twisting feeling in my chest again. Why can’t this girl be bitchier? Why can’t she cry and whine and beg?

I stand, pulling up the fly on my stained hunting pants. “There’s nothing to like.”

“Maybe we just see you differently.”

“Are you out of your mind, little girl? I threatened to kill you a hundred times. I fucked your mouth with a gun. Twice. And I liked it.”

I would have done anything Eli ordered me to do, but when January Whitehall arrived, I wanted to abuse her. I hated her, this princess that had everything—that everyone wanted. I was already coming to thoughts of her every night and now she was in my home, invading my space as well as my head. I wanted to kill her. At least I thought I did.

“I like you,” she says softly. “Under everything, I think you have a good heart.”

I bark out a laugh. “You gonna cure me with your love, little girl?”

She lowers her head, her bare tits shining in the setting sun. I want to find her a towel. I want her to leave and never come back.

“Wake up, Pryntsesa,” I say, striding back to the deer. “I want to shoot a load in you, same as any straight man with eyes, but I’m not some dog you’re gonna train. This is where I belong.”

It’s still too soon to carve the meat but I pick up my knife and slice into the front leg. I want to hurt something that can’t

feel. I want to be alone. There aren't enough intact places inside me for me to love. How can she not see that?

She steps out of the water, brushing her hands across her sides. I watch out of the corner of my eye as she picks up her dress and pulls it over her head. Her movements are exaggerated. She wants me to look. She's changing already. Living at Velvet House, away from her family and the threat of Parker, there's something flirtatious to her that wasn't there before. But I don't mourn her inexperience. She has an innocence of heart, not body. She'll always be pure, sweet and soft as a cloud.

When she's dressed and her shoes are back on her feet, she walks toward me carefully, as if I was a caged bear.

"You bring out this side of me," she says. "You push me away, or you like... hate me, and it makes me want to try more."

"It's because your father is dead," I say, slicing through the haunch.

I expect her to withdraw, but she gives a small laugh. "Maybe I just like being this girl."

"What girl?"

She raises a hand to her mouth. "You look at me like I'm magic."

"You are magic."

It comes out without me wanting it to, involuntary as blood from a wound. My face burns, the places where the scars are go white as flame. I hack at the deer, sending strips of meat spraying across my chest and feet.

"Can I come visit you?" she asks.

I think of her, curled in my arms. The two of us sleeping under the stars. "Maybe."

Another soft laugh. "I guess that's a start. Will you think about coming up to the house for dinner sometime? Maybe

seeing the guys?”

“No.”

She sighs. “Adriano, I know you miss your friends.”

“I’m not a girl.”

“Only girls have friends? And family? Because that’s what you guys are. Family.”

“Family can fuck up, Pryntsesa.”

She frowns. “Do you mean them or you?”

I say nothing.

“There’s something I’m not seeing. Some reason that you can’t forgive each other that no one wants to admit.”

I think about that night we sat down, the four of us back at Velvet House for the first time since January’s abduction. I remember Eli’s judgement, Bobby’s disappointment, Doc’s mocking smile. I slash at a swell of the deer’s fat, carving it from the meat.

“There’s no bad blood between me and my brothers. But I’m not going to eat at the same table as the men who insulted me.”

Her brow furrows deeper. “What did they say?”

I stop slashing. I know I shouldn’t tell her, but the words are boiling up like poison, the injustice of it. The idiocy. “They said they wouldn’t have done what I did. That they think I was weaker than they would have been.”

January goes still. “You mean taking me to my Zia?”

I raise the knife again. “Yes.”

“They don’t think I could have gotten them to let me go see my Zia?”

There’s a heat in her voice I didn’t expect. An annoyance that makes my lips try to curve again.

“No, Pryntsesa, they don’t think you could have seduced them. They believe I’m more vulnerable to you because I watched you dance all those years.” *Because I’m in love with you.*

“All of them? Even Bobby?”

“Bobby was the one who said it first.”

Her pretty mouth falls open. “They’re wrong!”

I flick a piece of hide off the knife. “That’s what they think.”

“And what if I can prove they would have let me seduce them?” she says in a hard voice. “What if they admit it?”

I laugh. “They’ll never admit anything. Bobby maybe, but not Eli. And Doc’d cut out his tongue first.”

“I can do it.” Her face shines as she says the words, like a saint on a mission.

I turn my back to her. “Then go.”

“Okay, but I’ll be back. I’ll get them to admit they’re wrong.”

She walks toward the woods, then glances back at me over her shoulder. “Adriano, I know you hate everyone, and you’re mean, but I would like to spend more time with you.”

That damned twisting in my chest. The lightness and heaviness that’s more unbearable than pain. “You’re supposed to choose one of them, Pryntsesa. Not me.”

She flashes me a smile. “Maybe I’ll choose all of you. That’s what you wanted anyway.”

And before I can say anything, she slips through the trees and runs toward Velvet House.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

January Whitehall

WITH EVERY STEP I take back to Velvet House, the heat burning inside me rises another degree. Doc, Eli, and Bobby are holding Adriano's actions over his head, not because they're mad that he kidnapped me, but because they want him to admit he's weaker than them?

Idiots, Zia shouts in my mind. You show them who's weak!

"I will, Zia. I won't stop until every one of them says they'd have taken me to the hospital to see you."

I find the three of them in the dining room with their laptops and glasses of wine having another stupid meeting. The sun is setting in the huge windows behind them, flooding the room with the last of its reddish light. I take a moment to appreciate the beauty before I put my hands on my hips. "All of you need to apologize to Adriano. Tonight."

Eli doesn't even look up from his computer. "Go away, *bella*."

"No! You need to pay attention to me!"

Bobby smiles distractedly and Doc leans back in his chair and flashes me a grin. "Hey, Princess Mononoke."

I have no idea what that means, but I don't care. "Stop being mean to Adriano!"

"What's she talking about?" Eli asks Doc, his eyes still on his screen.

“She’s been in the woods killing a sacred deer with the He-Man and now she’s all pissy,” Doc says in a stage whisper.

“I am *not* all pissy. You guys are such—”

Doc lowers his chair to the floor with a thud. “I’m not saying I don’t want to know why we’re such jerks or whatever PG-13 insults you’ve come up with, Tits, but we’ve got a shitload of work to do. Go to your room. I’ll come finger you later.”

My head feels like it’s going to come right off. They’re ignoring me. No, even *worse*. Eli and Bobby are ignoring me, and *Doc* is banishing me to my room. Would it kill any of them to treat me even a little bit the way they treat each other?

“No!” I practically scream. “We’re going to talk now!”

“What the fuck?” Doc chokes.

Bobby looks up from his laptop, disturbed, but Eli’s face furrows in anger. “Miss Whitehall, not to reduce whatever very normal thing is making you act like this, but the three of us are working on the contract that will save your life.”

“I don’t care about that!”

“You don’t care about your life?”

“I do, I just... you shouldn’t have told Adriano you wouldn’t have done what he did.”

Eli’s brows draw together. “What are you talking about?”

“You all said you wouldn’t have taken me to the hospital if I offered you my virginity.”

The guys exchange looks.

“That’s what you’re upset about?” Bobby asks.

“It’s the same thing Adriano’s butthurt over,” Doc says. “He’s recruited her onto his PR team.”

I ignore him and focus on Eli. “When I was locked in my room after I found out about my Zia, you all stayed away

because you knew if you saw me, I could convince you to take me to her.”

Eli closes his laptop. “Or we left you alone because we have better things to do than deal with a hysterical little girl. Go upstairs.”

I don’t move. I promised Zia I’d get the better of them, and I will not bend. Adrenaline floods my system and suddenly I know exactly what I have to do.

“You would have done what Adriano did,” I tell Eli. “I can prove it.”

I pull my wet, bloodstained dress over my head and drop it to the floor.

As if I flicked a switch, the boys’ expressions morph from irritation to blank lust. I stand naked in their precious dining room, and look from stunned face to stunned face. Bobby blushes scarlet, Doc’s mouth falls open, and Eli’s jaw goes so tight I think his teeth might snap.

“I want to lose my virginity.”

My words sweep through the room like a summer breeze. Bobby’s eyes widen. Doc runs a hand across his angular jaw.

“Oh, you’ve decided that, have you?” Eli snaps.

“Yes.” I lift my hands, cupping my breasts. “Does anyone want to help me?”

Bobby makes a sound like a car stalling.

Eli glares at him. “Put your dress back on,” he tells me.

“Here are the terms of claiming my virginity,” I say. “Whoever admits, loudly and clearly, that they’re not better than Adriano and would have taken me to the hospital, can have me first.”

A long tense silence falls over the room.

Eli scowls.

Doc bites his fingernail.

Bobby tugs at the collar of his blue shirt.

I tighten my fingers around my boobs pressing them together. “This is a real shame. I just want to know what it’s like to have a man use my body for his pleasure.”

“*Jesus fucking Christ,*” Doc mutters.

The thing is, I’m not lying. I want to lose my virginity, hold it up to the sun before dashing it to my feet in a spray of blood and glory. I guess that’s why the guys aren’t getting angry. They know I mean it, they just don’t want to meet me on my terms. But they will.

“This isn’t going to work,” Bobby says in his math tutor voice. “You need to be respectful.”

“Respectful? To sleep with you?”

“Yes.”

Eli and Doc nod like he’s making sense.

“Get going, Tits,” Doc says. “Put your dress on and go for a walk.”

For a second my confidence falters, but then I think of all the beautiful strippers at Dreams. Of Betty. What would they do if they were in my position?

Bobby eyes my stomach and Eli is shifting in a way that says he’s hard inside his suit pants. They’re pretending to hold a united front but there are already cracks in it. And if I know anything about these men, it’s that they’ll turn on each other for a chance to touch me. All they’ve done is bet on my virginity and compete for it. The only difference is that this time, I’m in charge of who wins.

I approach the broad, wooden table and push a chair out of the way.

“What the hell are you doing?” Eli demands.

“Just playing,” I say, climbing onto the shining surface. “If you don’t like it, don’t look.”

But every pair of eyes remains glued to me as I get on all fours. Bobby is sitting bolt upright, and Doc's practically salivating. Only Eli regards my naked body with something close to contempt. "You're making a fool of yourself."

I arch my back. "Okay, I guess I'm making a fool of myself."

He gives a low growl, but doesn't say anything. He's waiting to see what I'll do next. I turn on my side then sit back, facing all of them. I exhale, praying I can pull this off, then I spread my legs apart.

Bobby slams a fist into his forehead. "*January...*"

"Fucking hell, Tits."

Eli's amber eyes gleam. "Very pretty. Now run along."

But the rush of positive feedback has me more confident than ever. I swish my hair over one shoulder, letting it flow over my body like a waterfall. All three of them follow the movement as though hypnotized.

"I wish someone would come and play with me," I say, trailing one hand across my abdomen. "I've been waiting *such* a long time."

"If she touches her cunt, I'm done for," Doc tells Eli. "I want you to know that."

He scowls. "Give in and I'll slit your throat. Miss Whitehall, get the fuck off my table."

"No." I focus my attention on Bobby, who's struggling not to stare between my legs. His cheeks are burning so brightly it's hard to believe they'll ever be normal again. Adriano said Bobby might admit he was wrong. And if he does, I think Doc might follow.

I lift my hand to my breasts and pinch my left nipple. I meant it as a tease, but electricity radiates from the pressure point, making my flower tingle.

Bobby gives a helpless groan. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not doing anything.” I caress my other breast, trailing my nails over my sensitive skin. “Although, if you say, *I would have let January seduce me into escaping,*’ you can be the first man to ever slide inside my pussy...”

“JJ,” Bobby warns, but the edge in his voice is gone. Even his charade of being annoyed is failing. He’s going to break, I’m sure of it.

“Bobby? Could you please come and touch me?”

I close my fingers over my right nipple and tug lightly, parting my lips in pleasure. “*Oh...*”

Bobby throws a desperate glance at his brothers. “What about them? They’ll still be here.”

Doc is staring at my flower and doesn’t look far from breaking himself.

“They can watch,” I say. “Doc once told me he likes playing second string, didn’t you, *Nico?*”

Doc glances up at my face, his bright blue eyes narrowed. “You ready to be my little cum slut?”

“Not yet,” I say, making my voice all sugary. “Not until you say what I want you to.”

Doc’s face tears between lust and laughter. He pounds the table. “I knew it. I just knew you were gonna be worth kidnapping.”

“*Chiudi quel cazzo di bocca,*” Eli says flatly. *Shut your stupid mouth.*

Yet his eyes follow my fingertips as I slide them up my legs. He’s as helpless as the others. He just needs a reason to give in.

I trace hearts across my inner thighs. I’m swollen and dizzy and my flower is throbbing. An hour ago, I would have found this impossible, but now I *want* to do it.

“I guess if no one’s going to touch me...”

“Sweet fucking Christ,” Doc says.

I run a single fingertip along my outer lips “...I’ll have to do it myself...”

Eli snaps his fingers. “Miss Whitehall, come here.”

I feel the pull toward him like a million invisible bonds, but I close my eyes and find I have the strength to disobey.

“I think I’ll stay here,” I say, spreading my soaking pink folds.

Bobby jumps to his feet. “Fuck!”

“I’m so weak,” Doc mumbles. “So *weak*.”

Eli makes a noise like a cut snake. “*Ragazzaccia.*” *Bad girl.*

I rub myself lightly, the way I used to when I was alone in my bed with no one to talk to. It feels so good to do it under the spotlight of their attention that I let out a moan. “That feels so *nice*.”

No one says anything. All three of them are dumbstruck. It’s like when I was on Orchard, but better because now I want them here. I want them looking at my body. The knowledge makes me dip lower, toying with my entrance.

I open my eyes and see that Doc looks like he’s in physical pain. “What the fuck has gotten into you, Tits?”

“I don’t know,” I breathe. “Maybe I’m just ready.”

“Ready to blackmail us,” Eli mutters.

I decide to use another weapon. A word I’ve been saving just for him. “It’s not blackmail to tell the truth, *daddy*.”

Eli freezes and I watch his pupils dilate. “You...” His face hardens, rage taking over. “You’ll pay for that.”

I can’t bring myself to say ‘*I hope so*’ but I can press my fingertip inside my flower. I’m soaking wet, and when my

slippery flesh contracts around myself, I moan. “Oh my gosh...”

“Shit,” Bobby hisses, “Can’t you just come here and give in, JJ?”

I shake my head. “You guys already tried that when you kidnapped me. And with Orchard. And when you locked me away from my Zia. It doesn’t work. No matter how many chains you wrap me in, I’ll always be able to say no.”

Bobby holds my gaze, but Doc looks uncomfortable, and Eli remains icy and remote.

I push another finger inside myself, imagining it’s one of them. All of them.

“Me getting what I want doesn’t mean I don’t want you,” I tell them. “I just need to know you care about me enough to let me make my own decisions. At least sometimes.”

“Little brat,” Eli says.

I ignore him, pushing my fingers deeper. I’m getting even wetter. I withdraw, rubbing the glossy liquid over myself, and a wave of self-consciousness hits me. Am I being disgusting? But none of the guys’ faces say that. In fact, they all look like they’re about to burst in their pants. As the sun becomes tangerine bloody in the windowsills, I decide to make my last stand.

“Take it or leave it,” I tell the guys, sinking my fingers back inside myself. “But you should know I’m going to make myself come on this table.”

I pulse into my flower the way Doc did in the car, bringing down my second hand to pet my clit.

“Put another finger in,” Doc urges. “Pump your virgin pussy.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, asshole!”

Heat rushes over me. I swore at Doc! I wait for the backlash, but it doesn’t come. Doc looks annoyed, but he’s

still interested. *More* interested, maybe. I always thought you had to work so hard to make men happy. To be so nice. Maybe I was wrong. The more I get to know these guys, the more it seems like these bossy dangerous men *like* being put in their place.

Except Eli. He pushes his chair back. “I’m going.”

He gets to his feet but he’s still watching me. My dark captor. My daddy. I lift a hand and bring my fingers to my lips. Three sets of lungs inhale. Am I really going to do this? But then I’ve always liked the smell. It’s sweet and earthy like fresh bread. I suck my fingers into my mouth and Bobby lowers his forehead to the table. “This is so fucking unfair.”

I pull my fingers from my mouth with a pop, but it’s getting hard to concentrate on seduction. My free hand is still pulsing inside my flower and the shivery sensations are growing more insistent. “I think I’m going to come.”

Doc leans forward, his eyes on me. “Do it, you dirty bitch.”

“What did I say about telling me what to do?”

With immense effort I move my fingers from myself and give an exaggerated yawn. “I’ve changed my mind. If no one’s going to play with me, I’m going to bed.”

Three simultaneous noises of fury.

“Don’t you dare,” Eli snarls.

“Sorry.” I pull my legs together and Doc reaches across the table and grabs my ankle.

“No, you fucking don’t.”

“Let go of me!”

“No. Touch yourself.”

“I only touched myself because I wanted to! You can’t make me. None of you can. Now let go.”

Doc releases my ankle, his teeth bared. He looks to Morelli. "Deal with her."

Eli scrubs a hand across his dark jaw, and I feel him drawing on all his inner strength. I pull my knees into my chest. "Eli..."

"If you don't come here," he says in a soft, dangerous voice, "I'll throw you in the cage downstairs and leave you there."

"And what will happen if I come to you?"

His lip curls and I understand that he'll have sex with me without saying what I wanted to hear. My heart sinks. "No. You can lock me up, but then you won't get my virginity."

There's a spiraling second when I think he's going to storm from the room, then he slams his hands on the table, making all of us jump. "The hell I won't. I should have fucked you the night you came into his house, January Whitehall. I *own you*."

I slide back on the table, my heart pounding. I've never seen Eli like this. His hair is on end and there's a wild look in his eyes. A storybook prince driven to madness.

Part of me strains to comply, to say yes and make everything right again, but I trust the humming feeling in my chest telling me it's okay. That Eli Morelli might like a woman who holds her own a lot more than a girl who cries in a cage.

I send my legs across the table and let him look at me. All of me.

"You can take me by force if you want to," I say in a ringing voice. "But I know you won't. You're too good for that. That's why none of you have ever slept with me, even Doc."

"The fuck do you mean, *even Doc?*?" Doc demands.

I ignore him.

"I want to obey you," I tell Eli. "I want to be your princess, but only if you respect me. Do you respect me?"

“Of course not.”

“*Eli*,” Bobby says through gritted teeth. “*Maybe this isn’t the right—*”

“Why would I respect you? Respect is earned. From the moment I laid eyes on you, all you’ve done is defy me.”

My spine stiffens. What does he mean, ‘defy him?’ But I already know. The night I arrived at Velvet House, I refused to take off my clothes or suck the gun. I didn’t let Eli seduce me in my cage. I didn’t sleep with anyone the night he commanded me to give my virginity to Doc. It didn’t feel like defiance at the time, but it was. My insides glow. I’ve grown so much since I arrived at this house, but even from the beginning, I was stronger than I thought.

“I didn’t mean to defy you,” I tell Eli. “But I’m allowed to control my own body.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Morelli...” Doc says. “Not to tell you to shut the fuck up, but you’re ruining this titty show, *shut the fuck up.*”

Eli shoots him a furious look then strides toward me. “You said you wanted to leave, so leave. Get off the table and out of my sight.”

I don’t move. Staring into Eli’s eyes, I know he’s close to breaking. I once sensed his fear that loving someone would mean being left like his father. I just need to prove him wrong. To show him that he doesn’t have to control me to love me.

We can do this, I think. We could really be together. You just have to let me be strong.

“What did you learn from giving me Orchard, Eli?” I ask. “From watching me be kidnapped? I’m braver than you think. I know you want me to give myself to you and I will, *I want to*. But you have to give yourself to me too.”

He shakes his head. “You’re becoming someone else.”

“That’s what’s supposed to happen when you grow up.”

Eli raises his gaze to the arched ceiling. “This is why I didn’t want you to know how beautiful you are.”

The compliment hits like a slap. “Well, now I know. What are you going to do about it?”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

January Whitehall

I PART MY knees and let Eli and the others see me again. They lean forward and I want to throw my head back and laugh with the glorious freedom of it. I remember my ex-bodyguards shoving boys who smiled at me, my stepmom making me wear brown sweaters, Mr. Parker drooling all over me whenever we were together.

Screw you all, I think. This is my life.

I smile at the men in front of me and rub two fingers through my pussy. “I own this precious, once-in-a-lifetime thing. This tiny flower Mr. Parker spent millions protecting.”

Eli doesn’t even protest at me saying the name.

I stroke myself softly. I hope I’m gleaming in the dim downlights. I hope I look good enough to eat.

“My virginity belongs to me,” I tell them. “And when I offered it to Adriano, he agreed to whatever I wanted, just like you would.”

“You’re right.”

I turn to the man who spoke.

Bobby gives me a wry, admiring smile, the way he did when I solved a tricky equation.

“You’re right, JJ.” He clears his throat. “I, Roberto Bassilotta, would have let you seduce me into taking you to the hospital. And it was only luck that it was Adriano and not me.”

I beam at him. “You mean it?”

“Yup.”

He moves toward me and my pulse hammers in my throat. Bobby is going to be my first. In my head, I know it’s not super important, especially after what Doc and I did in the car, but in my heart, it still feels huge. And maybe it was always meant to be this way. Bobby was the first man I fell for. The first man who made me wish I could choose who I slept with. I kneel on the table and hold out a hand. “Bobby, would you like to be my first?”

Bobby sticks his tongue in his cheek and grins at me. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything as much.”

He takes my hand in his warm callused one.

The others are far from happy.

“Weak-ass pussy asshole.” Doc shoots a glance at Eli. “You approve of this, Morelli?”

Eli’s face is a mask. Bobby pulls me into his arms, and I look away, feeling very naked and suddenly shy. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he says, gripping my hips. “Can I kiss you?”

I nod and he bends forward. It’s a slow, delicious kiss that warms me from head to toe. I like the way Bobby always gives me heat, gives me affection, helps deal with everyone else in Velvet House. When we pull apart, we both look at Eli.

“Can we do this?” Bobby asks. “Can I have her?”

Eli makes an angry noise.

“Fine. Don’t approve. Do you want us to go somewhere else?”

“Fuck that,” Doc says. “If it’s not gonna be me, I wanna watch. Morelli, lighten the fuck up and give your blessing.”

“You’ve changed your tune,” Eli says coldly.

“Yeah. Did you see that pussy all spread out on the table?”

“You could withstand it.”

“What do you want from me? I’m just a man.”

Our eyes meet and Doc gives me a small wink. My heart glows. Domenico Valente is deranged and a criminal to his bones, but he can also be sweet.

Eli turns away. “Do whatever you want, then.”

Doc gets to his feet. His ripped jeans are all distorted from the front. “Tits, what’s the thing you want me to say?”

Suddenly my whole body feels lighter than air. “I told you; I’m sleeping with Bobby first.”

“And I told you, Tesorina; I like playing second string. Bobby can have his turn, then I’ll go and give you something to really scream about.” He flashes me his Elvis smirk. “What do you want me to say?”

I look at Bobby who grins and I can read his face like words. *‘It doesn’t matter if it’s both of us, JJ. He’s a fucking idiot, but I love him too.’*

I put a hand on my hip. “You need to say *‘I, Domenico Valente, would have let January seduce me into escaping and I’ll no longer hold it over Adriano Rossi or anyone else.’*”

“That’s more than what Basher said,” Doc grumbles, but he throws back his shoulders. “I, Domenico *Salvatore* Valente, would have fucked January’s virgin pussy then driven her to the hospital and probably fuckin’ died when Parker put one in my head, so I’ll stop giving Adri shit about it.”

“Close enough,” I say, beaming.

Bobby urges me back onto the table and climbs on top of me. He unbuttons his shirt and I admire the heavy swell of his muscles.

“Here?” I ask.

He tosses his shirt aside. “I don’t see why not.”

Doc crosses the room, leans into the bar and pulls out a bottle of JB. “Hurry up, Basher. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Fuck you. I’m taking my time. We only get to do this once.”

He gives me another slow kiss, guiding me back onto the wood. I grip his bicep right over the swordfish tattoo. I’ve never looked at it up close but there’s something familiar about the design. The swirling, almost dreamy colors. I think of Adriano’s left forearm, the fire-breathing dragon twisting up his wrist. The styles are similar.

“Did Adriano do this?” I ask.

Bobby nuzzles my neck. “He did.”

I smile. Hopefully now he and Doc and Bobby can be friends again. I’m all the more determined to make Eli admit his weakness, too. From the growing darkness on the far side of the room, I know he’s still watching.

Bobby licks my nipples, pulling them into his mouth with slow blissful draws. The ache between my legs becomes painful.

“I’m so glad we’re doing this,” Bobby says, stroking my clit with rough certainty. Knowing Doc and Eli are here is like having four extra hands on my skin. Soon my stomach is fizzing, and I can’t take it anymore. “Bobby...?”

“We’re almost there.” He presses his forehead to mine. “You know this won’t change how I see you? You’ll be as precious to me after, as you are now?”

I nod, suddenly shy again.

“And you’ll tell me if it hurts?”

“Yes. I promise I want this.”

“Good.” He kisses my forehead then draws back, shoving down his chinos and briefs. Naked, his ruddy skin and bulging muscles remind me of a Roman soldier. He lies on top of me, skin on skin, and I’m both turned on and painfully aware of how close he is. What if I do it wrong? What if it doesn’t fit?

Then he kisses me and everything blurs. His thick cock presses against my thigh and I wait for him to enter me. To end this stage of my life and begin another. Instead, he cups my hips and expertly turns us, so I'm on top of him. "It'll be easier this way, baby."

I brush the dark hair on his chest. His body is as warm and hard as sun-warmed concrete. "Have you been with someone like me before?"

"There's no one like you, JJ."

He rolls his hips against me, and the stimulation sends shocks through my oversensitive flower. I gasp. After so much tension, my orgasm is as close as a scarf on my shoulders. "What should I do?"

Bobby grabs my hand and wraps it around his shaft. It feels like a hot baseball bat.

"Here," he says. "You put me where you need me. Take it at your own pace."

The moment has arrived, it's my choice. I didn't know my choice would be on a dining table with my math tutor while two other men watched, but it's mine. I guide Bobby's hard cock to that soaking open place I've only ever toyed with. I'm sopping wet and the flared head slides easily inside.

"That's good," Bobby says through gritted teeth. "Now push back on me, baby. Slide down my cock."

I do as he says, my inner walls stretching to accompany him. There's a flash of pain, then a sweet, almost *bright* feeling. I let the luxurious sensation twist through me as I draw in slow, deliberate breaths. It was different when Doc was inside me in the car. Then my head was blaring and all I wanted was to feel alive. It was like being on Orchard again. This is sober and electric and terrifyingly real. I'm not any kind of virgin anymore. I'm a girl who's had *sex*.

"Does. It. *Hurt?*" Bobby groans, grasping my hips.

"I... It's a little strange but it doesn't hurt."

He slips another inch inside me, and I clutch his chest. “It’s so deep.”

“You need me to slow down?”

“No.” I rock slowly. “Can I do this?”

Bobby bangs his head back against the table. “You can do whatever you want. Jesus, January, your *pussy*.”

My face burns. “Is something wrong?”

“Never.” My sweet math tutor’s lips are twisted into a snarl. “Fuck me, baby. Ride my cock like you own it.”

I grind myself back and forth. Bobby’s pubic bone presses into my clit and a glorious gold feeling blooms between my legs. A sense of fullness, but also of *rightness*. Since I’ve come to Velvet House, I’ve been touched in so many ways; been made to touch others; but this is a decision all my own and it’s just... perfect. It was meant to be. Bobby eases inside me and the gold feeling spreads like lava. “I’m going to come,” I tell the dining room.

“Fuck yes,” Doc says. “No going back now, Tits.”

He’s right, I’ll never be a virgin again. The thought sends a flush of happiness through me. I know Eli’s watching. What does he feel? Loss? Regret? Or is he still just angry? I hope he isn’t, because it doesn’t feel like it’s just Bobby inside me. It feels like it’s all of them. Even Adriano. One of them doesn’t work without the others.

Bobby and I fall into a rhythm, rocking against each other like we’ve been doing it our whole lives.

“You’re a natural,” he says, fingers closing around my nipples.

“It reminds me... of riding a horse,” I pant. “The rhythm and the bouncing.”

Doc laughs. “How does it feel with a man between your legs?”

“So... much... better.”

“Good. I’m gonna buy you a saddle, Tits. Black leather and ribbons. Get you a helmet and a whip, too.”

The image takes over my brain as Bobby presses a thumb to my clit. “Tell me if it’s too much, baby.”

He strokes me softly and I cry out. All the thoughts in my head vanish. I see why people do this. I don’t know why people aren’t *always* doing this. I lean forward and feel Bobby’s cock rubbing against some small, incredibly sensitive place inside me.

“Fuck yeah,” Doc says. “Bobby, you need to—”

But his hand is already rising, pinning me into the bent-forward position, his hips pumping faster, battering me. I let out a small shriek as the golden glow washes over my face. I’m soaking wet and the sounds of our bodies slapping together is almost violent.

There’s a loud popping sound and I look across the room to see Eli leaning against the bar, a bottle of champagne fizzing in his right hand. Our eyes meet and I feel so filthy it starts to happen, the shifting, shaking end.

“Oh fuck,” Bobby groans. “She’s clamping up on me. She’s coming, Jesus Christ...”

I convulse, and Bobby swears, pressing up into me, screwing me through my orgasm. It’s nothing I’ve ever felt before, a tearing, screaming release. When it’s over, I keep moving, unable to stop riding Bobby’s cock.

“I just came,” I babble. “I just came, I just *came*.”

Bobby rubs a slow thumb over my lips. “You’re incredible.”

“Yeah, that was hot.” Doc is lying back in his chair, his hand around his cock. The sight of it, and the flared ridges of his hip bones, sends aftershocks rolling through me.

Doc strokes himself, a wicked smile on his face. “Hurry up, Bash. I want my turn or an invitation or I’m gonna ruin this for you.”

Bobby smiles at me. “What do you think? Do you want to suck his dick while I fuck you?”

I feel myself pulse around him, my pussy answering for me.

Bobby laughs. “Yeah, she wants it.”

“Of course, she does.” Doc swings onto the table in one agile move. He kneels before me, slowly pulling his cock as though compelling me to watch. Beneath me Bobby tenses, making his powerful muscles bulge. They’re competing against each other to impress me, or maybe just showing off, but either way, it’s sexy.

Doc doesn’t touch me, not right away. He kneels, watching instead, making me hyperaware of my swinging hair and boobs and the shake of my ass as Bobby slams into me. Another orgasm builds, faster and shallower than the first.

“Hey, Tits.” Doc gets to his feet. “Are you gonna come all over Basher’s fat cock again?”

I whimper, loving and hating his disgusting words.

He cups my chin, tilting my face toward the V between his hips. “He likes getting you off. He’ll like it even more when you’re blowing me. That’s his favorite thing, watching a girl get done at both ends.”

“No,” Bobby says. “It’ll be watching you do it, JJ. That’ll be my favorite thing.”

“Yeah, he’ll be jacking off to that for the rest of his life.” Doc takes his cock in his free hand and brings it to my lips. “Time to suck, baby.”

Oh God, I think as I take his smooth thickness into my mouth. I was just a virgin and now I’m doing this.

My head spins as they push into me, and the feel of two men in two places throws my body into orbit. I picture us from the outside, what Eli can see, and everything between my legs pulls tight.

“Fuck her,” Doc says, his hand clamped around my jaw. “Don’t let up ’til she’s broken.”

Swearing, Bobby drives into my body and the stretch of him and the slap of our thighs as we rut together makes the pleasure blare so loud, it hurts. I scream around Doc’s shaft and feel a tangible release between my legs. Like I’m peeing, but not. I dig my nails into Bobby’s shoulders and hear Doc laugh like all his Christmases have come at once.

When the noise in my ears dies down, I see Bobby’s face screwed up in concentration.

“I’m gonna finish, JJ. I can’t hold back. You’re so fuckin’ perfect, you’re just—”

“*Pull out.*”

The voice is so cold, my skin crawls.

Bobby stops moving. “What?”

Eli emerges from the shadows, his tie loose around his neck, champagne bottle still in hand. “Pull. Out. She’s not on birth control.”

“Back off, Morelli,” Doc says, his heavy shaft twitching in my mouth. “This isn’t your fuck.”

“Don’t,” Bobby pants. “It’s okay. January, let go of Doc.”

I obey and the second my mouth is free, Bobby lifts me off him.

“On all fours,” Doc says, grabbing my hair. “Basher’s gonna come all over your cunt.”

I kneel and in seconds, the broad head of Bobby’s cock rubs against my clit.

Doc taps a finger to my mouth. “Open wide.”

I let him fill my throat and the second I start sucking, Bobby’s rhythm goes ragged. “Fuck you’re such a good girl,” he pants. “You’re *such a good girl.*”

Warm liquid runs down my folds and I smile around Doc's penis.

"You liked that, huh?" Doc says, working himself into my mouth. "You ready for the next one?"

"Give her a second," Bobby breathes. "Let her rest."

With a curse, Doc withdraws, allowing me to collapse. Bobby climbs off the table and heads for the ornate dresser. He pulls out a cloth napkin, wiping his ridged abdomen before returning to me. "Is it okay if I clean you with this?"

"Of course," I say and maybe I'm still dazed from my second orgasm, because I add, "I really like you, Bobby."

His brown eyes crinkle. "I really love you, January."

My chest swells like a balloon. I want to say it back, but Doc is pulling me up by my hair. "We can do all the feelings shit later. Take a seat, Basher. It's my turn."

"Fair," Bobby says, giving me the napkin.

As I clean myself, he and Doc catch each other's eyes.

"Nice work, Bassilotta," Doc says, holding out a hand.

To my amazement, Bobby takes it. "Thanks."

They let go quickly but their show of affection almost brings tears to my eyes. Everything could be okay between us. Better than okay.

Then Doc rounds on me, his blue eyes sparking with lust. "Okay, let's see what we have here."

He steers me back onto the table and moves between my legs, a lazy smile on his face. He slides a fingertip inside me, making me tremor. It feels huge.

"I thought losing my virginity would make this easier," I say. "But everything down there's gone tight again."

"That's normal," he says in that calm voice that makes me think he's a doctor. He withdraws from me, examining his finger. "Well, I never, Miss January..."

“What?” Bobby says from his seat near the table. “Is she hurt?”

“She’s fine,” Doc shows me a dark red stain. “Check this out.”

I flush. “It’s not time for my period.”

“I know it isn’t. This is virgin blood and girl cum.” He smirks. “You were a bleeder, after all.”

The excitement in his voice is palpable, but Doc’s always been a freak. As if to prove me right, he wipes those fingers across his face, leaving red streaks on his cheeks. “Now I’m Princess Mononoke.”

“I still don’t know who that is.”

“We’ll watch it sometime.” He kneels between my thighs, pulling my feet onto his tattooed chest, and I almost swoon. He was right when he said we look good together, my pale skin against his inked muscles. It’s like someone’s posing us for a photoshoot. I gasp as he presses himself to my entrance.

“You ready, Tits?”

“Yes.”

Doc’s eyes take on a cold burn I remember from my time in the cage. “Say what I wanna hear.”

At first, I’m confused, then it comes to me. “Please, Domenico?”

“That’s it.” His cock eases inside me and I gasp.

“Now say *‘fuck me. Rail my slutty pussy like the dirty girl I am.’*”

“I can’t say that!”

He withdraws. “Then you don’t get dick.”

I touch a hand to my breast. It can’t matter. I can’t need any more sex. Yet in a few seconds I’m squirming, the lack of friction like physical pain. I look into Doc’s grinning face and know he could tease me all night. I made him surrender and

now I need to do the same. I draw in a breath. “F-fuck me, Domenico.”

He taps himself on my clit. “And the rest?”

“R-rail my slutty pussy.”

He seems to forgive me the last few words because he slides back inside me with a groan. “I’m gonna batter you, Tesorina.”

I clutch his muscular shoulders, too overwhelmed to say what I feel, which is ‘*Good. Do it.*’

He tilts forward, pinning me against the table, my ankles around his neck. He sets a brutal pace, slamming into me, driving me to a peak I thought impossible after the orgasms I’ve already had. He never pulls all the way out, pulsing and grinding like he can’t stand to leave my wetness.

“We’re here,” he says. “We’re fucking here.”

And as he fucks me, his eyes stay locked on my face, as though he’s committing all of this to memory. As I writhe beneath him, his hand closes around my throat. “Your cunt belongs to me now. Give me everything.”

“You come in her and you’ll be killed, Valente,” Eli barks, and I want to scream at him that it’s not his business, that it doesn’t matter. But Doc just grunts and keeps thrusting, bringing me closer and closer to climax. I convulse again, digging my fingernails into the table and scratching the wood.

Doc keeps going, driving into my oversensitive flesh and making me scream.

“You angel. You fucking... beautiful... bitch.”

He pulls out and comes all over my stomach in a warm, white flood.

He did listen, I think dizzily.

Doc sits back on his heels, swiping a hand across his forehead. “Basher, are there any more of those cloth things?”

I lie in a daze as Doc wipes me up. I'm so lucky I didn't have to marry Mr. Parker. That I get to be here. It isn't anywhere my family would approve of, but it's mine. And my old school friends would be so jealous.

Doc tosses the napkin aside and thumbs my lower lip. "Finally got to stick my dick in your twat, Tesorina, and all I had to do was say some shit I didn't mean."

I give him a look. "Even if you didn't mean it, you said it and I'm going to tell Adriano you said it."

"You little... female version of Benedict Arnold."

I giggle. "Sorry, I guess."

"Yeah, you will be." Doc lifts his gaze to Bobby. "Basher, you wanna come up to my room and do this whole thing again?"

Bobby gives us a wide, all-American smile. "Let's do it."

Doc jumps from the table and extends a hand to me. "Let's go find a bed, Tesorina. You're gonna get fucked forever."

My stomach flutters. How can I possibly keep up with both of them? But even as I think it, my flower contracts, informing me that she needs more. I guess I'll figure it out along the way. I move to take Doc's hand and Eli emerges from the darkness and slams the champagne bottle on the table. "This ends now."

I curl under his furious gaze, but Doc squares up to him. "She stated her terms, Morelli. You didn't wanna play along. It's over. Basher and I are gonna take her up to my room and nail her."

"No one moves."

"Fuck you."

Eli pounds a fist into his chest. "I'm the boss of this family."

"Boss, not the fucking king. Don't take it out on the girl because you're too proud to say what's obvious."

“And what’s obvious?”

“You’re in love with her,” Doc says coldly. “That scares you, so you want to control everything about her, and you can’t. So, do what you told me to do.”

“And that is?”

“Suck it up and give in.”

Eli stares at Doc with something close to hatred, then he looks at me. His eyes are so dark, I can barely see the amber.

“January, come here. *Now.*”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Elliot Morelli

I'M LOSING CONTROL.

The thought echoes through my head, undulled by champagne or lust. January kneels on the table, naked and covered in sweat and whatever Doc and Bobby have left on her but she looks exquisite. More stunning than she did in silk and rubies. It's the look on her face, the defiant tilt of her chin. She knows her power now. I could see it as she fucked my brothers, her mind expanding to take in new pleasure and exude new strength. She shifts closer to the edge of the table, but she doesn't get down. She doesn't obey. It makes me want to hurt her. To take her so roughly she's left wearing my bruises like jewels.

"Come, Miss Whitehall," I repeat. "Come and I won't punish you."

She stares at me with her luminous green eyes. She doesn't move.

Doc loops his hands around her stomach. "Don't you dare give in, Tits."

"Let go," I say. "She's not yours."

"She's not yours either, Morelli."

January pushes Doc's restraining hands from her belly. "It's okay. I want to go to Eli."

"Is this... are you choosing him?" Doc asks.

The question makes my heart stop, but January shakes her head. “I want to belong to all of you. I want to live here and cook and work in a café as a barista.”

“Sweet.” Doc collapses back onto the table. “Hand me the JB, Basher.”

I glare at him. “Get dressed and leave. That’s an order. And you,” I point my Dom Pérignon bottle at January. “No woman of mine is going to work, least of all in food service.”

She tosses her shiny hair over her shoulder. “Then I can’t be yours, at least not the way you want me to be.”

“You’re wrong,” I tell her. “You’ll be exactly what I want you to be.”

She stands. The face of an angel, a body bred for sin. “I think that you’ve wanted someone like me for a long time, Eli. Someone to challenge you. Someone to share with the men you love.”

I have wanted someone like her. I *do* want someone like her. I want her to sit at the swirling center of Velvet House and make all of our miserable lives better. But I don’t like the way she commanded me to apologize to Adriano. As though she were the one with all the power.

“What I want is obedience,” I tell January. “That is the only thing I enjoy in a woman.”

She smiles. “Our history says you enjoy me more.”

It’s a statement so arrogant, it makes my blood boil. I can’t think of a retort. I drop into one of the velvet backed dining chairs and drink from the neck of my champagne. I will the alcohol to bring oblivion and free me from this situation.

“Enough,” I tell her. “You’ve made your point. Leave with Doc and Bobby. I want to be alone.”

Doc, now swigging from a bottle of JB, nudges January with his foot. “Go work your magic on him, Tesorina.”

January slides her legs off the table. “Is it okay if I touch you, Elliot?”

I despise that name, and as she stands in defiance of me, I despise January Whitehall. Ten seconds ago she was getting the life fucked out of her and now she looks like snow wouldn't melt in her mouth. She's exploiting us with her body, with her innocence. Her virginity is gone, but she remains as pure as she's ever been and that feels like a curse. Like she's taunting me.

“You may not touch me,” I tell her.

Her face falls and I feel a stab of something irrational, but something softer, too. “You can go to the bar and get me another bottle of Dom Pérignon,” I say.

She goes meekly, returning with a fresh green bottle. “Here you go, Mr. Morelli.”

When I take it from her, she drops to her knees on the floor before me. “Mr. Morelli, can you please touch me?”

I stare at her full breasts, her crimson lips. The excessiveness of her and the simplicity.

“No.”

I peel the foil away from the bottleneck. Alcohol is what I need. Alcohol and cigarettes, if Doc has any.

January tilts her head, staring at the front of my suit pants. My cock surges against my leg, betraying me.

“I think you want to play, Eli.”

“That's because you're a disobedient little slut.”

She smiles up at me, the picture of virtue. “I'm sorry, *daddy*.”

The air around me crackles. She said it again. The word that should only come out of her mouth while I'm fucking her into oblivion. “What did you just call me?”

“Daddy. Isn't that what you want to be?”

I delicately place the champagne bottle on the floor. “Say it again?”

Her eyes widen. She’s scared and she should be. “D-daddy?”

I grab her by the hair, pulling it tight. The word thrums through me like a current. She called me daddy. Not sweetly as she should have done, but like a spoiled bitch. I’ll show her *daddy*.

I drag her, gasping, to the edge of the table. Doc rolls out of the way as I bend January over so her round backside faces me. “Say it again.”

I expect her to cry, beg, but she just shakes her thighs so her ass bounces. “Daddy, everything between my legs hurts. Won’t you make it better?”

Bobby gives a low moan.

“Yeah, this is fucked,” Doc says, getting up and settling on Bobby’s right side. “If you’re not gonna do her, Morelli, get out of the way. We’ll tear the girl up for you.”

I pull January’s hair. “No. She’s mine.”

“Yeah, for now. Then she’ll be mine. Then she’ll be Bobby’s, then she’ll be yours again. That’s how sharing works.”

I ignore Doc and focus on the porcelain curve of January’s spine. She looks back at me and I see hunger in her eyes. But there’s something else, too. A softness that almost floors me. After everything I’ve done to her, she still has a heart for me. I let go of her hair, my muscles trembling.

“What?” she asks. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I say, feeling the energy drain from my body. “You drive me utterly insane.”

She turns and takes me in her arms like a child. “I’m sorry.”

My hands and feet tingle. Am I having a heart attack? “Let go.”

“No.” She hugs me tighter. “You know I’ve never seen you less than fully dressed.”

Because I never want to be. If I could fuck in a suit and not be labeled as a freak, I would. The champagne seems to be catching up with me, coating my brain in a low fuzz.

January’s hand creeps to touch my tie. “Can I undo this?”

I say nothing, but I let her pull open the knot and slip the silk from around my neck. She drops the tie to the floor and starts on my shirt buttons. Soon I’m naked from the waist up. January runs her hands over my stomach. “You shouldn’t hide your body.”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

Her mouth twists, but her touch is gentle. I let her continue stroking me, closing my eyes. It’s been a long day. A long life. The feel of her against my skin is a release from all of it.

“Eli,” she says quietly. “Can you please just say you would have taken me to the hospital like Adriano?”

My abdomen tenses under her palm. “No.”

“But I know you would have. When I was locked in the East Wing you didn’t even come and take your necklace.”

“That’s because you were born to wear my rubies.”

Her smile mixes with the alcohol in my blood and makes everything glow for one seamless instant. Then it fades. I sigh. “Why does everything have to be so difficult, *bella*?”

“I don’t know,” she says, stroking my hip muscle. “But if you admit you would have helped me, I’ll make love to you.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. And I’ve had practice now. I might be good at it.”

A chuckle from beside us. “She’s better than good at it,” Bobby says.

“Can confirm,” Doc agrees.

I feel a sudden rush of affection for the pair of them. These men with whom I’ve unwittingly shared a life. “Are the two of you going to hold it against me forever if I bow to this brat?”

“I mean... I did it,” Doc says. “So it’d be pretty hypocritical of me.”

“Yeah,” Bobby agrees. “I can’t pretend like I’m better...”

“...so, I don’t think we’ll bring it up,” Doc finishes. “Get a move on, Morelli. I want another turn.”

I laugh. It just tumbles out of me the way it did when I was younger. Light and loose.

“Thank you both.” I touch a hand to January’s cheek. “Are you really ready?”

She nods so I bend to her ear. “I wouldn’t have taken you to see your Zia.”

January rears back in shock but I slide my hands around her waist, keeping her close. “I *would* have paid to have your Zia medevacked to a hospital in New Jersey where I could have taken you, saving her life and protecting yours at the same time.”

January lets out a slow breath. “You mean it?”

“Yes,” I say stiffly, praying she doesn’t want more. If she does, Christ knows what I’ll do. Fall to my knees and give her every dollar to my name? Swear to take my life if she’s ever unhappy? But January’s fingers are already on my belt, unbuckling and pulling away the leather.

“Thank you, Mr. Morelli.”

“And now you’re all polite again...”

She offers me a soft smile. “I feel things for you. I have ever since I first saw you.”

The lightness in her voice, her uncertainty, it makes me want to be honest. “I am... bound to you, *bella*. In a way I’ve

never been bound to a woman before. I dislike it with every fiber of my existence.”

She giggles.

“Do not laugh at me.”

But she only giggles harder. “Sorry, I just love it when you’re grumpy.”

I grip her chin, lifting her face to mine. “Is that right?”

“Yes.” Her cheeks go pink. “Can you make love to me now?”

“And now you’re shy again,” I say with a smirk. “How delightful for me.”

I turn her onto the table, pushing her back so that her ass is presented to me. I can see a little of her pussy, but not enough. “Spread your knees.”

She obeys and I stare at the pink slit between her legs, my cock swelling inside my briefs. I swat her pretty ass. “Say it again.”

“*Daddy.*” She lifts her hips higher. “Please take me?”

I touch her instead, brushing my fingers over the soaked folds and ruffles that I have been obsessed with since I first saw them.

“Look at this,” I tell no one in particular. “This is the girl kept pure all her life, fucked twice and still dripping all over my hand.”

January gives a pitiful moan. “Sorry, daddy.”

I inhale the phrase like Amyl. If I live to be two hundred, I’ll never hear anything so good. “Do you think you fooled anyone with your chastity? You’re a born slut, Miss Whitehall. Meant to be here, bent over and servicing me and my men.”

I swat her backside. “Did you like losing your cherry in front of me?”

“I... I don’t know.”

She knows, she's just embarrassed. I press her face into the tabletop. "I know you liked it, just like I know Doc stuck it in your asshole during your little road trip."

January gasps. "He—"

"Didn't tell me," I say, at the same time Doc shouts, "I didn't tell him, Tesorina!"

"He didn't have to," I continue. "I know everything. Every thought you've ever had, every desire that's gone through your mind. Do you understand?"

She nods, her cheek rubbing against the table.

"Good." I unzip my suit pants, shove down my briefs. My heavy cock falls onto January's backside and she trembles. I give her ass another slap. "Now that you know you have my respect, I plan to be disrespectful to you for a very..." I press my cock to her entrance, "...long..." she cries as I thrust inside her pussy, "...time ..."

My pleasure spikes as her walls close around me. The others weren't exaggerating, she's as sweet as sugar and tight as a lock. More than any man could hope for. And as much as I wanted her virginity, I'm glad she's broken in. I'm in no mood to play nice.

I slam inside her, savaging her as she screams. I hold her hips so she can't move, trying and failing to savor this first taste.

"Eli," she breathes. "Eli, that feels so good."

I grit my teeth. With every thrust she seems to grow tighter. How did my brothers pull out of her? Climax is already upon me. I distract myself by spanking her. It's as hard as I've ever hit any woman, but January just pushes back on my cock, begging for more. Barely clinging to my load, I grip her hair. "You like pain, don't you?"

She shakes her head but her cunt pulses around me.

"*Gesù Cristo, Santo Dio.*" *Jesus Christ, God in heaven.*

“Yeah,” Doc calls. “You get that.”

I pull January up by her hair so Doc and Bobby can see her tits as I pound her tight little cunt. The blood I saw on Doc’s fingers is now smeared all over my shaft and the sight of it only sharpens my arousal.

“Call me daddy. Call me daddy while I fuck your cunt.”

“Daddy,” she wails. “Daddy! Daddy! *Daddy!*”

Her pussy flutters around me. She’s close. Very close. “Beg me to make you come.”

January’s eyes are glazed, her mouth half-open.

“Beg or I’ll pull out and leave you hungry.”

Her gaze flicks to Doc and Bobby. I laugh. “That’s how you think it’ll be? I turn you down, you go to one of them?”

I wrap her hair tighter around my fist. “Beg or I will pull out of your luscious pussy and lock you in that cage downstairs and this time my men will not help you. They’ll pull their cocks out and make you suck them through the bars instead.”

January gives a high whine. “No!”

I stop moving, my cock speared deep inside her. She gives a desperate sob, grinding up against me, trying to get more stimulation.

“Say, *‘please make me come, daddy.’*”

“Please make me come, daddy,” she mumbles, still trying to pump herself on my cock.

“Again.”

She repeats the words, voice quivering with shame. This girl is mine. As long as I’m alive, she’ll cower in front of me, equally humiliated and excited. “You’re going to get what you want, Miss Whitehall, just open those pretty lips for me.”

She complies, and I grip her jaw and spit into her mouth.

The shock on her face, the absolute horror, spurs me to action. I fuck her roughly as she wails, her magic cunt rippling around me. “I’m sorry. *I’m so sorry!*”

I don’t know who she’s apologizing to, possibly God for being so unchaste, but I don’t care. She comes with a violent scream, struggling hard against my cock. I keep fucking her until she falls, half-conscious, onto the table then I spank her again, leaving a blistering red mark on her backside. “Say *‘thank you, daddy.’*”

“Thank you, daddy...”

“Good girl.” I clutch her hips, honing in on my own orgasm. “Tonight, I’m going to finish all over you, but soon you’ll take all of my cum and give me a child.”

January gives a low moan and the thought of it—this goddess round with my child—brings me to the edge. I tear myself from her clinging pussy and ejaculate on her ass. She lets out a squeak of surprise but holds still as I finish coming all over her. When I’m done, I stroke her hair and rub the back of her sweat-soaked neck.

“Good girl,” I croon. “I’m so proud of you. You’ve done so well.”

“So, you’re not hurting her,” a gravelly voice says.

I turn. Adriano is leaning up against the doorway, his arms folded across his chest.

I inhale, fresh oxygen cutting through the fog in my head. “What are you doing here?”

“Watching.”

January buries her face in her hands, but Doc laughs. “Bigfoot’s returned! What’s up, Adri?”

Adriano doesn’t look at him, his gaze is still on January. His green eyes are impossible to read in the semi-darkness. I tuck away my cock, then pick up another cloth napkin. “We’re not hurting her, Rossi. What’s your concern?”

Adriano takes a step into the dining room and watches me swipe the cum from January's skin. His expression is easy to read. Pure, slack lust. He wants to fuck her and as always, he hates himself for wanting to fuck her.

"Adriano," Bobby says quietly. "Is everything good?"

Adriano shakes his head like he's flicking off a fly. "I thought she'd come storming up here and start... it doesn't matter."

Doc stretches, still naked and entirely comfortable. "Well since you're here, Adriano, pull up a chair. Grab a drink."

He makes an angry bull noise, and his gaze drops to January's face. She's peeking at him from between her fingers, and her cheeks are red. A throb goes through my cock. Somehow, after all we've done to her, she's still not finished.

"We fucked her," Doc says lazily. "Front and back. She's come about four times now. Squirted too."

"Guys!" January whispers.

"Quiet, *bella*," I tell her, wiping away the last of my orgasm. I address Adriano. "Something is happening between us and this girl. This is your chance to decide if you want to be a part of it."

For a second Adriano merely stares, longing and disgust warring on his scarred face. Then he turns for the door. My chest contracts. After everything, this is how it ends.

"Wait!" January pushes away from me and gets to her feet. "They said it, Adriano! They all admitted they would have done exactly what you did."

He paused. "They what?"

"They apologized. Or as good as. Doesn't that change things? Doesn't it make them better?"

Silence falls over the dining room. Even Doc doesn't puncture it with whatever dumbass thing is running through his head. Adriano turns grey-faced, and uglier than I

remember, scarred and insolent and stubborn as a mule. I find myself thinking of a night in Barcelona many years ago when a stranger shoved a broken bottle in my face. I was drunk and confused and before I could act Adriano appeared out of nowhere and put the guy's lights out. He'd protected me before as a business partner, but that night he protected me as a brother. For no reason I could see other than that he wanted me to be safe.

"Come home," I tell Rossi. "Or at least come and shower in the house, for fuck's sake."

A smile lifts one corner of Adriano's mouth. "I'll think about it."

January smiles and so does Bobby.

Doc tosses the bottle of JB to his friend. "Come watch."

"Why should he watch?" I say, sliding my hand down January's back. "We've been taking Miss Whitehall's virginity, Rossi. Would you like to finish?"

Adriano unscrews the cap of the JB and drinks long and deep. "Dunno."

"I suppose I'm asking the wrong person. January, would you like to be fucked by Adriano Rossi?"

She trembles against my palm, goose bumps racing up her spine.

"You can't see this," I tell Adriano. "But she's trembling for you."

He makes a low, animalistic noise. The woods seem to have turned him wilder. Less human.

"I don't know if she should," Doc says slowly. "He's fucking huge. There's every chance he'll ruin that pussy."

I hadn't considered this. Adriano is easily the most well-endowed out of all four of us. Seasoned whores have taken one look at him and refused their services. I glance at January and seem to see her slightness anew. Aside from her breasts

and ass, she's really quite tiny and her pale flesh is already covered in marks. "*Bella*, maybe you should just get on your knees for him? You've endured enough pain for one day."

"Guys," January says. "I don't think..."

Adriano's nostrils flare like an angry bull. "You're offering me something you don't want to give, Morelli? What a fucking surprise."

"It's not that we don't want to give it," Doc drawls. "We just don't want you breaking our new toy."

"At least not during her first time," Bobby says. "JJ, maybe you can just jack him off?"

January dips her chin. "I—"

"What the fuck is your problem?" Adriano growls at Bobby and Doc. "I have as much of a right to take her as either of you."

"Yeah, but neither of us is going to murder her with sex," Doc retorts.

Adriano opens his mouth to say something, but Bobby beats him to it. "She's already tender, Adri. You don't want to hurt her, do you?"

Adriano's look of irritation collapses. He stares down at his feet. "No. Of course not. I'm sorry. Another time. Or maybe fucking never."

He turns his back and heads for the door.

January shakes off my hand. "Adriano! Wait."

He stops. "I want none of your sympathy, Pryntsesa. Anything but that."

She takes a step toward him. "But I want to sleep with you."

She's flushing furiously as she says it, but her small chin is lifted in defiance. "I wanted to out by the water, but it seemed like you wanted to watch me instead."

“What the fuck?” Doc laughs. “What happened out there?”

Everyone ignores him.

“I can do it,” January insists, a low throb in her voice. “I did ballet for ages, I’m really flexible—”

Doc gives a cracking laugh. “Holy shit she’s pitching for you Adri.”

January shoots him an icy glare before returning her gaze to Rossi. “Adriano... please can we just try?”

He shakes his shaggy head. “If this is about the money for your nanny’s daughters—”

“No.” She touches a hand to her bare breast, cupping the nipple. “I... want you. I wanted you when I thought you were a janitor. I didn’t understand because I didn’t know anything about men, but I really want us to be together. I want to know what it’s like to be yours.”

There are moments that bite into you and refuse to let go. Strange quotes. Peculiar scents. As I watched Adriano’s face change, I knew I was witnessing such a moment. This cruel, half-dead man, realizing that someone perfect and precious truly desires him. Adriano’s brutal mouth curves into a genuine smile, his scarred cheeks lift and his green eyes lighten and I understand now that some kind of sanity had been restored to him. A purpose.

“He loves her,” I mutter. “*Gesù Cristo* and all the dead saints, he loves her.”

Adriano takes a step toward January, and she straightens in response. Two partners preparing to meet in a dance. He is hers now. Her loyal dog. A man whose sole purpose is to kill and die for one woman. The same one I have given my heart to.

But perhaps it was always going to end this way. The broken boys that fled to Italy together, never lived apart again. Couldn’t last more than a few days on our own, little as though any of us want to admit it. We became one family in trauma.

Now January has united us, we might remain one family in love.

Adriano and January draw closer, warm, almost dazed expressions on their faces.

“Let the games begin,” Doc mutters, swigging from the JB bottle. “Ten bucks says she can’t walk after.”

“Are you sure this is what you want, Pryntsesa?” Adriano rumbles.

She manages to lift her chin to look at him. “Yes.”

I nudge her. “Go, *bella*. Give your soldier what he needs.”

She walks carefully toward him, as carefully as she walked up the aisle on her wedding day. When Adriano picks her up, he makes her look like a doll in comparison. He kisses her with so much tenderness I turn away, picking up the discarded champagne bottle and taking the seat beside Bobby’s.

He lies her back on the dining room table and climbs onto the wood, holding himself above her. “I’ll go slowly,” he promises. “I’ll go slowly and I’ll stop if you need me to.”

“I know you will,” January whispers, her hand closing around his shaft. Her small, pale fingers make it look like a boa constrictor, yet she guides it toward herself without a trace of fear.

Adriano sucks in a breath as the head kisses her wet entrance. “Pryntsesa, I don’t want to hurt you.”

January’s eyes slide closed. “I don’t care if you hurt me. Not this time.”

“But...”

“Shhh,” she whispers. “I want this so badly, Adriano.”

He tries to be gentle as he slides into her but January isn’t giving him the space. She arches into his cock, swallowing it as though she was born to take it all.

“Fucking Jesus.” Adriano grunts, his whole body is shaking with the effort to not ram inside her.

Then January’s face contorts. “God, it’s so much. Too much.” But she keeps grinding her hips upwards, urging Adriano’s shaft deeper still.

“How do you feel?” I call.

She lets out a breathy moan that sets my blood on fire. “It burns, but it feels *so good*.”

And just like that I’m as hard as I was before I came.

“Shit,” Doc mumbles, running a hand through his hair. “They look fucking hot together.”

They do.

The two of them, January and Adriano... it isn’t like it was with any of us. It’s erotic, almost romantic. Adriano keeps his mouth on January’s the whole time, his scarred arms holding her body tenderly to his. As he thrusts into her she sighs lushly, her hair flowing like a woman in a Raphaelite painting. At times the intimacy is almost painful, like watching the first man fuck the first woman, a marriage of the primal and the profound.

January moans like an angel when she comes and this time she seems entirely at home in the pleasure, turning her face upward and letting it wash over her in waves. “Oh my God, Adriano. *Adriano*, I don’t know if I can take it...”

“Move slowly, Pryntsesa. Feel how deep I am inside you. Feel how close we are.”

Beside me, Bobby wipes sweat off his forehead. “This is fucked up,” he whispers, and I silently agree.

“Of all the crazy shit I’ve seen,” Doc mumbles drunkenly. “I never thought it would be Adriano Rossi showing me up in the sex department.”

I silently agree again.

But Adriano and January don't seem to hear us. They're too wrapped up in each other, in the sensations of their own bodies.

"Pull out," I warn Adriano as his thrusts grow faster and he groans in a way I recognize from a hundred other times, with a hundred other women. Adriano makes no motion that he's heard me, and as he fucks January with determined, steady movements, I consider my next move. And as sexy as the scene has been to witness, I will not have January pregnant with a crazed, quarter-Italian bastard.

I consider pulling out the gun strapped to my ankle when Gretzky walks through the open door. "Mr. Morelli, Parker has agreed to a sit down with you in Manhattan next week—"

The room freezes—January impaled on Rossi's cock, Adriano engulfing her with his mutilated body, Doc with the JB bottle between his teeth, Bobby palming the front of his briefs.

"This is a bad time, Gretzky," I say, trying not to laugh. "Though good news about Parker."

Our senior advisor's face crumples like he's about to have a stroke. "Shit-fire! Jesus!" he says, practically running away.

"We're going to have to initiate a locked door policy," I tell the others. "Starting immediately."

January covers her face as Doc and Bobby laugh. Adriano looks like someone has pissed in his cornflakes.

"Cheer up," I tell him, moving toward the door. "Keep fucking her. I'll lock this then order Chinese."



IT'S SIX IN the morning. The dining room is thick with cigar smoke and the scent of cold takeout, liquor and pussy. January is curled in my arms, sleeping. Doc is drinking contemplatively in the corner, probably imagining more perverted things to do to our girlfriend's body and Bobby and Adriano are playing cards. I'm drunk, but not terribly. I mostly

feel a strange sense of calm, as though there's nothing in the world that needs worrying about.

“What the fuck are we doing?” Adriano says suddenly, turning to face me. “Things can't go on like this with her.”

“Maybe not. But we're making it up as we go along, Rossi.”

He growls but says nothing. I'm glad. I don't want to discuss technicalities. I just want to bask in the glow of everything that's happened tonight. Apparently, I'm not alone.

“I'm happy,” Doc says, lowering his whiskey bottle. “Happier than I've been in a long while.”

“That's good,” I say.

“And I've decided... not to ruin everything.”

“What are you talking about?”

Doc sits up straighter in his chair. “Don't freak, but I was gonna fly to Vegas and kill Parker before the contract was signed.”

I swirl my scotch. “We know.”

The look on Doc's face is almost worth the ulcer he's given me over the past week.

“What?!” he shouts.

“Be quiet! You'll wake up January.”

“You didn't know,” Doc hisses. “You had no idea about Vegas.”

I look at Bobby. “Apparently January Whitehall isn't the only one who needs to be reminded that I know everything.”

Bobby smirks. “Yeah, I knew too.”

“So did I,” Adriano says, suppressing a yawn. “Even from the woods.”

Doc gets on his knees, almost tipping the chair over. “How? I didn't tell anyone! I didn't say shit! I was using my

private server, I was—”

“Yourself,” I say. “And seeing as we’re your oldest friends who know exactly what you’re like, do you think maybe we’d guess you’d attempt to murder your way out of this, Domenico?”

“Well, shit...” Doc runs a hand through his hair looking about fifteen.

“You fucking *idiot*,” I say.

“What were you gonna do?” he asks. “Confront me about it before I left?”

“No. Sal and Gretzky were going to shoot you full of morphine and lock you in your bedroom.”

“The fuck!?”

I laugh. Bobby joins me and even Adriano gives a low, bull-like rumble.

“You fuckin’ assholes,” Doc sulks. “Well, whatever, I could have done it but now I’m not. Because I’m happy and I’m choosing not to.”

I want to call him a psychotic narcissist with the impulse control of a three-year-old but decide to take the high road instead. “I’m glad, my friend.”

“I was going to kidnap her,” Adriano says lightly.

We all turn to look at him.

“You what?” I demand.

“When I first came back to Velvet House. I thought about snatching January in her bed and heading for Mexico.”

“I was going to take her to Canada,” Bobby offers. “Ordered some fake passports and everything.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I despise all three of you.”

“And we hate you too,” Doc says, raising his bottle. “To a better ending.”

I lift my scotch and Bobby holds up his Stoli.

“A better ending,” we say.

Adriano holds up his beer. “*An ending.*”

The rising sun glows in the windows behind us. I watch it lift higher into the sky. Soon, we’ll sign the contract. What will a world without vengeance at the center even look like? Better, I imagine, because there’ll be a pretty girl there instead.

Doc shifts in his seat. “I’m fucking tired.”

“So go to bed.”

But he doesn’t move. “I should talk to January about Alessia.”

I glance at the others, but we don’t say anything. We know better.

“She’s been gone for years,” Doc slurs. “It’s like this old Polaroid. I can still see her but she’s fading. I forget stuff, confuse things she said with things I made up. But January’s alive. She’s in the world I live in. She fits.”

I remember her lying in my entrance hall in her wedding dress, surprising me as so few things do.

“She does fit,” I tell Doc. “She fits with all of us.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think I could love anyone after Alessia, but I was wrong. It’s why I’ll do the contract. I can’t die before I have a chance to really be with her. Or double stuff her with one of you assholes.” Doc presses a thumb into his eyelid, stamping away a tear. “And if Parker doesn’t get her and I fuck her every single night for the rest of our lives, maybe that’s enough revenge.”

The sun is higher now, its initial red glow dissolved into a clean brightness that only highlights the filthy dining room.

January shifts in my lap, her huge eyes blinking open. “What... what time is it?”

“Time for bed.” I glance at Bobby. “Take January to the East Wing. And keep your cock out of her, she needs rest.”

“I’m coming, too,” Doc announces as though he expects someone to stop him.

“Go,” I say. “I prefer to sleep alone.”

“I’m going back to the cabin,” Adriano says, draining his beer. “But I’ll be back later today to talk about the contract.”

“Good,” I say with relief. “We’ve missed you.”

Adriano looks at me like I’ve shaved my head. “You what?”

Doc claps him on the shoulder. “We missed you, you big idiot. Next time, don’t stay away so long.”

The four of us grin at one another, and I feel the words hovering. The ones we never say. Then Doc punches Adriano’s side and heads for the door. “Later, pussies. See you in bed, Bash.”

I watch, relieved and disappointed in equal measure. “Be in the secure room at noon. And don’t be fucking late.”

Doc gives me the finger.

I look down at January. She’s fallen asleep again, her black lashes stark against her ivory skin. Doc was right when he said I can’t control her, but how does anyone stand it? All I’ve ever had is girlfriends who danced on a string for me, but they couldn’t hold a candle to the stubborn girl curled in my lap like a kitten.

“Give her to me,” Bobby says quietly. “I’ll carry her upstairs.”

I let him take her, praying that whatever comes next, I will not lose her.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

January Whitehall

I LIE ON my bed, scrolling through jobs on my laptop. Bobby's lying beside me, his head on my butt, watching the Patriots game on his phone. Every couple of minutes I glance into my dresser mirror and check we're still there. That it's all still real.

This time my reflection smiles wickedly at me, reminding me what Bobby and I were just doing. My backside still burns and I'm sure I'm going to have bruises tomorrow. Not that I mind. The sight of them drives Doc and Eli nuts. My smile in the mirror grows even wider. I've done a lot of making up for lost time, sex-wise. Eli says eventually I'll spend a different night with each of them, but right now it's more like... a different hour.

I click on a promising new hostess job and scan the requirements. "Bobby, do you think I could work front of house for Theïkós?"

"That Michelin star place? Definitely."

His tone makes me suspicious. "How do you know?"

"I... have a good feeling?"

I swat his shoulder. "I want to get a job at a restaurant without Doc threatening the owner or Eli calling the health inspector or you... I don't know... hacking their email and changing my résumé around."

Bobby cracks up. "Hacking their email..."

"You know I don't understand how that stuff works!"

He tosses his phone aside and rolls onto his back, spreading his arms. “C’mere, baby girl.”

I climb onto his bare chest and snuggle into him. Bobby rubs my head, making my scalp tingle. “If you really want a job, why don’t you let us find you one?”

“Because I want to earn it!”

“And we can all appreciate that, but nepotism makes the world go round.”

I roll my eyes. “Eli still doesn’t want me to have a job. He’ll just pretend to help me, then sabotage it.”

“True. But he can’t help it if you’re such a good housewife he wants to keep you close.”

I bury my face in his chest hair. I know what he’s referring to. Last night I made handmade gnocchi in red wine ragù—Zia Teresa’s showstopper dish. Eli tasted it and then dragged me into the next room and went down on me while everyone else listened. It was flattering and terrifying and so hot. Kind of like how everything has been since I got to Velvet House.

“Hey.” Bobby strokes my lower back. “Are you embarrassed about what we’re doing here?”

He means ‘*are you freaked out about sleeping with four men?*’ All the guys keep asking that. Yesterday I helped Adriano skin another deer and he told me there was still time to choose a proper husband and he’d never leave me, no matter who I picked. I was so shocked I cut myself with the knife. I spent the next two hours begging him to believe he is as much my choice as any of the others.

“I’m super comfortable,” I tell Bobby. “I feel like the luckiest girl in the world. If anything, I’m worried about you guys.”

Bobby snorts. “Don’t worry about us.”

“But you’ve never shared a woman before! Won’t you guys be the ones who’ll want someone else to sleep with every night or to... you know... whenever you feel like it?”

I flush. I'm still not very good at talking about sex.

"Baby," Bobby says in a calm voice. "You seem to have this opinion that before you showed up, Velvet House was a non-stop party fuckfest. We run a billion-dollar business. We work all the time and when we want to unwind, we do shit on our own. Adri goes hunting and Doc swims and Eli looks at fancy rocks and I watch ESPN."

"So, none of you ever slept with anyone before me?"

"I'm not saying that. But we would duck out and show up again later, or we'd go to Doc's clubs. It all fits into our schedules. We never had anyone we cared about, and we never needed anyone to care about. Until you."

"Oh." For a second my heart lifts, then all my doubts drag it back to earth. "But what if I don't have enough time for all of you?"

"JJ, we're all still working twelve hour days."

"No, you're not!"

"Where do you think Doc and Eli are right now?"

"I don't know..."

"They're working. Doc's with his crew at Flare, that nightclub we have in Harlem, and Eli's negotiating a construction security agreement with some guys in Florida."

"He's *in* Florida?"

"No, baby, the meeting's online. But we're setting up contracts in DC, Omaha and Toronto and we have agreements in LA, New Orleans, Tijuana, New York, and are you seeing how none of us have time to scratch ourselves let alone *think* about cheating on the hottest girl in the world?"

I ignore the flattery. "What about Adriano? All he does is skin deer."

Bobby grimaces. "He says he's retiring. We'll see about that, but in the meantime, we're covering his workload, which doesn't help with our schedules."

My stomach gives a guilty squirm. “Do you need to go to work? Should I give you some space?”

Bobby’s arms draw tight around me. “Never. Having you around is like a four-hour lunch break in Fiji.”

“But if you have to work...?”

“Not right now.” Bobby smiles. “That’s what makes you perfect for me. For us. We’re busy, but we can all give you a little of ourselves. Between all four of us, we might make one decent boyfriend.”

I kiss his chest. “I think you’re all decent boyfriends.”

“Even Adriano and all his dead deer?”

I smile, thinking of the way Adri calls me ‘Pryntsesa.’ I know what it means now. It’s Ukrainian for ‘princess.’

“Especially Adriano and his dead deer,” I tell Bobby. “Now can you please help me find a job? Once I have one, I’ll feel like I’m doing something useful.”

“You’re doing plenty useful already. Besides, the one thing Velvet House doesn’t need is money.”

I believe that. Two mornings after I lost my virginity, Eli called me to his office. It’s on the fifth story of the North Wing, a huge sunlit room with a beautiful view of the grounds.

“This is for you,” he said, handing me a plain black credit card. “Bobby will show you how to access your account.”

“What account?”

Eli looked at me so sternly it was hard to believe he’d ever let me undress him. “Your bank account.”

I thought he wanted me to start paying rent. “I’m sorry, I’m not working yet, but once I am, I’ll be able to contribute. I *want* to contribute.”

Eli’s face went all scrunchy. “What are you talking about? This is your *personal bank account*. I’ve given you two

million dollars and you'll receive an additional fifty thousand a month."

My jaw almost hit the floor. "You can't... that's too much money!"

He fixed me with his golden-brown eyes. "I'm a billionaire, *bella*. What do you expect? Eighty dollars a week for groceries?"

"You don't have to give me anything!"

"And yet I am. If you need anything more, clothes, jewelry, speak to me. Do not let Domenico hand you wads of filthy strip club money. And let me know when you'd like to buy a car. That needs to be bought separately for tax reasons."

I tried to come up with an answer and instead I just screamed. Just opened my mouth and screamed. The thought of two million dollars went off in my head like a bomb and I didn't know what else to do.

"*Mannaggia*," Eli said, jumping to his feet. "What's wrong?"

I couldn't get the words out, and just burst into tears. But instead of getting angry, Eli carried me to his office chair, sat me in his lap and rocked me back and forth. "*Su... su... la mia dolce ragazza. Il mio prezioso gioiello.*" *There, there, my sweet girl. My precious jewel.*

"I'm so scared you'll all eventually hate me," I sobbed. "I don't deserve any of this."

Eli pressed a furious kiss to my forehead, like a stamp denying my right to doubt him. "You deserve everything that every man in this house has to give."

I was still sniffing like a baby when he eased me onto his desk. Despite my tears, my body was already throbbing from its proximity to his hard, faintly lavender scented one.

"Do you want me to go down on you?" I asked, because of the four of them Eli seemed to like blow jobs the best.

“No,” Eli said, lifting my pink babydoll dress and pulling down my panties. “I’m going to take you. Not for your pleasure, but so you know you belong to me, and that all your problems are mine to solve.”

I expected him to be rough, but he took me gently, one hand cupped to my cheek. He said it wasn’t for my pleasure but when his cock stroked over that deep secret place inside me, I came so hard I thought I was going to pass out.

“Good girl,” Eli murmured, pulling out. “Now tell me to finish on you. Tell me you want my cum.”

I did, so I told him. Eli covered my mound, coating my landing strip which Doc had just shaved into a heart. Then he kissed me on my cheek and told me to leave *‘before you distract me into bankruptcy.’*

I thought he was joking, but apparently the boys do need to be working around the clock to keep things afloat.

“What *does* Velvet House need?” I ask Bobby.

“Huh?” Bobby’s eyes have wandered back to his phone.

“You said you guys don’t need money, what do you need?”

“Manpower,” Bobby says at once. “Trusted people to take valuable positions and not fuck them up.”

“What about Archie and Bill?”

“That’s a good suggestion, baby, and I’m all for it, but it’s a sore point with Doc.”

“He can’t *still* think that Archie and Bill want to join Velvet House just to sleep with me?”

Bobby grins. “No, he doesn’t think that. But he doesn’t trust them. He doesn’t trust anyone. It was a nightmare trying to hire Sal—Doc thought he had suspicious eyebrows.”

I laugh. “Was he right?”

“Hardly. But Eli and I aren’t budging on the twins. Once the contract’s signed, we’ll hire them. Doc will just have to get

used to it.”

The mention of the contract sets my nerves jangling. There are less than four hours until we leave for New York...

“Maybe you can convince Doc that hiring the Baskervilles is a good idea,” Bobby muses. “He might listen to you. At the very least, he wouldn’t kick you in the stomach.”

“Sure,” I say, not really listening. “Is it okay if we talk about this later? I don’t know if I can think properly before tonight.”

Bobby’s face shifts, becomes almost angry. “You don’t need to come. I can put my foot down with Eli and the others.”

When it was first suggested I accompany the four of them to sign the contract with Mr. Parker, Adriano refused, Bobby was nervous, and Doc and Eli insisted. They argued back and forth all through dinner. Bobby saying I’d be safer at Velvet House, Doc countering it would make us look weak. Then at the end of the meal, Eli turned to me.

“You make the choice, *bella*.”

I’d rather have run from the room. I was terrified at the thought of seeing Mr. Parker, but in my heart, I knew I had to go. I owed it to Zia Teresa to look into the eyes of the man who killed her and smile. “I’ll come,” I told the table. “I’ll be there with you.”

Eli inclined his head. “Then you need to understand that means going public.”

“About what?”

“Us.”

“Do I need to lie about sleeping with all of you?”

“No,” Doc said. “Unless you wanna say Bobby’s good at sex.”

Bobby threw a fork at him.

“Then why...?” I asked Eli. “What does ‘going public’ mean?”

“It means the second we arrive at the meeting with you at our side, everyone will know January Whitehall belongs to Velvet House.”

“But... I do, right?”

The corner of Eli’s mouth kicked up. “Yes, but being open means admitting you’re the kind of girl who enjoys being... beloved by four men at once, *bella*.”

“Oh.” I suppose that should upset me, but I kind of like it. It makes me sound cool. Like one of the bad girls from school who snuck into nightclubs and sold feet pics.

“She’s into it,” Doc said. “Conversation over.”

But Eli held up a hand. “January, you need to understand, once Parker and the arbiters of this contract know you’re ours, the whole world will know it. And the whole world includes your family, your school friends, and the New York Society pages.”

My first thought was panicky—*my mom is going to kill me*—but then I remembered that she sold me to Mr. Parker, stole the last of my life savings, and isn’t my real mom. My second thought was that my brothers would be mortified, not to mention my uncles and the many other Whitehalls who don’t want a slutty relative. “What happens if I don’t want people to know?”

Everyone at the table exchanged glances.

“You won’t come to the meeting, and we’ll tell Parker we’ve sent you to Italy,” Eli told me. “You won’t have to go, but you’ll have to stay hidden until we can find you a secure apartment. After that we can meet at arranged times. Work out a system so it’s not obvious how connected to us you are.”

“I’d have to leave Velvet House?”

“Yes.”

Eli's brow was furrowed with lines and Doc, Bobby, and Adriano all looked murderous. The thought of having me live somewhere else was clearly distressing them, yet they were still offering me a way out.

"I don't want to go," I told the table. "I like living here and cooking and hanging out with whoever's around. And if I'm hidden away in some apartment, I won't be free."

"JJ," Bobby said quietly. "It's your reputation on the line."

I thought of my brothers and uncles. They were always kind to me, but as far as I knew, none of them intervened when my stepmom sold me to Mr. Parker. If they were going to judge me, it would be very hypocritical.

"I want to stay," I repeated a little louder. "I want to live here with all of you."

Bobby let out a long breath and Doc smiled, but Eli and Adriano remained stony-faced.

"I'm not sure you know what you're agreeing to," Eli said. "Anyone who mocks you within our hearing will die, but we can't protect you from whispers."

"Whispers don't bother me. There were always whispers about me because I had bodyguards and I was engaged. I would rather there were whispers about things that make me happy."

At that, a rare smile spread across Eli's face, one that reached his eyes, turning them caramel. "Spoken like a brave princess. Then it's settled. You'll come with us and be ours forever."

His words buzzed through me like an electric shock.

"*Forever?* I mean, are you all happy to keep... *seeing* me like this? Exclusively?"

"Of course," Bobby said.

"Get with the program, Tits."

Eli clucked his tongue. “I thought that was obvious from the fact we’re about to sign away our sworn revenge to protect you.”

I pressed a hand to my pounding heart. “I just... Didn’t you want to have fancy pedigree children?”

“And we will.”

“I... *what?*”

Bobby nudged him. “Don’t scare her.”

Eli sighed. “We don’t need to have all the answers tonight, but I want you to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

I felt a tiny pang of fear. “What exactly *am* I getting myself into? Is there some line in the contract that says I belong to you now? Like I’m trapped at Velvet House?”

“No,” four voices said at once.

“*Bella,*” Eli leaned across the table. “None of us want to own you. We would like you to stay, but if you changed your mind tomorrow, you could take the money I’ve given you and run. We might try to change your mind, but we wouldn’t stop you.”

“So, there’s no, like, contract between us?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember the one I made you sign in your sleep?” Doc said.

Eli ignored him. “What we’re doing here, it’s a risky investment, not a contract. We’re all taking a chance together.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“Then we cut our losses and walk away. That’s business.”

“But I don’t know if things will change!”

“And neither do we. That’s why I’m telling you to decide for yourself if you want to commit to us for the foreseeable future. You’re the one who knows how you feel.”

“Can’t you make all my decisions for me? Isn’t that your whole thing?”

Eli didn't smile. "Not when it comes to this. Trust your instincts. You're more insightful than you realize."

"You all used to say I was stupid!"

Doc laughed. "You're the only person who's ever brought us to our knees, Tits. If you're stupid, what does that make us?"

I looked at them, four strange, dangerous criminals who love each other and could love me. If I stayed, we'd be doing something that's never been done before—at least not that I knew of. And yet how could I live with myself if I walked away? I'd see Doc in every blond, think of Bobby every time someone mentioned baseball, develop a lifelong fixation for grumpy, well-dressed businessmen because of Eli, and forever be looking in the shadows for Adriano. My chest gave a hum, and I had my answer. I'm sure there's an alternative reality where January Whitehall has one good man, but in this reality, she has four hot, evil boyfriends.

"I want to stay," I told them. "I want to be with you."

There was a moment when they all looked back at me, identical expressions of hope and gratitude. Then Eli raised his wineglass. "To our risky investment. May it prove our greatest yet."

"January?" Bobby draws me back to the present moment, to the two of us on my bed. "I was saying you don't have to come to the contract meeting tonight."

I give my head a small shake, trying to focus. "I still want to come. It's my duty."

"But it might upset you and you're already in a... delicate place."

I've been having nightmares. Nothing I remember once I wake up, but I'm screaming the house down almost every night. Doc offered sleeping pills, but Adriano taught me some breathing exercises. At first, I thought he was joking, but they work, calming me whenever I jolt awake. That and hugs, which all of the guys give me when I sleep in their beds.

“I’m doing okay,” I tell Bobby. “Besides, I’ve got plenty of time to recover after the meeting.”

‘Plenty of time’ is my new favorite phrase. My whole life, I was on a clock ticking down to marrying Mr. Parker. Now I’m ticking down to weeks, months, *years* of freedom.

Bobby smiles then points to my laptop screen. “If you’re gonna go straight, you might not have the experience for a hostess role. Why don’t you aim for a bartender gig and get some service skills?”

I imagine myself working behind a busy bar, pouring beer and making cocktails like girls on TV. An immediate problem comes to mind. “Um, don’t bartenders get hit on a lot?”

“For sure,” Bobby says, tucking a hand behind his head. “Even the ones who don’t look like you.”

“Oh. So, is everyone going to be okay with me bartending?”

Bobby cracks up. “Honey, we’re gonna be there for every single shift you work.”

“*What!?* You just said that none of you have time for that!”

“That’s why it’s good there’s four of us.” He stretches his arms over his head, making his T-shirt ride up. I stare at his ridged abdomen, dusted with dark brown hair, and my lips tingle. Bobby pulls his shirt higher. “That’s the other thing we make time for, JJ. Working out.”

“I can see that.”

Bobby unbuckles his belt. “Why don’t you come here and see a bit more?”

I’m riding him when there’s a knock at the door. “*Bella?*”

I freeze, but Bobby grabs my hips and keeps fucking me. “Come in.”

Eli opens the door. He’s wearing an impeccable navy suit and carrying a long clothes bag and a cream box. His gaze runs over me. “Good evening, *bella.*”

Bobby pulls down my tank top, exposing my nipples. “She’s being a good little housemaid.”

“I can see that.”

Mortification flares through me and Bobby’s pounding thrusts feel twice as deep, twice as good. “Um... *hi*.”

“Still so shy.” Eli places the bag over my desk chair and the box on the table. “This is the dress and shoes you’ll wear tonight.”

“Yes, daddy,” I pant. “Are you... still sure you want me... to come to the contract signing?”

“Of course. You’re ours.” He turns to watch me writhing on top of Bobby. “Will you be dressed and in the dining room by midnight?”

The heavy look in his eyes sends tension crackling through me. “Of course.”

“Glad to hear it, my jewel.” He moves toward me and palms my breasts. “Say ‘thank you, daddy.’”

It’s hard to concentrate when Bobby’s screwing me like a demon. “Th-thank you, daddy.”

Eli’s thumb and forefingers close over my nipples with enough pressure to make me scream. I grind against the base of Bobby’s shaft and he grunts.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Eli says with a glance at Bobby. “You’re not finishing in her?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” Eli gives my breasts one last squeeze, then leaves. I feel so slutty and uncomfortable but that doesn’t stop me from having another screaming orgasm all over Bobby. Maybe it even helps.



I CAN BARELY look at myself in the mirror. I’ve worn revealing dresses before, but this one takes the cake. Every cake. There

will never be another cake because of this dress.

The neckline has a heavy silver collar and dangling from it are dozens of fine chains. They coil around my body like snakes, holding strategic scraps of black silk to my breasts and hips. My skin looks moon-pale against the dark material and the dress has no back, only more chains. They brush across my spine and collect over my ass in a silver pool. You can't see anything, but it looks like you might see *everything*.

My shoes are sky-high black leather pumps with silver chains down the sides. The overall effect is obvious, even to my inexperienced eyes—I look like a slave girl chained by her owners. Empowered but imprisoned. Luxurious but bare. My entire Velvet House experience in one dress. I pull my hair to the top of my head in a high ponytail and cover the tie with a swatch of my own hair. I keep my makeup simple, lilac lids fading to smoky gray and sheer pink lips.

I turn in the mirror and imagine walking into a room with Mr. Parker. This dress is like an evil twin to the gaudy wedding dress he chose for me. I don't have to do anything in the contract meeting. Neither do the other guys, really. Eli explained that signing the contract in person is just a formality. Two groups of people forced to meet face-to-face and admit what they're agreeing to.

For Eli, Doc, Bobby, and Adriano, it means setting aside revenge.

For Mr. Parker, it means never coming near me again. As unrealistic as that seems, I can't wait for it to be true. I decide my St. Christopher would look silly with the outfit, so I slide it off its chain and tuck the medallion into the base of my ponytail.

"We're almost free, Zia," I say to my reflection.

Be careful, bella. That's all I ask.

I hesitate. It's been a while since I've talked with my internal Zia Teresa, and I know why. "Zia, will you hate me if I have four boyfriends?"

She lets out a long sigh. *You young people, always trying new things. Why can't you just settle down and get married?*

“Zia, you hated being married!” I say indignantly. “You told me your husband ruined your life, like, every day!”

A sound that could be a cigarette cough or laughter. *Well, I don't remember that.*

I wait. I wait so long it feels like I've lost my Zia Teresa voice. Disgusted her into never speaking to me again. I stare at my reflection, watching my eyes go glassy with tears. Then it comes.

Maybe I can't advise you about this. Maybe you will just have to do what you want and not expect me to approve.

I smile, my insides tender as kneaded dough. “Okay. But I'll always love you, Zia.”

And I'll always love you. Another rasping cough laugh. *Besides, no man has ever been good enough for one of my girls.*

I dab away my tears then put my phone and lip gloss in my Chanel bag. I don't bother with a coat. None of the guys will want me to wear one and checking it somewhere might be awkward. With one last glimpse at my reflection, I head downstairs for the dining room.

“Fuck me sideways.”

Doc is wearing ripped jeans and a dark purple T-shirt. The color turns his blue eyes indigo. He looks like a surfer on his day off. I squeak. “I can't wear this dress if you're wearing jeans!”

“That's exactly what you can do.” He grips my arms and pins me to the wall. “But first I'm gonna chain you up and fuck you senseless.”

I turn my face away. “I'm not saying no, but you'll ruin my lip gloss. It took ages.”

“I do want you at your most fuckable for this meeting. How ’bout I eat you out instead?”

I struggle against his hold. “Nico, can’t we just wait?”

“Fine.” His purple eyes look dangerous. “But after this, we’re gonna get drunk and fuck until we can’t feel feelings anymore.”

My body flushes at the thought. Even as a virgin, it wouldn’t have surprised me to learn that Domenico Valente is vicious in bed. He likes hurting me, pinching and biting and pulling my hair. What *would* have surprised me is that he likes being hurt even more. Every time we’re together, he orders me to scratch his back with my nails, press my hand into his windpipe, sink my teeth into his shoulders. Anything I can do to hurt him, he wants it.

The last time, he gave me his butterfly knife and made me hold it to his bicep while he fucked me. He wanted me to hold it to his throat but I refused.

“What if I hurt you?”

Doc just laughed his crazy laugh. “I want you to fucking *kill me*, Tesorina.”

I believe him. There isn’t a thrill Doc doesn’t want to chase. When we have sex, he barely finishes before he picks up some toy or rope and starts some new game with my body. He watches, too, whenever he can. Me and Bobby. Me and Eli. He even came down to the cabin and watched Adriano screw me on the wooden floor.

He curls a finger into my cleavage and tugs me closer. “Tonight, when all this bullshit is over, I’m gonna nut inside you.”

The thought turns my knees to water. “Eli says—”

“Fuck what Morelli says. It’s all I can think about, coming in your little vise grip of a cunt. Filling it with my cum.” He licks along my neck. “I can just imagine it dripping out of your

pretty pink pussy. When I see it for real, I'm gonna die and go straight to hell."

"And if you get me pregnant?"

"This isn't a rom-com, Tits. It takes more than one fuck to knock someone up."

"Who's getting knocked up?"

Bobby strolls in wearing a checked shirt beneath a snugly cashmere jumper. He takes in my dress and his cheeks flare crimson. "You look stunning, JJ."

Doc hisses at him, tucking me into his side. "You had her all afternoon, she's on my time now, Basher."

"Whatever. Nice outfit by the way, you teenage fuckin' dirtbag."

The fall of heavy footsteps announces Adriano. He's dressed the way he was the night I arrived at Velvet House, in a sage green Henley and heavy canvas pants. His boots are battered black, and he has a gun strapped to his thigh.

Fear sizzles down my spine. In the hours I've spent with him, I've felt nothing scarier than nervousness, but he's the scary military-looking man again. At least until he looks at me and his face softens. "Pryntsesa. Your beauty is incomparable."

I touch a hand to my burning face. "Thank you."

If there's one thing my virgin self never would have believed, it's how Adriano Rossi treats me now. All he wants to do is feed me home-cooked deer, teach me how to shoot a bow, or listen to me talk. He says my voice is the most beautiful sound in the world. He also goes down on me constantly. I can barely draw breath without him burying his head between my legs and using his huge rasping tongue to lick me to orgasm.

He takes my hand and kisses it. Then he ducks his head and for a second, I think he's going to kneel before me. Doc must too.

“Holy fuck, are you gonna make Tits knight you?”

Adriano scowls and drops my hand, striding away to the bar. He picks up a bottle of clear liquor and drinks from the neck for a long time.

I’m still only getting to know his moods, but he seems nervous. They all do, shifting around and cracking their knuckles. So much for ‘just formalities.’

The atmosphere changes when Eli arrives. It grows sharper, more formal. He’s in all black tonight, a black suit and shirt and tie. Even his cufflinks are onyx. It makes his hair extra dark and turns his eyes to gleaming coal.

“We need to leave,” he says without so much as a hello. His gaze finds mine. “You look like heaven on earth. Let’s go. The helicopter’s waiting.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

January Whitehall

THE HELICOPTER RIDE is swift. In thirty minutes, we're hovering over the heart of Manhattan. I sit between Doc and Bobby, both of them squeezing my thighs and kissing my shoulders and hands. Across from us, Adriano is stock-still, his jaw set, and Eli is typing away at his laptop. Bobby's right about him being a workaholic. It seems like if he's not sleeping with me, he's doing something work related.

As we circle over the city, my nerves spike.

"How's Margot?" I ask.

"Fine," Bobby says. "Gretzky just texted me. She's watching TV."

I nod trying to process how bizarre it is that my sister has met the men who held me at Velvet House. Eli decided that in the unlikely event the contract signing goes badly, Margot might be targeted. Harvey and Mr. Gretzky brought her a letter from me at her college, and she agreed to be taken to a safehouse for the night. I wanted to talk to her, but the boys warned me it wasn't wise while Mr. Parker could still be trying to abduct me.

"You'll speak to her afterward," Eli promised. "If all goes well."

I felt reassured at the time, but all 'going well' is beginning to feel a lot less likely.

The helicopter lands on a stretch of dark grass. A dozen armed guards are waiting for us. A hard knot forms in my

stomach. Eli eyes me closely. “Time for you to be brave, *bella*. You are our glamorous toy, nothing more.”

He means—play your part. No tears. No fear. As Doc and Bobby have said a dozen times, Mr. Parker will be looking to upset me, if only for a last shot at revenge. But if I learned anything living with my stepmother, it was to play the role required of me. I push back my shoulders and try for a remote smile, like an off-duty model. I’m pretty and bored and no one can hurt me.

“Perfect.” Eli leans forward and kisses my cheek. “This will all be over soon.”

I think of Margot and pray he’s right.

The armed guards lead the five of us inside the building. It’s huge, like a gothic museum with glossy black floors and well-lit statues everywhere. The boys act as if they’ve done this a hundred times before, shrugging off their jackets and chatting to one another. But their eyes are cold and they walk in front and behind me. Four corners protecting me at the center.

We’re steered to a black marble reception where a man in sunglasses tells us to surrender our weapons. I expect Adriano to hand over his gun, but he also unpacks two knives, a set of handcuffs, and a taser. The other three are all carrying guns and knives, too.

I watch the receptionist pack them away under the desk and realize the boys are probably trying to make a point. *‘We’re super armed and dangerous.’* I wish they’d included me but, then again, there’s no way I’d look scary with a gun.

Once the gun butler has all the weapons, he comes around the desk and runs a black wand over each of us. It can’t be a metal detector because the chains on my dress don’t set it off. Maybe he’s scanning our bones. He eyes my breasts as he scans me and though it makes my skin crawl, I give him my best uninterested look, as though I couldn’t care less he finds

me hot, because there's no chance a lowly gun butler could be with someone like me.

"Good work, Pryntsesa," Adriano mutters as we're led to an elevator.

The guards stay behind as we pile in. It's entirely black and so shiny, it's like we're in space. Eli presses for floor ninety, the highest floor. The doors close and I feel trapped. I touch the base of my ponytail where my St. Christopher is hidden.

Help me, Zia. Help all of us.

The space capsule opens on a conference room. The enormous glass table looks big enough for fifty people, yet sitting right in the middle is a single old man. His suit is light gray, and his thick white hair is combed neatly over his head. He should look harmless, even friendly, but as his pale eyes meet mine, a bolt of fear shoots through me. His eyes trail my body and then glance away and I understand he's like a shark circling in a nature documentary. He won't hurt me because he isn't hungry and I'm just an unimportant little fish, but he isn't someone I should make a mistake in front of. Ever.

The old man puts his phone aside and smiles at Eli. "Elliot! You're here first."

"Of course I am," Eli says drily. "It's good to see you Mr. Bianchi."

He walks around the table and kisses the old man on both cheeks.

"You remember my brothers, Domenico Valente, Roberto Bassilotta, and Adriano Rossi?"

The old man gives each of them a friendly nod, but his clear blue eyes don't crinkle. They stay open and cold as ice.

Eli gestures to me. "This, Mr. Bianchi, is January Whitehall."

Mr. Bianchi gives my body another perfunctory sweep then shoots Eli a smile. "Suddenly this contract makes far

more sense.”

My cheeks heat, but I stand tall. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Bianchi.”

“Elliot tells me you sing.”

“I... Yes,” I say. “I love singing.”

“Perhaps if everything goes as planned, you’ll sing at my wedding to my darling Yelizaveta next summer?”

My breath catches in my throat. This old guy is getting married? And he wants me to perform there? Out of the corner of my eye, Bobby gives me a tiny nod.

“Of course,” I say with all the enthusiasm I can push into my voice. “I’d love to.”

“Excellent. Take a seat. All of you.”

Eli sits at the furthest end of the table. Bobby and Adriano take his left. I sit on his right with Doc beside me. As I settle into my seat, I see three men in black suits, blending into the dark windows behind them. Aside from the one wearing wire-rimmed glasses, they look identical. I try not to stare.

A waiter places a glass of water in front of each of us. Doc asks for beer and one is promptly brought to him. I wish I could ask for orange juice, but I don’t want to look like a child. Eli and Mr. Bianchi enter a deep conversation. It’s all gibberish to me except for random numbers and place names: *‘three-sixty-five,’ ‘Tacoma,’ ‘Upper East Side.’*

The minutes tick by and I wish I could take out my phone and play games, scroll social media, read the weather app, *anything*. The boys shift around me, irritated. This must be part of Mr. Parker’s plan. If he can’t have me, he’ll be as annoying as possible for as long as possible.

When Doc finishes his beer and the conversation between Eli and the old man is getting strained, the elevator dings. Doc presses his knee into my right leg and Eli does the same on the other side. I turn my face into a mask. I’m a pretty, vacant doll and I belong to the men around me. That’s all that matters.

Mr. Parker exits the elevator first. He's dressed in a brown suit and boots that make him look like he's about to go hunting. He's brought seven men with him. I only recognize one of them, a big redhead, from the hospital. At least the Baskerville twins aren't here. I don't think my acting skills are that good.

"Good evening," Mr. Parker tells the room in a loud TV presenter voice.

"Good evening," Mr. Bianchi says quietly.

I can feel the hatred coming off the four men around me like steam hissing from a boiling pot. Doc's shoulders have risen, and Adriano's face is as hard as the night he pushed a gun into my mouth. Bobby is looking at his phone, but his jaw is tight enough to burst. Only Eli sits straight-backed and calm, his glittering eyes the only physical manifestation of his rage. "Good evening, Zachery."

"Elliot." Mr. Parker wanders closer to our side of the table. "Dom. Basher. Rossi."

As he looks at each of my men, it's like he makes them younger. More like teenagers than the grown criminals I've come to know.

Mr. Parker gives Adriano a wide-lipped smirk. "How's the side? Any broken ribs?"

Adriano says nothing.

Mr. Parker's gaze falls on me. As he takes in my tight, slutty dress, his loathing is bright as a star in the sky. I remember the way he looked at me in his limo, telling me we'd be married by morning. I fight back a shudder. He doesn't leave to take his seat, just keeps staring. To distract myself, I examine his shirt. It's purple silk and you can see his nipples through it. Mr. Parker always wears silk shirts, and you can *always* see his nipples through them. Maybe it's on purpose. Maybe it's a sex thing. I bite back a snort of laughter and then, somehow, it's easy to meet Mr. Parker's eyes. He's just a guy with a nipple shirt.

“Jan-u-ar-y White-hall,” he says, rolling each syllable around his pink mouth. “We meet again.”

Doc’s leg presses harder into mine, like he’s scared I’m going to run away. I toss my ponytail over my shoulder. “Hi, Zach.”

His mouth falls open, and I swear he almost lunges for me.

“Parker,” Mr. Bianchi says sharply. “Remember why you’re here.”

He rounds on the old man. “Did you hear... she just called me...?”

All at once, the tension leaves our side of the table. Doc barks out a laugh and Eli leans back in his chair.

“I don’t think it matters if Miss Whitehall refers to you by your first name, Parker,” Mr. Bianchi says. “Sit and we can begin the meeting.”

There’s a definite bite in his voice and I feel a little proud that the scary old man likes us more than Mr. Parker.

My ex-fiancé settles at the other end of the table and his seven men fan out around him. A few have briefcases which they put on the table, and take out thick pages of documents. I think of all the guns and knives we surrendered downstairs. Why didn’t we come prepared with our own lawyers and paperwork, too? Maybe Doc and Adriano said that strategy was for nerds...

Mr. Bianchi fixes a pair of gold glasses to the end of his nose. “Everyone’s here. It’s time to proceed.”

The room chills by several degrees. We all sit up straighter.

“I’ve been assigned to end the conflict between your organizations in an amicable, and more importantly *final*, way,” Mr. Bianchi says. He looks around the table and I nod, the way I used to in school, so teachers knew I was listening.

Mr. Bianchi gestures to the invisible guys at the window and one man rushes forward with a leather folder. Mr. Bianchi

opens it with his spotted hands. “This is the contract that’s been drawn up. Both Velvet House and Parker Enterprise Holdings have had several days to look over it and make adjustments, so you should all be familiar with the contents. However, I’ll briefly summarize the agreement.”

Eli’s thigh contracts against mine. He’s refused to answer any of my questions about the contract. I’m sure he didn’t want me to hear this. My heart gives another painful squeeze.

Mr. Bianchi points to Mr. Parker. “In signing this contract, Zachery Parker renounces any romantic, financial, sexual, or familial claim to January Joy Whitehall. He may not threaten or harm her. If asked to comment on their previous relationship, he will say he ended their engagement so Miss Whitehall could attend college...”

I feel Mr. Parker looking at me and I try to think about fractions. Fractions are the most boring thing in the world. Fractions will save me.

“...should Mr. Parker or anyone who works for his organization be found in violation of this contract, by harming Miss Whitehall or contacting her or her family, their lives will be forfeited.”

Mr. Bianchi pauses so we know he means ‘get murdered.’

“Afterward, the entirety of Parker Enterprise Holdings’ assets will be divided between my association, Capital Nine, and Velvet House.”

Mr. Parker tilts his chin. “Understood.”

“In addition, Mr. Parker surrenders any and all claims to the patent for the drug known as ‘Orchard,’ and swears he is no longer in possession of any outstanding product.”

“I swear,” Mr. Parker says, pressing a hand to his chest.

I think of his tree safe and the drugs he threatened to give me and Emilia in Vegas and I know with my whole heart he’s lying. He still has old Orchard. He’d never give it up. I open

my mouth to say so and Eli's hand clamps over my thigh. I stay silent.

Mr. Bianchi turns to Eli. "In exchange for the dissolution of his relationship with January Joy Whitehall and his renunciation of any claim to the drug Orchard, Zachery Parker will receive clemency for any and all misconduct toward Elliot Morelli, Roberto Bassilotta, Domenico Valente, and Adriano Rossi."

Beside me, Doc is grinding his teeth. I touch his leg. His wiry muscles clench and I think he's going to throw me off, but then his hand settles over mine, warm and heavy.

"Should the four of you, or anyone who works for your organization, be found in violation of this contract by harming Mr. Parker or contacting him or his associates in any way that could be deemed improper, your lives will be forfeit and Velvet House's assets divided between my association, Capital Nine, and Parker Enterprise Holdings."

"We understand," Eli says.

The old man continues to look at our end of the table.

"Agreed," Bobby says quietly.

"Fine," growls Adriano.

All of us look at Doc.

"Got it," he says through the smallest possible opening of his lips.

"Wonderful," Mr. Bianchi says briskly. "Finally, in addition to personal amnesty, Zachery Parker will receive compensation for the money he gave the Whitehall family to secure a marriage with January Joy Whitehall."

My stomach falls. Eli and the others have to pay back all the money Mr. Parker gave my stepmom? But that must be a million dollars, maybe more.

"Capital Nine has done a thorough investigation of Zachery Parker's financial records. And we've concluded

thirty million dollars is to be paid to Parker Enterprise Holdings.”

I gasp.

Everyone turns to look at me and I fight to return my expression to blank ambivalence. I feel like I’m falling down a long, dark hole. Thirty million dollars. *Thirty million dollars...* How could my stepmom have taken so much money? How could no one have told me?

A smile quirks Mr. Parker’s mouth. “You were an expensive investment, January. Not that I consider it money well spent.”

I try to divide a thousand into thirds. Try not to move a muscle.

“I’ll thank you not to speak to Miss Whitehall,” Eli says coldly.

Mr. Parker leans back in his chair. “Contract isn’t signed yet.”

Fuck you, his eyes say. Fuck you and your whore.

“Upon signing the contract,” Mr. Bianchi says, a little louder. “Velvet House and Parker Enterprise Holdings will cease contact. The payments will be brokered through Capital Nine and anyone attempting to converse outside our influence will be considered in violation of the contract. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” Eli and the boys say in unison.

“Yes,” Mr. Parker drawls.

“Then we’ll proceed with signing the contract.” The old man clicks his fingers and one of the assistants brings forward another heavy leather folder. He places it, and a fancy pen, in front of Eli.

“You only need one signature each. Final page,” the man murmurs. “It’s been marked.”

Eli opens the folder to the last page. Out of the corner of my eye I see their four names printed next to dotted lines.

Elliot Velluto Morelli

Domenico Salvatore Valente

Roberto Libero Bassilotta

Adriano Bohdan Rossi

And just below it.

Zachery Blake Parker

Eli signs quickly then passes the file to Bobby. Bobby signs just as fast before handing the document to Adriano. Doc goes last. He lets his pen hover for a few seconds before he scrawls his name. He leaves a huge inkblot on the page, but it's done. The assistant comes forward to collect the document and I give a small sigh of relief. We're so close. Maybe only minutes away from this being over.

The contract is placed in front of Mr. Parker. He stares at it, then shoves it aside. The atmosphere in the room goes icy.

"Is there a problem, Parker?" Mr. Bianchi demands.

"No," Mr. Parker says. "I just want my lawyer to re-read the contract in full before I sign."

Doc swears under his breath.

"That will take a significant amount of time," Mr. Bianchi says testily.

Mr. Parker doesn't shrink into his seat the way I would if Mr. Bianchi was talking to me like that. He folds his arms behind his head and smirks. "Then it'll take a significant amount of time. I'm sorry, but anyone could have added to or altered the document and I'm not going to have that before I sign."

"Fine," the old man snaps. "But you're inconveniencing all of us and insulting this entire endeavor by implying I haven't fulfilled my brokerage duties."

“Sorry.” Mr. Parker shoves the contract at the man on his right. “Read quickly, Martin.”

The lawyer produces a ruler and slides it across the first page of the contract. Bobby catches my eye and gives me a small smile. I try to take comfort in it. He, at least, doesn't seem too surprised.

Mr. Bianchi continues glaring at Mr. Parker. “Velvet House requested you return Miss Whitehall's passport. Have you brought it with you?”

“Sure have.” Mr. Parker pulls my passport from his pocket and tosses it onto the table with a loud slap. “Here you go, *January.*”

I fight the urge to flinch. He's still staring at me with his angry crocodile smile. I hate that my passport was in his pants. That he touched it with his hands.

Eli shoots Mr. Parker a look of utter loathing then turns to Mr. Bianchi. “Is it possible for Miss Whitehall to leave the room?”

The old man's smile is sympathetic. “Sorry, Elliot. You'll all stay where you are until this is done. Would you like a drink?”

“Scotch,” Eli says quietly. “And January will have champagne.”

“She's underage,” Mr. Parker says loudly. “So, it's not appropriate to give the bitch alcohol, even if Morelli and his friends are sticking their dicks inside her.”

My muscles go weak. Mr. Parker was the one who wanted to marry me when I was barely eighteen! I open my mouth to say so but Doc and Eli both squeeze my thighs under the table.

“Scotch,” Eli says firmly. “And champagne for January.”

“Bold choice,” Mr. Parker calls.

Mr. Bianchi gives him a nasty look but doesn't tell him off. He can't, I realize. Until the contract is signed, Mr. Parker is

free to say whatever he likes to me. He's delaying the meeting specifically so he can be horrible. After all he's done, after killing my Zia, it's still not enough.

Our drinks arrive and I sip my champagne fast, praying it returns me to my numbness, but by the time I'm done, Mr. Parker's lawyer is only halfway through the document.

Eli cups my jaw, turning my face toward him. "Another champagne?"

His touch is so gentle, it makes me want to cry. I turn away, blinking hard. "No, thank you."

"Very well," Eli kisses my cheek and I feel Mr. Parker's eyes on me. I turn to look at him and maybe it's the champagne, but I can't help myself. "Is something wrong?"

Mr. Parker's lip curls. "You've slept with all of them now, have you?"

"Of course, I have," I say. "I slept with them the second I got away from you."

To my right, Doc chuckles and even Adriano smiles. Mr. Parker makes a sound like a viper about to strike.

"That's enough, *bella*," Eli says lightly. He raps on the table. "Another scotch and champagne."

Mr. Parker stares at me as the fresh drinks are set before us. I think of Zia Teresa lying cold in her hospital bed. Her daughters sobbing at her funeral. I think of Doc's sister. Bobby's father. Someone who belonged to Adriano and Eli. Spite and hatred, that's all Mr. Parker knows. My hands ball into fists. He can talk to me before the contract is signed, then I can talk to him.

"Emilia doesn't want you," I tell Mr. Parker. "No woman does."

"You think anyone cares about what comes out of your mouth, cunt?"

I shrink back in my seat. I'm a fool. There's nothing I can do to hurt Mr. Parker. I'm not a person to him. Not human. If I hit him, it would probably feel like paper brushing past.

A warm hand descends on my shoulder.

"I care about what comes out of January's mouth," Doc drawls. "And if I don't, I can always shove my dick in it."

One of Mr. Parker's men snorts and my face burns. It's one thing for Mr. Parker to say horrible things, but Doc? After all we've been through? I glance at him, and he turns down the corners of his mouth in an exaggerated frown. "Aww, she's feeling sensitive. Come on, Tits. Where's your sense of humor?"

He leans forward and nuzzles my ear. I try to pull away, but his hands grip my wrists, holding me fast. "*Play along, January.*"

For a second I'm confused, and then I understand—I don't have the meanness to mess with Mr. Parker, but if anyone does, it's Domenico Valente. I slide my mouth into a sensuous smile. "Sorry, Mr. Valente."

Doc presses his nose to mine. "That's better. Champagne always gets you wet, doesn't it, you pretty bitch?"

Mr. Parker bares his teeth and I understand why Doc's being so rude. Mr. Parker finds Eli treating me kindly hilarious because he doesn't think I'm worth anything. But Doc drooling all over me is still insulting because he never got to touch me.

I giggle. "Yes, Mr. Valente."

Doc sucks air between his teeth. "Keep calling me that and I'll lay you out in front of everyone in this conference room."

"The two of you can stop whenever you like," Eli says, but lazily, like a substitute teacher who doesn't care if you're paying attention or not.

"Ah, Morelli, don't act like you don't watch." Doc licks along my neck. "I think I should fuck her just to pass the

time.”

He grabs my breasts through the tiny panel covering them. The sensation is so shocking, so *sexual*, I let out a squeal.

Doc massages me, squeezing me through the silk. “Mmm, these are fucking fantastic. You ever touch January’s tits, Zach?”

Mr. Parker’s men look uncomfortable, but Mr. Bianchi is just staring at his phone. Maybe he’s done dozens of negotiations like this and doesn’t care anymore.

“Of course, you didn’t,” Doc says. “Well, I’ll let you in on a little secret. If you suck her nipples while you’re hitting it juuuust right, she squirts everywhere.”

I duck my head. I’ve only done it a few times. Squirted. The last time, Adriano was inside me and Doc was watching, and I was worried they’d be disgusted, but both of them acted like they won a billion dollars.

Mr. Parker’s eyes narrow. “So, she’s a fucking whore.”

“You’re damn right she is,” Doc says breezily. “She wants dick twenty times a day. She’s draining the life out of all of us.”

Now every man in the room except Mr. Bianchi is staring at me, many of them slack mouthed. I lift my chin, inviting them to stare. I’m January Whitehall and I’m precious to the men who want me. Doc rubs his thumbs over my nipples, making them peak through my dress. “Thirty million dollars for this perfect little fuckdoll. She’s worth every penny, isn’t she, Morelli?”

Eli drains his scotch. “I’d have paid double.”

Mr. Bianchi finally looks up from his phone. “Don’t say that before the contract’s signed, Elliot.”

Eli gives a dry laugh.

“It wouldn’t matter if it was double,” Doc says, his indigo eyes on mine. “With what we pull in, we were always gonna

pay for her. Wrap her up in lace and jewels and keep her as a plaything. Any straight man who looks at her'll understand. She's a fucking treasure." He looks across at Parker. "And that's what everyone'll think, isn't it? Not that Parker gave up January Whitehall so she could fail out of Columbia University. That better men stole her and kept her for themselves."

I know Doc took it too far the instant the words leave his mouth.

'*Porca misera,*' groans Eli as Mr. Parker jumps to his feet. "Say that again!"

Mr. Bianchi looks up from his phone. "Parker, sit. Mr. Valente, I must object."

Doc rolls his eyes. "Fine."

Mr. Bianchi returns to his phone. Mr. Parker lowers himself back into his seat as big red spots appear on his cheeks. "Always running your cheap mouth, aren't you, Dom?"

"Sorry," Doc says, tugging my nipple. "January's body makes me forget things."

I arch into his touch, closing my eyes as though it's bringing me to ecstasy. Truthfully, it is. I don't know what kind of woman the boys have unlocked in me, but I'm soaking my black thong. All these men looking at me as Doc expertly manipulates my body...

Doc gathers a fistful of the chains connected to my silver collar and pulls my face closer to his. "Honey, tell all these nice men you love getting railed by all four of us."

"I love sleeping with you," I say huskily. "It's the most fun I've ever had."

Doc kisses me hard. It reminds me of our first kiss, him in a priest robe, me in my wedding dress. He licks inside my mouth, and I can't help but moan.

When we pull apart, Mr. Parker's face is brick red and Bobby and Eli are grinning. Even Adriano looks amused.

"Hurry up," Mr. Parker roars at his lawyer.

The guy twitches and the ruler goes flying out of his hand.

Eli laughs. "Be nicer to your lackeys, Parker. A good CEO knows people perform worse under pressure."

"Fuck yourself, Morelli."

"No, thank you." Eli grips my silver collar. "Come here, *bella*."

He kisses me slowly, expertly, and my skin tingles. He pulls back, his amber eyes on mine "Soon this will be all over, and you'll be free to play again. Won't you?"

I know exactly what Eli wants to hear. "Yes, daddy."

He strokes a thumb over my lower lip. "Good girl."

One of the men behind Mr. Bianchi clears his throat. Another brings a subtle hand to the front of his pants, adjusting himself. My chest tightens with embarrassment, but I keep smiling sweetly at Eli. Mr. Parker wanted to use this time to harass me, now my men intend to use this time to harass him.

Eli presses another light kiss to my lips then directs me back to Doc. "Amuse yourself with Valente for a while. Lord knows he's not concentrating."

"Fuck you," Doc says easily, sliding his palms over my stomach. "Hey Zach, you wanna know something else about January? She's a freak. Likes pain. Fuckin' *loves* danger. She came when I fucked her with my knife handle. 'Course I was licking her pussy at the time..." Doc looks at Eli. "Did I eat January out first or was that you?"

Eli glances up from his phone. "Bobby was first. He was the first to fuck her too."

"I was the first to fuck her pussy," Bobby corrects. "Doc did her ass."

“I did,” Doc agrees. “You should have been there, Parker. She was soaking and begging me for a lay, trying to get me to pop her cherry on the street where anyone could have seen her. So, I fucked her asshole instead. She took it like a porn star. All the way in with only spit for lube.”

My whole body roils with humiliation, but I force myself to stay composed.

Doc grins. “Still, Eli busted in her mouth before I did.”

“True,” Eli says. “But January asked Adriano to take her virginity first.”

“Begged,” Adriano growls. “But Doc was the first man to come on her tits.”

“Ah, but you’ve been making up for lost time since then, haven’t you?” Doc says. “Parker, you wouldn’t believe how fucked up January and Adriano look together. Little girl riding that great big dick. It’s like monster porn in real life—”

“Mr. Bianchi,” Parker interrupts. “Can’t this be stopped?”

Mr. Bianchi looks mildly at him. “I can’t see that they’re insulting you in any way, Parker, and you’re the person who delayed this meeting.”

“But—”

“Are you questioning my authority?”

“No, but—”

“Clearly you are.” Mr. Bianchi gestures at the men behind him. As one, they slide their hands into their jackets and bring out shiny black guns. Mr. Parker stops talking.

“So where was I...?” Doc asks the ceiling. “...Oh yeah, monster porn...”

And so, it goes on. Mr. Parker’s lawyer rapidly turns pages as the boys describe the things they’ve done to me and the things they plan to do to me. Doc and Eli take turns kissing me and argue over who the first person to finish in my flower will be. I keep thinking they’ll run out of words, but they never

even come close. By the time Parker's lawyer shoves the contract across to him, they're still going.

"...so we're probably better off running a train on her," Doc tells the other three who all nod as though he's made a clever point.

Mr. Parker signs as quickly as his hand can move. "Done. I'm fucking leaving."

Doc cocks his head. "What was that?"

But Mr. Parker is already around the table shaking Mr. Bianchi's hand. "Thank you," he says through gritted teeth. "May I leave?"

Mr. Bianchi adjusts his glasses. "That depends. You know what you've signed, don't you?"

"That's why I signed it."

"Then go. And let this be the last time you speak to anyone who remains in this room."

Mr. Parker snaps his fingers, and his men rise.

"Goodbye," he tells no one in particular and then his gaze finds mine. His stare is so full of utter loathing, my skin seems to shift over my muscles. Then I blink, and he's gone. Doc grabs my hand as Eli lets out a satisfied sigh and Bobby laughs. Only Adriano sits motionless as though he can't really believe it.

But it's over, and I'm safe. With four powerful, dangerous men around me, how could I not be?

We hang around in the conference room for a few minutes so we don't collide with Mr. Parker in the lobby and then the boys shake Mr. Bianchi's hand goodbye.

"Go and be well," he tells them and then his blue eyes find mine. "You'll sing at my wedding?"

"Of course, sir," I say, dropping into the curtsy I've practiced for the rare times I've met royalty. Doc laughs, but I think Mr. Bianchi appreciates it.

As we enter the elevator, Bobby wraps his arms around me, kissing me so thoroughly, I'm almost knocked off my feet. "You did great, JJ."

"Are you serious? I was mortified and I almost cried a bunch of times!"

"But you didn't," Eli says behind me. "You were poised and sweet and you held your own."

He plants a kiss on my forehead. "You're the queen of New York. I couldn't have dreamed for a better woman."

I bow my head, feeling pleased and self-conscious. "I'm happy just being the queen of Velvet House."

Eli smiles. His amber eyes crinkle and it makes him look both older and a million times sweeter. "Long shall she reign. Now, since you are free and you are our queen, would you like to go see your sister?"



CHAPTER NINETEEN

January Whitehall

THE SAFEHOUSE ISN'T what I expected. I'd pictured a creepy motel room in the middle of nowhere with wooden boards over the windows. Instead, it's a super fancy apartment on the gazillionth floor of a super fancy building. The kind of place a businessman in a movie would live.

Harvey lets us in and leads us to the massive living room, grinning from ear to ear. "So, contract's signed? I can't believe it! And that's a knockout dress, Miss Whitehall!"

I try to say 'thank you' but I'm too nervous to speak. I stand on my tiptoes to see if Margot is behind him.

Harvey tugs the end of his long, white beard. "You know, I never thought we'd see a peaceful resolution to the situation with Parker, but—"

"Get out of the way, H," Doc calls from behind me. "She wants to see her sister."

"Of course. Sorry." Harvey steps aside to reveal the lush apartment. There's no sign of Margot at the glass dining table or on the white leather sofa. I turn to ask the guys where she is and familiar arms close around me.

"JJ! You're here!"

For a second, it's staggering. So many things about my life have changed, but not Margot's smell or the feel of her hair as it sweeps over my shoulders. Tears burst in my eyes like sunspots. "Margot! It's so good to see you again."

“You too, I thought you were dead! And then I thought you’d been taken away!” She pulls back, looking into my eyes. “I can’t believe you’re here!”

Bobby clears his throat. “JJ, the four of us are gonna hang out in the entertainment room. Give you guys some privacy.”

“Okay.” I have no idea where the entertainment room is, but I’m glad they’re not leaving.

Eli, Bobby, Doc, and Adriano slip away with Harvey, as Margot pulls me into another furious hug.

“Good, they’re gone.” Margot takes my hand and leads me to the kitchen. A bottle of red wine is open on the marble counter next to a half-full glass. Margot takes another wineglass from the shelf and pours me a drink. As she offers it to me, she seems to realize what I’m wearing for the first time. Her green eyes expand. “Holy shit, January. *What* is that dress!?”

I hunch my shoulders. “It’s nothing. It’s new.”

“It’s tasteless!”

A voice in my ear talks. Not Zia Teresa, someone else. *Screw her*, it says with enough venom to scare me.

This is my sister. I’ve missed her, I want everything to be good between us. I take a deep breath. “You don’t think I can pull this dress off?”

“I mean... of course you can. But... what’s happened to you?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve grown into myself.”

Margot looks at me like I’m wearing an eyepatch and a peg leg. “Sure.”

I frown. “You’ve worn stuff like this. Remember your masquerade dress that almost showed your nipples?”

“So? I don’t have huge Dallas Cowboy Cheerleader titties!”

“That doesn’t matter! Mom still almost made you go home and change!”

Margot flinches at the mention of our stepmom. “Okay, so maybe I’ve almost showed some skin, but you’re all shy and now you’re like...” She casts a glance at the doorway. “...Are these kidnapper guys making you dress like this?”

It’s hard to hear Margot talk about the men I care for, the men who rescued me from Mr. Parker, as ‘kidnapper guys.’ But that is what they are. It’s not *all* they are, but it’s where our history starts. Now that I’m free of Mr. Parker, free to do whatever I like, I can appreciate how tricky it’ll be to bring my sister and friends to our side. To show them Velvet House is where I want to be. I smile. “Yes and no. Eli bought me this dress, but I wanted to wear it.”

“But they did kidnap you?”

“Yes, but now I’m free to do whatever I want, and I want to be with them.”

Margot picks up her glass and takes a long slug of wine. “I think you need to tell me what happened.”

“The guys said we only have an hour here before we have to leave...”

“So, talk fast.”

We sit side by side at the kitchen counter as I try to explain what happened after I was taken on my wedding day. It’s a hard story to tell. I condense some of the scarier things and leave out others. I don’t mention Orchard or bribing Adriano with my virginity or the Baskerville twins. That makes it sound like I ran away from Mr. Parker’s limo all by myself, but I can’t risk blowing their cover.

As I talk, Margot looks more and more horrified. But she’s not freaked out by my escape or that Mr. Parker is a monster or even that I was held in a cage. She’s freaked out that I’ve lost my virginity in bits and pieces to four different guys.

“Are you serious?” She keeps saying. “You’re sleeping with Elliot Morelli *and* that blond guy *and* that giant guy *and* that cute muscly one? And they all know about it? And they’re okay with it?”

“Um, I think so,” I say and try to return to my story. But Margot keeps dragging me back. “You slept with them because you were scared of them, right?”

“No, I *didn’t* want to sleep with them when I was scared of them.”

“So then how...?”

“We got to know each other more and I... wanted to.”

“You *wanted* to have a bunch of threesomes with criminals?”

“I mean... it’s not a threesome if there are five people, is it?”

That makes Margot scream.

I try to explain how things at Velvet House feel normal and make sense to me, but the more I talk, the more Margot gets suspicious and freaked out. I give up and jump to explaining the negotiation and how Mr. Parker can’t come near me anymore.

“...so, I’m free,” I tell Margot. “Our whole family is. Mr. Parker has to go marry someone else and leave us all alone. And once the air has cleared, Bobby says I might be able to meet with Zia Teresa’s daughters and explain what happened, so they have closure.”

“Right.” Margot pours herself another huge glass of wine. “Are you sure Mr. Parker killed Teresa? It wasn’t an accident?”

I think back to that afternoon in the hospital, the dimly lit room, the man putting his hands around Zia’s neck, and I want to slap my sister. “Of course it wasn’t an accident. Mr. Parker ordered his men to kill Zia. He didn’t have to, but he wanted revenge.”

“For what? You didn’t kidnap yourself!”

“Because he didn’t get to marry me. And he wasn’t the first man to touch me. And now that I’m not a virgin, he hates me. He said he always hated Zia, too.”

Margot lifts her wine and drinks deeply. I lay a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

She shakes her head. “I can’t believe Teresa is gone.”

My heart aches for her. She and Zia were never close, but it’s awful to know someone was murdered.

“It’s okay. I mean it’s never going to be *okay*, but Zia was asleep and on medication. She didn’t feel anything. And Adriano gave her daughters a lot of money which I know doesn’t make up for it, but at least they’ve been looked after.”

Margot casts another look at the door. “Adriano... He’s the big scary one with the face scar?”

Again, I want to correct her, say he’s so much more than that, but I bite my tongue. “Yeah.”

“And are you going to keep living with them now you’re free?”

I feel my face heat. “Um, yes?”

“JJ, you can’t do that.”

“Why? You’re the one who says women should play the field and explore.”

“That means being with different guys *one after another*, not living with four of them and banging them all at the same time!”

She sounds so disgusted, it’s hard to hold her gaze. “Maybe that’s what ‘exploring’ means for me.”

Margot sighs. “God, you’ve been sheltered for way too long.”

Unexpected anger flares in me. “Yeah, I have been sheltered. More than you. More than anyone, and you know

why? Because our stepmom sold me to Mr. Parker when I was a baby and tried to keep me as innocent as possible for him.”

Margot flinches. “Don’t say that!”

“Why? It’s true! And you know it’s true. That’s why you were getting drunk at the wedding and saying you wished daddy was there. It’s why you hated Mr. Parker so much. You knew.”

Margot looks away. “At least you’re not acting like she’s our real mom anymore.”

Margot’s voice has none of her old angst. All at once, she looks a hundred years older. I take the wineglass from her hands and put it on the counter, then thread my fingers through hers. “It’s okay. I don’t blame you. I blame her. And now I’m free! I don’t have to marry Mr. Parker because of Velvet House.”

Margot pulls her hands from mine and reclaims her wineglass. “So, you’re not coming home?”

It never occurred to me that Margot might think I *was*. Then again, she doesn’t know about our stepmother emptying out my bank account or giving Mr. Parker my passport. “I’m not coming home, but we can still be close. Now that the contract’s signed, we can text and meet up in the city and hang out.”

“What?! January, you have to come home!”

“No, I don’t. I’m going to live at Velvet House and work in a bar. Or a café.”

“But...” Margot looks around the room as though it’ll give her ideas... “What about Fine Arts at Columbia?”

“I don’t want to go to college, that was mom and Mr. Parker’s idea. I want to get a proper job and... I don’t know... hang out.” I give a little laugh at how ridiculous I sound. Margot doesn’t join in. She doesn’t look well. She’s so pretty and I was so excited to see her, I didn’t notice the lines around

her mouth and shadows under her eyes. “Are you okay? Have you been sleeping?”

“No, but that doesn’t matter.” Margot grips my hand. “We *need* you to come home. Me and Harris and Lachlan. We need you, okay?”

A cold stone forms in the pit of my stomach. “What are you talking about?”

Margot’s gaze slides sideways. “Just, like, we miss you.”

She’s lying, I can read it in every inch of her face. But I don’t know why. I remember Adriano staring at me through the bars of my cage. How his silence made me feel like I needed to talk. I don’t answer, instead I wait for Margot to explain why it’s so important to her and my brothers that I go back to our big, chilly Park Avenue mansion.

“January,” Margot finally pleads. “*Say something.*”

Her fringe is growing out. I don’t think she’s had a haircut since my wedding and her nails aren’t done either. My heart shifts painfully in my chest. I think I know what the problem is, but I can’t bring myself to say it. It’s too scary.

Margot presses her palms into her eyes. “Okay, you *can’t* tell Mom I told you but if I don’t get you to come home, she won’t unlock my trust fund.”

There it is. The truth. The weight of it strikes me like a hammer. “You don’t have any money?”

“No. She’s cut me off. Not just me, Lachlan and Harris too, that’s why you need to come home. She said she’ll make everything right again if you come home.”

I pull away, horrified.

“Don’t,” she cries. “It’s not about going shopping or cars or whatever. If I can’t make my college payments, I’ll have to drop out! And Lachlan’s going to lose his house and Harris and Penny just had Lila! Everything’s a mess, JJ, we *need* you.”

I stare at my sister, trying to process what she's saying. "Why does mom have control of your money? I thought your trust fund came from Daddy?"

"That money's been gone for ages. All we have now is her payments."

Which means Mr. Parker's payments.

I slump onto the marble counter. Does my family have *anything* that wasn't paid for on the promise of my body?

"JJ, I'm so sorry," Margot says. "I know you didn't want to marry Mr. Parker, but I didn't know what to do."

"It's okay," I mumble into my forearms. A dull anger pounds in my chest, but it would be wrong to take it out on Margot. She's not the one who sold me. My stepmom, Corinne, is. From this point onward I vow to call her by her name. She's no mother of mine, step or otherwise.

"You need to come home, JJ." Margot's voice is tight. "You have to."

I lift my head. "I told you, I couldn't marry Mr. Parker even if I wanted to. And I'm not a virgin anymore, so I can't be sold to anyone else."

"But it's what she wants!" Margot says, her eyes filling with tears. "If we don't give her what she wants, she's going to sell all the houses and cars! She's going to sell Mama's jewelry."

Mama. The word still takes my breath away. I never knew her, but Margot, Lachlan, and Harris did. They told me she was an angel with long black hair, red lips and blue eyes. The sweetest woman in the world. I wish she was here to solve all of this. To pay Margot's college fees and get rid of Corinne and approve of my relationships because they make me happy...

Zia Teresa's voice comes to me. *'What do we say about wishes?'*

"They're for fools," I mutter.

“What?” Margot demands. “Did you just call me a fool?”

I look at my sister, tears glittering on her cheekbones. I love her. I don’t want her to be in pain, but I can’t heal her by going home. I’ll have to try and fix things myself with what I have now.

I draw a shaky breath. “Margot, I was in the contract negotiation meeting. Do you know Mr. Parker gave Corinne *thirty million dollars*.”

Margot’s mouth falls open. “What?”

“Thirty million dollars. That’s what Velvet House has to repay Mr. Parker to get me out of our engagement. So, Corinne can’t be broke. She just can’t be. She’s threatening to sell our stuff out of spite and if I go home just because she wants me to, she’ll own me forever.”

Margot sits back in her chair. “But what about my *trust fund*? Since mom cut me off... you have no idea what it’s like. I can’t buy lunch on campus or put gas in my car, all my friends are getting weird around me and asking all these questions...”

She sounds so spoiled, but I know she’s not faking how scared she is. I think of a documentary I once saw about pandas. How it took zookeepers and researchers years to teach a domesticated panda to fend for itself in the wild. Margot is like those squishy, hand-fed pandas. Someone needs to teach her how to live without Corinne’s money and it might have to be me.

I put my hand on hers. “Why don’t you come and stay at Velvet House? You can have your own room and we can look at getting jobs and applying for scholarships together?”

Margot pulls her hand from mine. “I’m not living with you in some freak house in Albany.”

Her words strike at me like a whip. I try to keep my breathing steady.

“Sorry,” she says. “I just... I want my life. I don’t want things to change.”

They already have. “Then why don’t I find somewhere else for you to stay? I can speak to Eli about getting a lawyer and seeing what we can do about Daddy’s money?”

“That won’t work! I already spoke to my friend Timothy, he’s a junior lawyer with Monaghan & Shepard, and he said unless Daddy left us specific things in the will, everything would have gone to Mom when he died. Lachlan checked and we’re not entitled to anything.”

“Oh.”

“JJ, just come home and *talk* to Mom...?”

“No! She’s not my mom and that *isn’t* my home!” I say it with more force than I intended.

Margot stares at me like I’m a stranger. “Okay, fine.”

We sit in silence for a long time. I want to talk, but I won’t apologize, and I won’t act like I’m going to come home. That doesn’t leave me with a lot to say.

Margot picks up her wine and drains the glass. “So, you belong to Velvet House now? They paid for you to leave Mr. Parker, so now they own you?”

“No. If I went to Eli or Doc or any of them and asked to leave, they would let me.”

“Are you sure?”

Something shifts inside me, opening until I feel as wide as a summer sky. “I don’t know, but I’m happy to take the risk. I want things to change.”

There’s a polite knock on the door. Harvey sticks his white-bearded head inside the room. “Sorry to interrupt, ladies, but Miss Margot asked me to tell her when she could go home...?”

Margot gets to her feet. “I’m leaving.”

“Wait!” I say, totally shocked. “It hasn’t been an hour!”

She grabs the bottle of wine. “I don’t care. I’m out of here. Have fun with your *men*, I’ll deal with Mom on my own.”

“Can I text you?”

“I... Okay.” She bites her lower lip. “For the record, I am glad you don’t have to marry Parker.”

I stand, wrapping my sister in a big hug. Margot’s tense, but after a few seconds, she hugs me back, the wine bottle poking into my side.

“Bye,” she says, her voice full of tears. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“You too. You have options.”

“Sure.”

I watch her collect her Fendi bag before Harvey escorts her to the pretty blue door. It closes with a neat snap behind her. I hug my arms around my middle and try not to cry. I know this isn’t the end. Margot is a good person. Eventually she’ll see that there’s a life beyond Corinne, but right now she feels totally alone. I understand that better than anyone because that was how Corinne made me feel.

I hear the low rumble of male voices from another room and smile. I’m not alone. Not anymore.

The guys are piled into rows of movie seats. Adriano is examining his gun, Doc has his feet on the chair in front of him, Eli is on his laptop, and Bobby is tossing a purple ball into the air. I burst into tears and all four of them leap to their feet.

“Pryntsesa!”

“What’s wrong, Tits?”

“Are you okay, JJ?”

“*Bella*, what happened?”

“I’m fine,” I sob, teetering backward on my heels. “That was just really hard.”

Bobby gets to me first, wrapping his arms around me. “C’mere. It’s all okay.”

I draw back. “It isn’t okay! My sister hates me.”

“She doesn’t,” Bobby says gently.

“And if she does, she’s a fucking idiot.” Doc shoves Bobby out of the way and pulls me into his arms. “Sorry, Tesorina. Family sucks.”

It’s weird to be hugged by Doc but I let my head rest on his chest.

“Did Margot try to get you to go home?” Eli asks, his voice tight.

“Yeah, she said Corinne, my stepmom, wants me there. She’s frozen Margot and my brothers’ trust funds until I go back.”

Eli and Adriano exchange looks.

“You should know that we think your stepmother is still in contact with Parker,” Eli says. “She was due to gain fifty million after you were married and it seems as though she’s still pursuing the money, claiming she had no control over your abduction.”

I shudder.

“There’s more,” Eli says, and his sharp tone is betrayed by the concern in his eyes. “There’s a possibility your siblings were going to get a cut and they might feel... entitled to tell you to come home.”

I wait for the sting, but nothing happens. I don’t know that there’s anything about my family that could surprise me anymore. “Okay. Well, there’s no way they can get that money now, is there?”

“No,” Adriano says flatly.

“Your brothers can get fucked,” Doc fumes. “Trying to drag their kid sister into a snake pit for a few nickels.”

“Lachlan and Harris don’t know how to exist without my parent’s money. From their perspective, I’m sure they don’t have a choice.”

Doc looks like he wants to be mean, but he hugs me tighter instead. “You’re a better person than us, Tits. But I guess we already knew that.”

I smile into his chest. “I think you’re all good men.”

“That’s because we bent you to our will with mind tricks and hardcore fucking.”

I giggle harder than the comment requires. It just feels so good to smile. Then I catch the look on Adriano’s face. The brutal focus I recognize from the times he’s truly terrified me.

“No! Adriano, you can’t.”

His head jerks up. “Pryntsesa?”

“You’re not gonna kill my stepmom!”

Adriano glances to Eli who smooths his jacket lapels. “She’ll be dealt with in due time, *bella*.”

“But you’re not going to kill her?”

“No.” Adriano says.

“Definitely not,” Eli adds.

“Good.” I sway in Doc’s strong arms. “I’ve had enough drama for at least like... three years.”

“Make it twenty and that’s how I feel,” Bobby says, giving me his easy, open smile. Suddenly all I want is to be in bed with Doc on one side and Bobby on the other, watching videos on my phone as we fall asleep, knowing tomorrow I’ll see Eli and Adriano. I fight back a yawn.

“You’re taking this well,” Eli says. “Or are you in shock?”

Doc shoves two fingers against my neck.

I tap his hand away. “I’m fine. I’m okay with where I am.”

Judging from the guys’ skeptical faces, they don’t understand. But they don’t have to. I’m still crushed about Margot and my brothers, still mad at Corinne and worried about the look Mr. Parker gave me as he left the conference room, but I can accept it. And not in a stiff, angry way. The feeling inside me is softer than that. It reminds me of a word I’ve always liked, ‘yielding.’ You could see yielding as giving up, but to me it sounds more like giving way. Relaxing into what is instead of fighting the unknown and hurting yourself worse for no reason. I have no idea what’s going to happen, but like I told Margot, I’m willing to wait and see.

“Can we get out of here?” I ask. “I want to go home.”

That makes them all smile. Or Doc, Eli, and Bobby smile and Adriano just crinkles the corners of his eyes a bit.

“In a minute, Tits,” Doc says. “I’ve got a contract signing surprise for you.”

I look at his hands.

“Nothing you can touch, although...”

“Get to the point,” Eli growls.

“It’s a job. One night a week at Dreams.”

I stare at him.

“As a bartender,” he says firmly. “One shift a week behind the bar. The rest of the time, you’re at Velvet House sucking our dicks.”

“But you can keep all your tips,” Bobby says drily.

My insides vibrate with happiness and I clap my hands. “A job? I’ll have a job? I’ll work in a bar?”

“One day a week,” Eli says loudly. “Betty will keep an eye on you and if I find out anyone’s harassing you or trying to buy dances—”

“Give it a rest, Morelli,” Doc says. “Let the girl have her fun... That being said, I will slaughter anyone who lays a hand on you.”

I laugh, my heart lighter than it’s been in weeks, months, years. Maybe my whole life.

“Look at her,” Eli says, amused. “When we stole her, it was to make her hate us beyond words.”

Adriano gives an affirming grunt.

I might love all of you instead.

I don’t say it. Now isn’t the right time. Instead, I go around and kiss all of them on the cheek.

Bobby grabs my hips and pulls me closer. “I haven’t had you since Parker laid eyes on you. That feels wrong.”

“It does,” Doc agrees. “We should baptize her in our cum. Make sure she knows who she belongs to.”

Suddenly the chains of my dress feel much heavier along my skin.

“Sorry,” Eli says lazily. “But you’ll have to control yourselves. There’s a jet waiting at Thompson Airfield. We need to be there in forty minutes.”

Doc, Bobby, and Adriano turn on him.

“What the fuck?” Doc demands. “Work? Now?”

“I suppose it depends what you mean by work,” Eli says, but he can’t hold back his smile. “I’ve restocked the villa in Maui. I thought that after everything we’d gone through, we might want a vacation.”

“A vacation?” Doc repeats.

“Yes. A week of sunshine and swimming and fucking our little jewel senseless. Unless you’d prefer to stand around with your thumb up your ass, which you’re entitled to do.” Eli holds out a hand to me. “Coming, *bella?*”

I picture crystal water and lush forests. Canopy beds as big as whole rooms and drinks with chunks of pineapple in them. Twosomes that become threesomes and foursomes. Hours that run like honey, slow and sweet. I grab Eli's hand. "Please take me to Hawaii, Mr. Morelli."

"It would be my pleasure."

"Fuck off, we're coming, too," Doc says. "There better be booze on the jet."

We head for the pretty blue door, and I hear Adriano's boots, Bobby's dress shoes, and Doc's sneakers fall into step behind my heels and Eli's wingtips.

I don't have all the answers, or any of them, but the contract with Mr. Parker is signed, my stepmom is gone from my life, and I'm the queen of Velvet House. How could this not be the start of a golden age? What's the worst thing that could possibly happen?



EPILOGUE

Ray Teller

IT'S THREE IN the morning when the guest arrives. Duncan and I are playing poker in the security office. I'm not particularly happy about leaving the game to greet whoever's in the silver Bugatti idling at the front gate.

"Fucking criminals," Duncan grumbles as he straightens his tie. "Why can't they keep regular hours?"

We take the golf cart, rain splattering our sides the whole way, but when we see who's behind the wheel, the journey seems to pay off. It's a blonde with a great set of cans.

I nudge Duncan. "New girlfriend?"

"Maybe."

Whoever she is, she's a rude bitch. She refuses to get out of her car and when we tell her we need to scan her for weapons, she acts like we shoved dog shit under her nose.

"Where's Mr. Parker?" she demands in a weather presenter voice. "He *said* he was going to meet me here."

"Mr. Parker's occupied," I tell her. "We can take you to him as soon as you're scanned."

She sniffs and gets out of the car revealing a tight ass under her light purple skirt. I scan her and she comes up clean.

"Please get back in your car and we'll escort you to the main house," I tell her. "You can leave your car in the underground garage and then we'll take you to Mr. Parker."

She looks at me like I'm dirt beneath her shiny black heels.
"Fine."

Michael Ridge is monitoring the garage, yawning over a super-sized cup of coffee. He appears to be alone.

"Where's Baskerville?" I ask. "He said he'd be here tonight."

"Haven't seen him for ages."

Duncan laughs. "We all know why that is. He was on duty when January Whitehall got snatched from that truck stop. I'd be surprised if he's still alive."

Michael shakes his head. "Didn't you hear? Parker forgave him for that. Forgave him outright."

"You're kidding!"

"I was there, man. Bill and his brother were stood up in front of Parker and Parker's yelling and flashing his Beretta around and I thought they were both dead. But then Parker goes *'did you motherfuckers steal my fiancée?'* and Archie looks him dead in the eyes and says *'if we did, we'd be in a hotel room fucking her end to end, not here talking to you.'*"

Duncan gives a nervous giggle. "That worked?"

"Yup. Parker laughs his ass off and said he believed them and they were fine to come back to work."

"That's a fucking miracle," Duncan says. "Isn't it, Ray?"

"They've got balls," I agree. "But then why aren't they ever around the house?"

"No idea, word is Parker sent them to—"

"Excuse me?" says an icy female voice. "Is someone supposed to help me?"

The blonde bitch has driven her Bugatti up to the entrance and is looking none too happy to be kept waiting. I flash her a smile. "Right this way, ma'am."

Parker is still in the dining room when we arrive. The chef, Maurice, says every meal Parker eats has to be a feast and this one is no different. The table's covered in dishes of pasta and sausages, trays of meatballs and chicken wings, sides of pork and lamb and wood fire pizza.

Parker's sitting in the middle of the table digging into a plate of lasagne. Emilia's beside him, her tits falling out of her silver dress as she picks at her spaghetti with her fingers. Probably Xanaxed to the hilt as usual.

"Zachery," the blonde bitch calls from behind me. "Hello!"

Parker swallows a mouthful of pasta and dabs his face with a napkin. "Mrs. Whitehall! You've finally come to see me!"

Duncan and I back away as they kiss each other on the cheek.

"Mrs. Whitehall?" Duncan mutters. "This bitch isn't old enough to have a grown kid."

"Stepmother," I say under my breath, staring at her long, smooth legs.

I watch my boss pull out a hardback chair for Mrs. Whitehall. "Can I get you a glass of wine? Champagne?"

She shakes her head. "I can't stay. My children will wonder where I am."

"Of course," Parker says, sitting back beside catatonic Emilia. "I'll get right to the point, Corinne. I know you need money."

The blonde bitch bristles and I think maybe she's going to storm out, but then she slumps into her chair. "I do. I can't tell you how bad things are getting."

Parker studies her without emotion. "I'm sorry to hear that, but as I told you, I can't marry your daughter and—"

The blonde gives a loud wail. "I can't *believe* this has happened! All these years! All our planning, for *nothing*!"

“You think I don’t know that?” Parker snaps. “But I can’t go near January. Not that I’d want to. Morelli and his filthy friends have had every hole in her slut body.”

I expect the blonde to protest, but she just nods, leaning across the table. “I can appreciate that, Zachery. January being a virgin, that was always your priority.”

“It was. But priorities change.”

“What do you mean?”

Parker rubs his chin. “I shouldn’t tell you this, but since you need money and since you’ve made your way here on a cold rainy night...”

The blonde leans even further across the table. “What? Please tell me?”

I stare at her gaping cleavage and wonder if she knows she’s being played.

“I want revenge on the men who stole my wife,” Parker says. “I want every member of Velvet House killed.”

“But I thought you weren’t allowed—”

Parker slams a fist on the table. The blonde jumps and Emilia drops the piece of spaghetti she was twirling around her finger.

“Don’t...” Parker snarls, “...talk to me about what you *think* I can do, Corinne. Do you want my money or not?”

The blonde smiles, all big eyes and sweetness. “Of course.”

“Then you’ll help me.” Parker pulls out his phone. “Two hundred thousand dollars to deliver a message to your daughter and a hundred million when the plan comes off. How about that?”

“A hundred...” The blonde presses a hand to her forehead. “Zachery, that’s so generous!”

“So, you’ll agree to help me?”

“In any way I can!”

Parker smiles, his rubbery lips pulling apart like they're on strings. “Good. Now, go home to your children. I'll send you the two hundred thousand tonight and we'll be in touch about what comes next.”

The blonde seems confused to be dismissed so quickly but she clearly doesn't want to fuck up a good thing. I watch her ass as she heads for the door.

“Duncan,” Parker says, picking up his fork. “Escort Mrs. Whitehall back to the garage. Ray, you stay here.”

My nerves snap tight as Duncan scurries after the blonde. I hope Parker just wants to talk and he isn't having one of his episodes.

“You like?” Parker asks once Duncan and Mrs. Whitehall are gone.

“Like, sir?”

He points his fork at the door. “The cooze. You like the look of her?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Parker makes a face. “She's fucking ancient.”

I wouldn't put Mrs. Whitehall past forty, but Parker's always liked younger girls.

“I don't mind them MILF-y. She's keeping everything tight.”

“Including her bleached asshole.” Parker shoves back his chair, grabs Emilia's cheek and shoves her face-first into his lap. “Suck.”

I turn away as Emilia undoes his fly and starts blowing him. Parker's always appreciated an audience but lately he's started performing ten times a day. If this was any other gig, the staff would joke about it, but no one's stupid enough to do that here.

Seconds tick past as Emilia sucks and slurps and Parker goes back to eating lasagne.

“I should get back to the front gate,” I say as casually as I can manage. “Let me know if you need anything?”

I’m halfway to the door when Parker calls out. “Teller? You can have her before she dies if you want?”

“Sir?”

“The Whitehall bitch. Corinne. You can have a turn on her before I slit her throat.”

If Parker’s joking, I need to laugh. If he’s serious, I need to be grateful.

“Thank you, sir. Uh... when are you killing Mrs. Whitehall?”

“Once every man in Velvet House is dead.” Parker grips Emilia’s hair as she bobs in his lap. “Morelli first, I’ll string him up by his pretty neck. Then Bassilotta, then Rossi. Valente can go last. Once he’s told me everything I wanna know about Orchard, I’ll cut his dick off and watch him bleed to death.”

He thrusts into Emilia’s mouth, making her gag. “What do you think of that, Ray?”

“That’s... quite a plan, sir. Although, the Bianchi contract —”

“The contract says I can’t kill January. I’m not gonna kill January. I’m gonna kill her boyfriends, then her sister, then her brothers and then her stepmother. But only once you’ve fucked her good, Ray.”

I plaster a grin on my face. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’m gonna record everything,” he tells me, his face growing purple as his hips jerk upward. “January Whitehall is gonna watch it all. Anytime she uses a phone... her email... any screen on the planet, she’ll see everyone she cares about... *dying*.”

His mouth twists as he climaxes and Emilia sputters as she swallows him. When he's done Parker pulls out of her mouth and wipes himself on her red hair. His eyes are wide and glazed as if he's looking into a world only he can see. "I'm gonna turn January Whitehall's life to ashes, Ray," he says. "Just you wait and see."

◇ ◇ ◇

LACE VENGEANCE

EVE DANGERFIELD

To V.

For getting me through.



PROLOGUE

Teresa Calderoli

IT'S THREE IN the morning and rain is hitting the windows like it's trying to break them. The screams shattering the house for the last forty hours have stopped. The silence is worse. Evelyn Blay-Whitehall has been in labor for two days and there's no sign she's close to birthing. I hurry up the hall, my arms piled with the last clean towels in the house and climb the wooden staircase. I go as fast as I can and it makes my knees ache, as it always does these days. I turn for the master bedroom, and I bump right into a woman.

“Sor—” I start, but when I see who it is, my apology dies on my lips. It's Corinne Hawthorne, Mr. Whitehall's assistant. *Eh mannaggia*, what is she doing creeping around the house past midnight?

“I was here to deliver a contract to Mr. Whitehall,” the girl says, as though reading my mind. “Nicholas invited me to spend the night so I wouldn't have to drive home during the storm.”

“Of course, *bella*,” I say, avoiding her eyes. I've seen her and Mr. Whitehall together, their heads bent close, whispering and laughing.

The girl shakes out her blonde bob. “I mean it. Nicholas and I had important business to discuss.”

“Of course,” I repeat.

She blinks and I see her realize she's justifying herself to a housemaid. Her face relaxes. “Where are those towels going?”

To the master bedroom?”

“The doctor needs them,” I say, sidestepping the girl. “Let me know if you want pajamas or anything else.”

I don’t expect her to respond but she reaches out, grabs my shoulder.

“One thing,” she says in the voice of those who’ve always had maids and drivers and people like me to assist them. “Has Evelyn had her baby yet?”

I don’t want to answer, but it’s the fastest way I can think to get past. “No. Not yet.”

“And do you...” she asks delicately. “...think she will?”

I look into the girl’s wideset blue eyes. They lend her a deceptive innocence that doesn’t fool me at all. I picture the dark room down the hall, the doctors and midwives huddled around the four-poster bed and dread curdles in my stomach like bad milk.

“I don’t know.” I raise the towels like an explanation. “I have to go.”

“Sure,” Corinne calls after me. “I hope Evelyn’s okay.”

I continue down the hall, my stomach churning. The girl worries me. Her entitlement. That she feels completely at home wandering around her employer’s house, asking questions about his wife. She is a woman without character. A viper who wears Grace Kelly’s face. She wants Nicholas for herself and with Mrs. Whitehall trapped in bed, slowly bleeding...

But I will not think of the worst. I won’t let it enter my head.

I reach the master bedroom. The room smells of blood and I’m transported back to Foggia, to watching my mother and Zia’s bring children into this world. But never for this long and never this violently.

I give the towels to a helpless-looking nurse and as I do, I catch a glimpse of Evelyn's face. She's pale as the sheets around her and her lips are almost blue. She moans, a low animal sound and fear that flashes through me like the lightning forking the sky outside.

Mr. Whitehall is arguing with the doctor. "Call an ambulance. Get her to the hospital and give her a c-section."

"It's too late," the doctor says. "She can't be moved and the baby's too far gone. She'll have to keep going."

I don't realize I'm performing the sign of the cross until I've tapped my right shoulder. It doesn't matter what I think now, what I will or won't allow myself to imagine. The doctor's sweat-spotted brow says it all. Death is coming tonight. The question is will it be the mother, the child, or both?

Mrs. Blay-Whitehall knew her baby was in breech, but she'd given birth at home three times, and she didn't want to be away from her other children. I think of them, Margot, Harris, and Lachlan lying asleep in their beds. Will they see their mother tomorrow? Will they see her ever again?

Evelyn screams, but the noise has a desperate, whistling note, like a balloon losing air. The fresh towels are laid down, the nurses circle like crows.

"Push," the doctor bellows as my fingers rise to tap the four points of the cross again. "Push, Evelyn!"

Evelyn doesn't scream, she whimpers. A low, throbbing sound that sets my teeth on edge. She writhes and twists, shining with sweat and the seconds pass in agony. When I think it can't get any worse, when all the hairs on my neck stand on end, there is a scream. A new scream. High and furious. I rush forward to see the baby lifted in the doctor's arms. It's tiny and purple and covered in blood. A little girl. Undersized but with bright eyes and flailing limbs. She gives another healthy wail and I release a breath I didn't know I was holding.

“She’s alive,” Mr. Whitehall sobs. “January’s alive, Evelyn. She’s *beautiful!*”

But Evelyn isn’t looking at her daughter, her gaze is turning inward, her body going still against the bloody towels. The doctor clamps the umbilical cord and thrusts the child at a nurse. “Take it.”

She backs away like he’s holding a bomb. “I can’t...Mr. Whitehall?”

But Mr. Whitehall is staring blankly at Evelyn, the knowledge of what is about to happen dawning on him for the first time. The baby gives an ear-splitting wail and the doctor’s hands twitch as though he’s about to throw her. “Someone *take this fucking baby!*”

I step forward. “Here. Give her to me.”

I wait for protests, but the doctor practically shoves the girl at me. January Whitehall is as slippery as a raw egg, but I hold her fast. She draws a shuddering breath, braced for another scream, and I press a finger to her lips. Our eyes lock and the strangest feeling passes over me. That I know this girl. That I have turned down some sunny street and run into her after many years. We stare at each other, and I see she recognizes me too.

“*Dio abbia pietà delle nostre anime,*” I whisper. *God have mercy on our souls.*

The room becomes a blur. The doctor shouts, nurses speed around, Mr. Whitehall sobs, begs for someone to save his wife. There is nowhere I am needed. I stay looking at the newborn. Her rosebud mouth works the air, seeking a nipple that will not come. I know her. She is sweet and strange, but above all, my heart tells me she will have a difficult, dangerous life. That the world will treat her cruelly. It would be wrong to speak of such superstitions, but I sense them like the scent of blood in the air. I will have to teach her. To protect her. To show her what every woman must learn. I am almost sixty, but God has made me a mother again.

The commotion around the bed stops. Evelyn Blay-Whitehall is dead. I hold her child as Mr. Whitehall wails. Soon I will call my Emilio and tell him I'm not coming home. I will send for formula and blankets and a cot, but for now, I look into the pale, perfect face of January Whitehall and pray I can be all she needs of me.



CHAPTER ONE

January Whitehall

A MAN IN suspenders staggers up to the gold bar, a lopsided smile on his face. “Voshka tongick, pleaash gurlsh?”

After months at Dreams, I can speak drunk pretty well now. I smile at Kiara to let her know that I’ve got the order and mix the guy a vodka tonic, adding a squeeze of fresh lime and a salted twist. He stares deeply into my cleavage as I present his drink to him and tips me twenty dollars. I tuck it into my skirt pocket. “Thanks so much!”

He gives me a slow, longing look then grins at Kiara. “Would you gurlsh be into me if you dinnet work here? Like you’d go on a date wiv me?”

Before I worked at Dreams, I wouldn’t have believed men would say cringy stuff like this so openly. That they really think they could go home with the dancers and bartenders. After almost a year behind the bar at a gentleman’s lounge, I no longer have those delusions.

“Sure,” Kiara says perkily. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Of coursh.”

Kiara giggles. In the real world she only dates girls but she never tells customers that. Staff aren’t allowed to date customers, so it shouldn’t matter, but all the guys want to believe they could go home with her. And they tip better when they do.

“Can I get you anything else *from the bar?*” she asks.

“Oh. Nahh.” The man gives us another wide smile and staggers away with his vodka tonic.

“Another satisfied, yet sexually unsatisfied customer,” Kiara mutters.

I laugh. All the girls who work at Dreams are amazing, but Kiara is my favorite person to share a bar shift with. Even the way she mixes drinks is funny, spilling liquor and lemon slices everywhere. She just doesn’t care. Case in point, she reaches into her pocket and pulls out her phone. She shouldn’t have it on shift, but Betty isn’t around, and the night is pretty slow. As she scrolls social media, I occupy myself by rearranging the vodka bottles.

As I turn to lift the Belvedere back onto the shelf, a drunk guy whistles at me from across the room. “Hate to watch you...clean stuff but I love to...look at your ass, baby girl.”

I flash him a professional smile as his friends crack up.

Kiara rolls her eyes. “Idiots.”

I grin. “It’s money in the bank.”

“Agreed. What are you up to after this? Wanna come to Silk Mama with me and Ivy?”

I smile. I love being asked to hang out almost as much as I love knowing I could go if I wanted to.

“That sounds fun but Doc’s picking me up,” I say. “We’re doing something for my birthday.”

That gets Kiara to look up from her phone. “Birthday?”

“Yup. I’m nineteen today.”

“*Shhh*,” she hisses, shoving away her phone.

“Oops, sorry!”

I always forget I shouldn’t technically be working here because I’m under twenty-one but honestly, it’s one of the least shady things that go on at Dreams.

“How come you’re working on your birthday?” Kiara asks. “Surely you could have got the night off, Little Miss Banging-All-Four-Owners?”

I flush. “I could have, but Marnie is visiting her mom and I wanted to come in. I like working.”

Kiara looks at me like I’m crazy. I know why. None of the guys understand it either, but I like to work. The energy and the orders and the girls. I like mixing drinks and feeling social and productive and making my own money.

“Whatever,” Kiara says. “So just Doc is taking you out? What about the other guys?”

I feel a little squirm of embarrassment. Everyone at work knows about my dating situation. Before I started, I wondered if I’d keep it a secret but considering all the guys come in on my shifts to hang out with me—and make sure no one hits on me—that was never a real possibility. At first, I was uncomfortable because I thought the dancers and other bartenders would think I was a slut. But unconventional relationships aren’t so strange here. Some of the dancers are sugar babies and a few of them are in throuples or dating married couples. Kiara is living with three other girls that she hooks up with. When I was in school, I thought relationships went one way—marriage and kids and maybe divorce and new marriages and kids. But one of the many things I’ve learned at Dreams is that human relationships come in all shapes and sizes.

“Yeah, just Doc tonight,” I tell Kiara. “The guys all want to do something special with me one-on-one. Yesterday Bobby took me to the movies.”

“That’s pretty lame.”

“He hired out the whole theater and got them to show *A Streetcar Named Desire*.”

“Less lame. Although what the fuck is *A Streetcar Named Desire*?”

“It’s an old movie. It’s black and white and has Marlon Brando in it.”

Kiara’s nose wrinkles. “How does someone your age like black and white movies?”

I feel the stab of grief that comes whenever I think of Zia Teresa. She was the one who watched old movies with me. Cheesy Elvis films and *Gone with the Wind* and *The Sound of Music*.

“My Zia—my auntie—liked old films,” I tell Kiara. “She was the one who showed me *Streetcar*. And Marlon Brando, the lead, was *so* sexy.”

“Lemme look him up.”

As Kiara Googles Brando my mind circles back to my birthday date with Bobby. I’d never tell Kiara, but he went down on me while the movie was playing. It was so insane to orgasm while staring into the face of the guy I had a crush on when I was younger, but amazing too. Plus, Bobby kind of looks like Marlon Brando. They have the same clean-cut handsomeness and big muscular shoulders.

“Okay, yeah, he’s hot,” Kiara says with the tone of someone who doesn’t really care. “So, what are you doing with the other guys? Did the huge one take you to the shooting range or something?”

I smile. Given that Adriano is six-five with a cheek full of scars and a Glock perpetually strapped to his side, it’s an easy assumption to make. But the reality is too unconventional not to be funny.

“We hung out in his cabin by the woods,” I tell Kiara. “He painted me.”

My co-worker’s mouth falls open. “Like...with sex chocolate?”

“Like with brushes and paint. On a canvas.”

I laugh at her shocked expression, knowing I could never explain how romantic it was. Or how artistic Adriano can be.

Some people know he does tattoos—all four of my men wear his ink—but no one knows he’s an amazing painter. I didn’t know it myself until six months ago. He took me to this special meadow where he’d set up a picnic for both of us. We drank hard cider and kissed and waited until I was really tipsy and then he asked to paint me.

“Why?” I asked, flattered and confused.

“Because you change so much, *Pryntsesa*. I need to capture the way you are now, at this age and time.”

My heart stopped a little at that. “Will you not like me when I get older?”

He kissed my hand. “You’re more beautiful by the hour, but it’s like a solar eclipse. It’s over before I know it. I need to preserve some part of you, exactly as you are now.”

“Wait, so were you nude while he painted you?” Kiara asks.

“Um, a little bit?”

“Holy shit.”

I smile, feeling my cheeks burn. Not that Adriano’s art is embarrassing—it’s beautiful—but the sight of myself in oils was so surreal and romantic that the memories are tender.

“Rossi is such a weird dude,” Kiara mutters. “Still, I’d kill for him to give me a leg tat. Does he ever tattoo you? Do you have any?”

I sigh. “No. None of the guys want me to have tattoos.”

Kiara’s forehead crinkles. “Fuck them.”

“I know,” I say with a smile. “I’m working on it but they’re not the kind of men who compromise easily.”

She snorts. “You can say that again. Does Morelli have tattoos?”

“Yeah. Latin on his ribs and a bear on his thigh.” It wasn’t easy to tell Eli had tattoos because he refused to get fully

naked with me for so long and when he did, I was usually distracted but once I saw them, I realized they were the same art style as Bobby and Doc's—a gift from Adriano.

Kiara nods approvingly. “Is it hot?”

“Super-hot.”

“I get that. I don't do dudes, but if he had long hair and tits, I'd think about it.”

I laugh. “I'll pass the compliment along. Not that Eli needs more people telling him how good-looking he is.”

“He's got your other boyfriends to keep him humble. What's Eli planning for your birthday? The Hope diamond? A crocodile skin car? Two tickets to Mars?”

I chew my lower lip. “I don't know. Hopefully not something too nuts.”

Kiara laughs. All the girls know Eli spends crazy money on me. I'm still not used to it. Designer bags, ruby hairpins, all-day spa trips, and expensive pots and pans for me to cook with. A thought seems to cross his mind and he buys it for me. He bought me a pink Corvette a few months ago and filled the back seat with pink roses. No matter how much the other guys tease him he will not stop spending on me or will he let me return any of the gifts and give the money to charity. He just gives money to charity as well as giving me gifts, so I feel twice as guilty.

“He told me to pack an overnight bag,” I say helplessly. “Maybe he'll just calm down and take me to LA for a nice dinner.”

“Yeah...maybe.” Kiara grins. “Doc's gonna get you a gold-plated butt plug and make you wear it while he fucks you on the Brooklyn Bridge.”

I stop laughing and press a hand to my burning cheek. It's weird because all the girls at Dreams know Doc quite well. He's the owner and he used to spend a lot of time on-site. I thought that meant he'd slept with most of the dancers before I

arrived, but he hasn't. According to Kiara he mostly used to get drunk in his office and play trance music and do science things that would sometimes set off the club sprinkler system. Since we got together Doc's handed over management of all his clubs to Betty and it's way more efficient that way. Betty is great at working with the girls, getting them hyped before a shift and reassuring them if they have a slow night or need to make a complaint. From what I've seen managing a club is mostly about handling people's emotions and nothing about Doc says he's ever been good at that.

"I don't know what Doc and I are doing for my birthday," I say gnawing a thumbnail. "I hope we'll just get burgers or something. No presents."

"You don't want a present from Doc?"

"I mean I do, but I don't. Thinking of what to give me tends to, like, make Doc's brain explode so he does way too much to overcompensate. Like, one time I said I wanted to make Claude van Heusen's secret strawberry skin macaroons and Doc called his company in Paris and threatened to kill all of them until they gave him the recipe."

Kiara snorts. "Everything about that checks out. Well, good luck with your psychotic boyfriends, Whitehall. Better you than me."

"Evening ladies."

Another man has approached the bar. He's more sober than the last one and his eyes have a mean sparkle that reminds me of my ex-fiancé, Mr. Parker.

"Hi," I say, giving my biggest brightest smile. "What can I get you?"

He ignores the question, taking a step back as though to bring us both into focus. "You ladies are far too pretty to be standing here on your own."

I give the bright little giggle every girl at Dreams has down to a T. "Can I get you a drink?"

He looks me up and down. “Pour a beer down those tits and I’ll suck every last drop.”

My blood freezes but my smile doesn’t budge. “That’s not on the menu.”

“Then what is, honey?”

Kiara laughs, a sharp sound that’s nothing like my giggle. “January’s got four boyfriends and every one of them would kick the shit out of you for less than what you’re doing now.”

The guy turns away from me to smile at her. “Well then, what about you, princess? A friend of mine said you only fuck girls. That true?”

Kiara opens her mouth to reveal a gleaming silver tongue stud. “What do you think?”

I hide my laughter behind my hand. I expect the man to back away, but he reaches across the bar as though to touch Kiara’s lips.

“That little thing would feel just as good on my cock.”

I stop smiling. We both glare at him.

“Don’t be like that,” the guy says. “Why’d you girls wear outfits like that if you don’t wanna get my dick hard?”

I look down at my sparkly pink bikini top and miniskirt. It took me a long time to feel confident in my Dreams clothes. To ‘own it’ as the other girls say. But I liked the outfits and it’s been long enough that I understand dressing like this means giving the customers something nice to look at and that’s enough. It’s not teasing or asking for more.

“Go pay for a dance,” Kiara says, in a dangerously sweet voice. “Or management might wonder if you’re spending enough to stay in this club.”

The guy smirks, raising a hundred-dollar bill he already had curled between his fingers. Whatever this is, he came prepared for it.

“Okay ladies, how about this? You give each other a kiss and then you get—”

The double doors to the left of us explode outward and a man strides in. He’s dressed in all black, contrasting his golden hair and bright blue eyes. There’s a toothpick jammed between his teeth and as he scans the club, the air in the room charges. Becomes hot. The guests sit up straighter, the dancers arch their backs.

The man’s electric gaze finds mine and he gives me a wide grin. “January Joy Whitehall, you sexy little bitch.”

“Hi Doc,” I squeak.

“You ready for the night of your life, my luscious whore?”

Before I can answer—or ask for the millionth time for him to tone down his aggressively loving sexual harassment—Doc’s gaze lands on the guy in front of me and Kiara, leaning across the bar, money still balled in his fist.

“Well, well, well,” Doc says. “What do we have here?”

The guy seems to shrink three feet, drawing into himself until he’s practically a teenager.

“You,” Doc says in a low crackling voice. “The fuck are you doing that close to my girl, buddy boy?”

“I, uh, ahhh…”

Doc strides toward him. “The only logical reason for you to be approaching the bar with a hundred bucks in your hand is because you want to buy these ladies a drink. Am I right?”

“I… Yeah. You’re right.”

Doc snatches the money out of his fist “Well thanks, bud. Now get the fuck out of here.”

The guy turns and takes a step back toward the stage.

“Not there,” Doc says. “Through that door I just walked in.”

“But my jacket…?”

“Your jacket or your nutsack. Your choice.”

The guy all but runs to the door. Doc growls after him like an angry dog, then he swings around and beams at me, his face lighting up as though nothing happened. “Tesorina! How’s your shift going, you pretty little slut?”

I try not to swoon. Doc has been, and always will be a huge asshole, but I love his ridiculous way of talking, his gorgeous face, his manic charm. “I’m good? How are you?”

“Better now.” Doc smooths out the hundred-dollar bill and pounds it onto the bar. “After-shift drinks for the girls, Kiara.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Kiara says, with a genuine smile.

Doc points at me. “You. Shift’s over, we’ve got places to be.”

“But drinks,” I protest. “And we have to clean up and balance the till and pack down the bar and—”

“Fuck that, we’re leaving,” Doc says. “Birthday hijinks are in order.”

I still feel the pull to do what he says without question, but a year as Domenico Valente’s girlfriend has given me resistance practice. I put my hands on my hips. “I need to wipe down the bar.”

Doc’s eyes narrow. “I’m the boss and I say the bar can get fucked.”

“You’re not the boss,” I remind him. “Betty is.”

His fierce look flicks to my side. “Make Kiara do it.”

Kiara gives him the finger.

I pull a bottle of Glenfiddich toward me and pour a couple of fingers into a cut crystal tumbler. “Why don’t you drink this and let me clean up in peace?”

Doc takes the toothpick from between his teeth and squints suspiciously at me. “You can’t control me, you know?”

“I know,” I say, sweetly and watch him take his seat at the bar.

We have fun chatting while Kiara and I close down the bar and when the last show of the night starts, we all turn to watch. Morgan, a gorgeous redhead with huge boobs, takes the stage and we watch her wind herself around the pole like silk. I’ve been practicing a little bit, hoping to surprise the guys but she’s on a whole other level.

Eventually, I notice Doc isn’t checking out the show. He’s watching me watch Morgan. “You thinkin’ about getting up there, Tesorina?”

I shake my head. “Eli would kill me.”

It still takes my most possessive lover all his self-control to let me go to work. He’s more comfortable now, but he texts me before and after every shift, and he’s the one who comes in the most to watch me; make sure the customers know who I belong to.

Doc gives a big fake yawn. “Morelli isn’t here, I am. And I wanna watch you work the pole.”

“I know you do.”

Doc fishes in the little toothpick container, pulls out a fresh one, and sticks it in his mouth. He quit smoking a year ago. He says he doesn’t miss cigarettes, but he chews toothpicks constantly. Still, it makes him look so sexy I don’t care. I reach forward and touch his chest. “You’re really beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Doc cups my breast. “I could say the same thing about you, my nineteen-year-old dime piece.”

I swat his hand away. “You need to behave.”

“That’s the last thing I need. I’ve been working for almost forty straight hours. I need a nice long ride on your pussy.” He fixes me with a hard stare. “Remember what Adri and I did to you last week?”

I do remember. I spent the night tied up in Doc’s bedroom while he and Adriano took me one after the other and then at

the same time. I put a hand to my burning cheek. “Of course, I remember.”

“Good,” Doc flashes me an evil smile. “I fucked your asshole like it was a pussy and you loved it, didn’t you, you slut?”

Morgan’s show finishes and the club breaks into applause.

“I need to finish closing up the bar,” I say, backing away.

Doc scowls. “Why don’t you have a drink first?”

I gnaw my lower lip. In the last year, I’ve discovered I don’t really like alcohol. It makes me tired. But it is my birthday today... “Okay, but I don’t know what I want.”

“Allow me.” Doc puts down his empty whiskey glass, presses his hands onto the bar, and jumps behind the counter.

“Fuck you!” Kiara yelps. “You can’t be back here!”

“Can’t I?”

As the customers filter out of the club and the doors are shut behind them, Doc whirls around the bar like a hurricane, flipping up bottles and pulling fresh pineapple and maraschino cherries out of the little tubs Kiara and I have just packed away. He’s making a mess, but I’m too intrigued to stop him. “Did you used to bartend?”

Doc usually answers direct questions with lies and misdirection, but maybe he’s too preoccupied because he just smirks. “Yeah. I made drinks for Eli’s Nonno and his boys back in the day. Sidecars. Martinis. All that shit.”

A few minutes later he puts a tall cocktail in front of me. It’s bright pink with swirls of Chambord and chunks of pineapple. “And what’s this?”

“This is something I invented just for you. I call it Pink Pussy Juice.”

I stare at him, but not because of the name. Doc has been so gross to me for so long that it barely registers anymore. “You invented a drink for me?”

“Yup.”

I squint at him. “You’re lying. I bet you told every girl you’ve made this for the same thing.”

Doc’s blond brows draw together. “I don’t make bitches drinks.”

I swat his arm. “Nico.”

“He doesn’t,” Kiara calls from across the bar. “Never has ___”

“Never will,” Doc finishes. “Except for you, sweetness. Drink up.”

I stare at the cocktail. “You Googled a recipe, didn’t you?”

“Nope, I just thought of all the flavors that make me think of you and mixed them all together. Not gonna lie, it’s mostly peach because you have the most delicious cunt in the world.”

“Je-sus,” Kiara mutters.

“Shut the fuck up, Kiara,” Doc says, not taking his eyes off me. “You’re not actually questioning my obsession with you, are you? Because you’re my sweet girl and when I say I invented this for you, I mean it, and I’m willing to prove it.”

Doc’s love is as scarily intense as the rest of him, but it doesn’t frighten me anymore. Though God knows how he could prove he invented a drink. I take a sip of the cocktail. It’s powerful and sweet and tart all at once. “It’s delicious. Thank you.”

Doc inclines his head. “Thank *you*, baby girl.”

The other dancers start to cluster around the bar and Kiara mixes them vodka sodas and whiskey on ice. A new song comes over the club speakers, a heavy bass number that makes my heart prick up. A few of the dancers cheer and I take a long drink of my cocktail. When I’m done, I’ve made up my mind.

“Okay,” I tell Doc. “I want to dance.”

“Fuck, yes.”

Doc grabs my hand and leads me from the bar to the main stage. There are still a few guys sitting around it, dawdling over their drinks, waiting for security to kick them out.

“Doc,” I squeal. “The customers!”

“I’ll handle it.” Doc raises his fingers to his lips and gives an ear-splitting whistle.

“Here’s the deal, boys. My girl is gonna get up on this stage and dance for as long as she wants and if I see a single one of you look up at her, I’ll pop your fuckin’ eyeballs out like grapes.”

Every man allowed into Dreams is hugely successful—entrepreneurs, businessmen, professional athletes, and comedians—men used to getting their own way. But when Doc talks, all of them stare into their drinks like it’s the most interesting thing in the world.

“What about us?” Kiara calls from the bar. “Are girls allowed to watch?”

Doc rubs his chin, examining the dancers clustered around. “You know what ladies…”

I reach for his arm, ready to dissuade him from anything too aggressive.

“...look all you want.”

The girls cheer and I feel my cheeks go red. To be honest I don’t mind my friends watching me either. As Doc goes to arrange the music, Kiara climbs out from behind the bar and winks at me. “Get up on stage, girl.”

“You really want to watch me dance?”

“I do. And I can’t promise I won’t abuse the memories later.”

I laugh. “I thought I was too lame for you.”

“You are, but sometimes I’m into that.”

I clamber up on the shiny stage, feeling so much taller it's ridiculous. Powerful, but vulnerable looking down on all my friends' faces and the tops of the men's heads.

"Come on, baby," Doc urges. "Show me what you got."

I grab the pole, hook a leg around it and spin. The girls cheer, the men curl into their drinks like dying flowers, and Doc pulls a wad of bills from out of nowhere and starts throwing them on the stage.

"Get your top off, Tits. I wanna see that big rack."

I ignore him, rolling my half-naked body as I dance through one song, then another.

Doc watches me with an expression torn between hunger and fury, he throws bills and calls out filthy things, but mostly he stares at me like he wants to devour me. When the third song comes on and I'm still wearing as much as I was when I started, he jumps onto the stage. I'm sure he's either going to rip my clothes off or carry me away to have sex, but he doesn't.

Instead, he kisses me on the lips.

"Boooooo," Kiara calls across the bar. "Worst strip show ever."

Doc flips her off. "You're so fucking hot," he snarls at me, sounding angry about it. "As soon as we're done here, I'm gonna go into my office and get the security footage for the others; they're gonna blow their loads on sight."

I laugh, wrapping an arm around his tattooed neck and feeling free and pretty and alive. "Thanks, Doc. This is the best birthday ever."

"Cool." He fists my hair. "Now, I'm gonna throw you over my desk like some harassed little secretary and fuck your brains out. Then we're gonna get pancakes."

The idea is so sweet, so delightful I almost clap my hands together. "Yay!"

Doc bites my lower lip, his teeth sinking in until it stings. Then he releases me. “You’re the hottest bitch in the world, Tits. You’re everything to me.”

I stare into his clear blue eyes. “I love you, Nico.”

Doc’s jaw stiffens. He fights his body’s reaction, but he can’t hold off for long. He grimaces. “I... Yeah.”

Doc still can’t say he loves me. He did once. Back when we were in Maui, after the contract freeing me from my engagement to Mr. Parker was first signed. He was peeling me fresh orange slices and feeding them to me with squares of dark chocolate, trying to keep my energy up for the marathon sex bouts. A beautiful tropical bird flew overhead, and Doc stared after it like he’d never seen one before. “That feels like a sign. The universe telling me it’s okay to be happy again.”

“The bird?” I asked, a little confused.

“No. You. You’re my salvation, January. I... I love you.”

Hearing that, I almost melted into romantic nothingness. Then Doc got up and didn’t talk to me for three whole days.

I jolt back to the present where Doc is still frowning at me, clearly mad at himself for not saying *I love you*.

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “You don’t need to say you love me if you’re not ready.”

He frowns. “I’m a piece of shit.”

“Maybe, but you’re also gorgeous and fun and I adore you and you don’t need to rush.”

Doc grits his teeth. “But I do... I...”

“Hey, assholes,” Kiara calls. “Less chat, more stripping.”

I laugh and pull on the strings of my bikini top. My boobs bounce free and as the girls scream their approval, Doc’s mouth hits the floor.

“Does that make you feel better?” I ask, pressing my elbows to my sides so my tits swell together.

Doc's mouth becomes a hard line. "You wanna play it like that?"

"Always."

"Right." Doc turns to the bar and reaches for the hem of his T-shirt. "You bitches wanna see this or what?"

I laugh as my friends crowd even tighter around the stage, cheering and screaming and demanding Doc take his shirt off and I can tell this is going to become one of the amazing impromptu parties that have happened a few times since I started working here. I look to the gold circular bar expecting to see Betty watching and laughing too. She isn't there. Someone else is. My stepmother, Corinne Whitehall. She's found me.



CHAPTER TWO

January Whitehall

THE SECOND AFTER I recognize my stepmom, Doc does too, yanking me behind him. But it's too late. I'm topless in front of my stepmother. My face burns. Yet Corinne doesn't look upset. She smiles blandly like she's at one of my ballet recitals, then gives me a look that means *get over here now*.

"Olivia." Doc points at a nearby dancer. "Hand me January's clothes."

The look on his face kills the fun mood dead. All the dancers go quiet as Olivia passes Doc my bikini top. I numbly strap it around myself as my boyfriend stares at my stepmother.

"The fuck are you doing here?" The venom in his voice sends goosebumps down my spine. The only time I've heard him talk with this much hate was when he was staring down Mr. Parker. A new kind of fear mixes into my blood—fear that Doc is going to kill Corinne, just like he and Adriano have threatened to do for a very long time.

I step forward. "What are you doing here, Corinne?"

She blinks. "You're calling me by my first name?"

"You're not her fuckin' mother," Doc snarls.

"I am," Corinne says evenly. "Or as good as. January, come here. We need to talk."

I don't move, the shock of all this, how rude she's being, how entitled and snotty is mind-blowing. It's been more than a

year since I signed Mr. Parker's contract and refused to go with Margot back to my childhood home and yet Corinne is here talking to me like nothing's changed; like I'm a disobedient child runaway for the afternoon. She moves toward the stage with slow, waterbird steps and she must mistake my silence for fear because her voice sharpens. "January, get down here now."

"You must be joking." Doc lands on the carpeted floor in a thud of battered Doc Martens. "How did you get into my club?"

Corinne pauses, a small smile playing on her face. "I'm sorry... Who are you?"

"The man who rails your stepdaughter every night," Doc says, in that same hateful voice. "One of them, anyway."

Corinne's pale blue eyes scan him, taking him in and it's like I'm seeing Doc for the first time too. The neck tattoos, the ripped jeans, a gaping black T-shirt that shows off his lean, muscular body. He looks like every parent's worst nightmare and unlike a teenage poser, it's not an act. Doc is an ex-drug dealer and a current criminal. A murderer who takes great pleasure in hurting people. And on top of all that, he's handsome enough that you know you'd never drag your daughter away from him.

My stepmother's mouth twists. "I see."

Doc raises a hand to sweep his thick blond hair out of his eyes. I see Corinne clock the hearts Adriano tattooed over his knuckles in honor of me.

"Here's the deal," Doc says, voice dripping with poison. "If you're interested in keeping your body and soul in the same place, turn around and get the fuck out of here."

Corinne smiles. "Not before I've spoken to January."

Doc steps toward Corinne, his boots deliberately bumping the tips of her Louboutins. "Out. Now."

"I'm not leaving until I talk to my daughter."

My chest goes tight. If I had to pick any of the guys to be with me when I saw Corinne again, the last one I'd choose would be Doc. Bobby is as well-mannered as anyone who grew up on Park Avenue. Eli could be polite in the middle of a hurricane. Even Adriano, as intimidating as he looks, can be stoically calm. But Doc? Doc is a loose cannon. Our problem child, as Eli sometimes says. Too intelligent to be intelligent. Too reckless to know he's reckless.

I look around and see all the other girls have melted away, back to the bar or talking among themselves. I feel a pang of embarrassment. Some of them, like Kiara, know I'm estranged from my family, but that doesn't make this any less awkward. I want to run away, but I know Corinne means what she said. She won't leave until she's spoken to me. And since I don't want Doc to kill her, I have to do what she says.

I climb down from the stage, grab Doc's arm, and urge him backward. He resists for a second then lets me pull him away from my stepmother.

"How did you know I work here, Corinne?" I ask. "I've never told anyone in the family or put it anywhere online."

She blinks, and I can practically hear her thoughts. *How dare you question me, you disrespectful little chit.*

But I'm not the same woman she bullied into doing ballet and getting engaged to Mr. Parker. I straighten my shoulders. I'm a lot taller than her, even without my heels. Maybe she notices it too because her face softens into something I'm sure she thinks is kinder. More maternal.

"Your brothers and sister miss you, January. So do I. When are you going to let the past be the past and come home?"

"Don't you fuckin'—" Doc begins but I hold up my hand.

"I email Margot all the time. I said that I want to meet up with her and Lachlan and Harris. You're the one keeping them from me."

Corinne shakes her head sadly. "You're so paranoid. Can't you see how these...men have turned you against us?"

“They haven’t,” I say hotly. “I’m happy where I am.”

“So, you’re happy tearing your family apart?”

She says it so easily, as though it’s the purest kind of truth and for a moment shame sweeps over me. Then I remember what brought us to this place—the thirty million dollars Corinne accepted from Mr. Parker to get engaged to her underage stepdaughter. The constant control she exerted over my diet and friendships kept me pure for him until I turned eighteen.

“Maybe our family needed to be torn apart,” I say. “Because it seems like the only reason it was together was because of money.”

Doc laughs and Corinne’s face changes like bad weather.

“Fine,” she snaps. “If that’s the attitude you want to take, I’ll cut right to the point. We need to discuss family business. Business that can’t be put off any longer. Come with me to my car and—”

Doc muscles in front of me. “If you think my girl’s going anywhere with you then you’re fucking stupid. Say what you’ve gotta say and then get the fuck out of here.”

Corinne looks down her nose at him. “What happens if I don’t? Are you going to hurt me?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Corinne looks at me, eyebrows raised, as if we’re making fun of Doc together.

I put my hands on my hips. “What do you want to tell me?”

“It has to be in private—”

“No way,” Doc snarls. “Anything you’ve gotta say, you’re telling both of us.”

“And what about them?” Corinne gestures to the dancers at the bar. “Do they get to hear as well?”

“Talk quietly.”

“No,” My stepmother says. “And regardless of what you or your...*organization* thinks, January is an adult. She’s allowed to meet with me without your approval.”

Doc steps toward Corinne until they’re almost nose-to-nose again. “You just fuckin’ try me.”

I gnaw my lip. If Corinne’s come to tell me something about Margot or my brothers, or my little niece who I haven’t met yet, I *do* want to hear what she has to say. I touch Doc’s shoulder. “Can I please talk to her somewhere in private, Nico? Your office maybe?”

Doc swears loudly, turning away and shoving a hand through his hair. “Fuck this, Tits. *Fine*. You can use my office. But I’m staying in the room.”

“That’s okay,” I say quickly. I look at Corinne. “Is that fine with you?”

She wrinkles her nose. “You let this man call you filthy names?”

“More than lets me,” Doc drawls. “*Begs.*”

Corinne makes a disgusted noise.

Doc leads me through the private door concealed in the wood-paneled wall to his office.

I can hear Corinne behind us, the click-clacking of her heels, the soundtrack of my childhood and teen years. When I was young it wasn’t strange that she never hugged me or asked me about school or didn’t seem to like me very much. It was the way things were. I never knew my mother, so Corinne’s behavior was just...normal. Other kids were the ones who pointed out how mean she was. That if she spoke to me, it was only to tell me to straighten my collar, smile wider, brush my hair. But still, I thought she cared about me in some cold, remote way. The same way a mean coach loves his struggling team in sports movies. It was only after I was kidnapped by Velvet House that my brainwashing became clear. Corinne

never loved me. I was an asset to be used. She sold me to Mr. Parker to buy luxury cars and vacations and the plastic surgery that's kept her looking twenty-nine for a decade and when Velvet House abducted me and spoiled her plans, her only concern was getting me back to Mr. Parker so she could get her payout.

The back of my neck prickles and I wonder why she's really here. I don't believe she actually cares about bringing the family together, but she couldn't sell me anymore even if she wanted to. Without my virginity I'm useless to Mr. Parker and as dangerous as he is, he wouldn't violate the contract between him and Velvet House just to come after me again.

The contract is airtight. If anyone violates it, Mr. Bianchi will kill them and take their assets. No, Mr. Parker will never try to marry me again.

When we get to his office, Doc unlocks the door and ushers me to his desk. "You sit here."

I drop into the huge black leather throne and rest my hands on the desk. Doc leans up against the wall behind me, folding his tattooed arms across his chest. I feel safer knowing he's there. Safe and powerful, like I'm Eli. An untouchable boss. I know that's what Doc wanted, and I smile at the sweetness of my psycho boyfriend.

Corinne enters, her pale face flushed from climbing all the stairs. She looks around, taking in the black and barbed wire décor. "Isn't this...vampiric?"

Doc pushes off the wall with a growl. "Say what you've gotta say, bitch."

"Well," Corinne says, ignoring him. "First and foremost, January, we miss you and love you very much."

Doc laughs.

An answering smile curves Corinne's mouth, but her eyes are as cold as ever. I can't think of anything to say, so I don't say anything.

She tosses back her hair. “Secondly, I’d like to apologize.”

I feel my mouth fall open.

“For what?” Doc demands.

Corinne’s gaze remains fixed on me. “I understand now that you marrying Zachery Parker wasn’t a good idea—”

“That’s putting it fucking mildly,” Doc snarls.

“—and I want to say I’m sorry for putting you through so much stress on the family’s behalf. That I’m sorry I arranged for you to marry him.”

I make myself nod. My head feels heavy, like it’s gone rusty somehow.

“Good,” Corinne says briskly. “Now on to the most important matter.”

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a piece of cream-colored paper. She shows it to me and my heart sinks. I recognize it because we have an identical one pinned on our family noticeboard at Velvet House. It’s an invitation to John Bianchi and Yelizaveta Romansky’s wedding. The Italian oligarch and his fifty-years-younger Russian bride. The ceremony has been postponed over the last year while Mr. Bianchi had heart surgery, but now it’s less than a week away. It’s going to be the social event of the year and I’m singing at the reception, at Mr. Bianchi’s request. I wish I wasn’t because he scares me, but Eli pointed out he’s a good man to do favors for. And a bad man to offend.

“Where did you get that?” Doc says roughly. “How do you know John Bianchi?”

Corinne gives him a look of utter contempt. “I went to school with his youngest daughter Octavia.” *You peasant.*

Corinne doesn’t say it, but she might as well have.

“So, you’re coming to the wedding,” Doc says. “Big fucking deal.”

“It is a big deal,” Corinne responds icily. “Margot, Harris, Lachlan, and I will all be attending, and I thought it appropriate that we establish that ahead of time to avoid awkwardness.”

I frown. “You came all this way to say that?”

“Oui,” Corinne says because she sometimes slips into French. “My friends are not aware of our estrangement, January, and I want to keep it that way. I would also like us to take a family photo after the ceremony to reassure your uncles you’re alive and well.”

“You mean so the Whitehalls don’t cut you out of the family payouts for being the most dogshit parent in the world,” Doc says.

Corinne’s buttery-smooth expression flickers. For the first time, I see real anger on her face. “I’m not going to discuss my family finances with *you*,” she spits. “But don’t worry, I didn’t come to negotiations empty-handed.”

She fixes me with an icy glare. “Teresa Calderoli left you some things in her will. I thought the wedding might be a good place to exchange them.”

The casual mention of Zia’s name feels like a thumbtack in my chest. “What things?”

“This and that. So, do you agree? We’ll be polite to each other at the wedding, and you’ll take a picture with us?”

I look at Doc. He gives a small shrug. His expression says, *you’re on your own, Tits*. I’m surprised by his restraint, but he’s right. It is my decision. I think of Zia Teresa and take a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll take a photo,” I tell Corinne. “But I still don’t want to have a relationship with you.”

My stepmother gives a tinkling laugh, and I can tell she’s genuinely happy. Of course, she is. She’s getting what she wants, as always. “Where’s this animosity coming from, January?”

“I know you’re still withholding money from Margot and the boys. Margot replied to one of my emails last year and said she can’t afford to go to college.”

“She can’t afford to go to college because she doesn’t work,” Corinne says breezily.

“And what about her trust fund? And the thirty million dollars Mr. Parker gave you?”

Corinne’s smile fades. “Why don’t you come home and have dinner with us, January? Then we can discuss it like family.”

The word *family* makes my heart close up like a clam. “No, thank you.”

Corinne opens her mouth, but Doc gets there first. “Time’s up. Hit the bricks, Norma Desmond.”

I don’t know who that is, but spots of color appear on Corinne’s cheeks. “Can I at least hug my daughter before I go?”

I withdraw into the leather of Doc’s chair. “Please just leave.”

“Very well.” She eyes me over one more time and then gives a gentle smile. “You’re such a beautiful girl, January. It’s a shame you’ve whored yourself out to these criminals.”

“Get the fuck out,” Doc barks, but Corinne has already turned on her heels. The door closes behind her, leaving silence and a trace of lemony perfume.

Doc strides to the control panel on the wall and hits the intercom. “Laz, tell me when the blonde’s back in her car and flag her fucking plates.”

A low buzz. “*Got it, boss.*”

“Bitch,” Doc hisses.

“Total b-bitch,” I whisper. It’s always hard for me to swear, but right now my brain feels like chewing gum.

“That woman shouldn’t live a second longer than it takes for me to find a gun.”

I snap to attention. “Nico, you can’t kill my stepmom!”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t just kill people to solve your problems.”

“Of course, you can, Tits. Ask all the guys I’ve killed.”

I don’t say anything. I think I’m still in shock from the fact this happened at all. That my stepmother came to a strip club. That she saw me topless. That she’s keeping things from my Zia Teresa from me. She called me a whore.

“How the fuck did she find you?” Doc mutters. “Who paid for it?”

“My family?” I offer. “The Whitehall family, I mean?”

Doc looks skeptical. “I don’t think your uncles would do Corinne a favor. They hate that bitch almost as much as I do. And they’re not dumb enough to put up the money to stalk you when they know you’re with Velvet House.”

The intercom buzzes. “She’s gone, boss,” Laz, the security guy, says. “I’ve registered her plates. If she shows up again, the boys’ll bar her.”

Doc pounds the intercom button. “Good. Lock up and get out of here.”

“Will do.”

Doc stomps to his office door and locks it, then he turns around fiddling with his phone. He props it against a water glass on the desk, arranging it so it’s pointed right at me. I see my own face on the screen, startled and still a little flushed from dancing.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“FaceTime.”

The screen blinks and I see Bobby in front of his laptop with a glass of wine, shoulder to shoulder with Adriano and Eli who are on their phones. Bobby scowls into the camera. “Valente, this better be—”

His face brightens as he spots me. “Hey, baby girl. How are you?”

I feel a rush of relief at his calm, familiar voice. “I’m okay but—”

“Shut up, Bassilotta,” Doc tells Bobby. “You wanna watch our girl get fucked?”

An evil smile quickly replaces Bobby’s look of irritation. “Always.”

Doc looks down at me. “You wanna get drilled?”

I could say no. It’s been a long, strange night. But I can see Doc’s body vibrating with rage and that feeling echoes of the same tension in my own. Release sounds pretty good right now. Release and the chance to be what my stepmother accused me of. A *whore*.

“Let’s do it,” I say.

Doc pushes me face down onto the desk and yanks down my thong. “So January’s mom rolled up to Dreams tonight and ___”

“January’s stepmother—” Eli begins.

“Yeah, she told us she’s coming to the Bianchi wedding,” Doc cuts across him. “But we’re not here to have a nice chat, we’re here to give you assholes a show. Shut your mouths and watch.”

He reaches between my legs, stroking my folds with ruthless precision. He always pushes me to my limit, rubbing my clit just below the level where I’d scream and shove his hand away, but I love it. Soon I’m moaning and arching back on him, practically drooling with pleasure. I feel Eli, Adriano, and Bobby watching me and it’s like being on the pole

downstairs again, only a thousand times hotter. A sense of taboo that is as dirty as it is exciting.

There's a snap and a rustle as Doc pulls down his jeans.

"Condom," Eli barks from the phone screen.

"Don't have 'em," Doc says.

I stifle a laugh. Doc never has condoms.

"You better pull out," Eli snaps. "With plenty of time to spare. I know your little game."

Doc rolls his eyes. "I didn't kill anyone tonight and you're still gonna lecture me?"

"I'll lecture you until I'm sure you're not going to sneak your bastard child into our girlfriend."

Doc's hand stills on my clit and I give an urgent whine. He laughs, sliding a thick finger inside me. "Little January wants my cum. She doesn't care about me knocking her up."

I don't know if that's true and a part of me *is* curious how it would feel to have the men I love finish inside me. And even though I refuse to let myself dwell on it, and what it might be like to be a mother. But then I'm only nineteen. I don't know anyone who had kids at my age except model celebrities. And model celebrities don't have the kinds of concerns about their partners that I do...

"Tits?" Doc slaps my backside. "You ready for my cum?"

"No," I say quickly. "You can't finish inside me. I don't want to get pregnant."

"Bullshit." Doc leans down and licks me from behind.

I squeal, scraping my hands across the wood. "Doc!"

"Let me nut inside you. The boys wanna see it running down your thighs."

I look into the camera and see Bobby and Adriano wearing identical wicked grins.

"I don't want to see that," Eli snarls.

“Yeah, but fuck you, Morelli. You can’t stop me.” The head of Doc’s penis slicks through my folds. “You want it, Tits. I know you do.”

For a second I imagine it, the heat of Doc filling my pussy, making a spectacle for my men. Then I imagine a child. A child created over Doc’s desk in a reckless moment. I reach behind myself and push a hand into Doc’s chest. “No, Nico. You can’t have me that way tonight.”

Doc growls, a snarling animal sound that once would have terrified me. But I know better now. He won’t finish inside me. I trust him to listen to me. To understand even if he doesn’t like what he hears.

“Fine,” Doc says through gritted teeth. “But you’re gonna get it all over your ass and I’m not gonna clean you up after.”

I shiver at the heat in his voice. “Okay, Domenico.”

“*Okay, Domenico,*” he mimics in a high girly voice. He grips a fistful of my hair and smirks right into his phone. “She was dancing tonight, up on the pole with her rack out.”

Adriano gives a tight growl. “You film it?”

“I’ll send you the security footage.” Doc gives my hair a tug then lowers his mouth back to my pussy, consuming me with light, fluttering flicks. I close my eyes, my orgasm hovering like a promise.

“One of these days we’re going to hire out Dreams and you’re going to give us a private show, *bella,*” Eli says. Now he knows Doc isn’t going to violate me, his voice has returned to its usual velvet purr. “You’ll torture all four of us until we can’t take it anymore. And then we’ll fuck you right on stage. One after the other.”

The thought of it makes me cry out, grinding back into Doc’s tongue. He pulls away from me with a laugh and shoves me back onto the wood. “Hold still, bitch.”

I do as I’m told and hear him spit into his hand. I’m no longer a virgin, no longer any kind of pure but listening to that

filthy sound still sends tremors through me. He pushes into me roughly and the sudden parting makes me gasp. Doc pounds into me, hard and I feel the anger coming through his skin as pleasure blares through my body like a too-loud song. I watch us on the tiny phone screen, me, pale and helpless, Doc, hard and mean, his lip curled to expose his pointed canine.

“Take your shirt off,” I pant. “Please?”

“Only because it’s your birthday.”

Doc pulls his T-shirt over his head. He has an amazing body and the sight of it flexing, tattoos rolling across his skin brings me right to the brink again. I close my eyes and hone in on the rapid pulses inside me. Orgasm comes like oblivion, washing away every thought except *yes, yes, yes*.

Afterward, I roll in a sea of overstimulation, bucking uselessly against Doc’s shaft as he fucks my pulsing flower.

“Pull out,” I hear Eli say and snarling fit for a demon, Doc obeys, finishing all over my ass in slow throbs. The sensation of it, hot and sticky, makes me feel dirty and a trace of shame creeps into my consciousness. Corinne was right, I have become a whore.

Contradicting his mean promise, Doc reaches into his desk for Kleenex and wipes me up with clumsy, post-sex fingers. It’s so sweet, I forget my shame. What’s so bad about being a whore, anyway?

“Thank you,” I mumble, my tongue thick and heavy.

“Fucking hell,” Bobby mutters. “That was hot.”

Adriano gives a little grunt and I press my face into the desk, pleased and embarrassed.

“Brava,” Eli says, but I can tell from his tone he’s back in business mode. And sure enough. “You two need to come home so we can discuss this stepmother situation.”

“No,” Doc says, still sounding dazed. “I’m supposed to take January out for her birthday. We were gonna get pancakes.”

“Tomorrow,” Eli says. “This is urgent.”

Doc opens his mouth to protest, but I grab his wrist.

“It’s okay,” I say quickly. “I want to go home.”

And I do. Velvet House is my fortress. The first and maybe the only place where I’ve ever felt truly safe. Its grounds are huge, the walls are thick and in addition to my men, there’s a twenty-four-hour security team. All of them heavily armed and ready to lay down their lives for my men. For me.

Velvet House is my home and as nice as pancakes sound, I won’t feel safe until I’m inside its walls again.



CHAPTER THREE

Elliot Morelli

ADRIANO SLAMS HIS huge fists on the table. “I’ll kill the bitch.”

I don’t have to ask who he means. Corinne Whitehall. My head is still ringing with that strange and all too familiar mix of lust and anger. I want to fuck January like Doc just did, but I want to strangle her stepmother more. I planned to take January to Malibu for her birthday, but that’s been ruined. It’s too dangerous. It’s unfathomable that Corinne Whitehall had the balls to not only track her stepdaughter but confront her at one of our clubs. What it means for our future I can only guess.

Nothing good, I’m sure.

“I should have shot that woman years ago,” Adriano rages. “How have we let the bitch live this long?”

“Because you can’t just kill January’s stepmom,” Bobby reminds him. “January doesn’t want us to.”

“She doesn’t understand what a viper she is. We do. As soon as January’s home I’m going to New York and blowing her brains out.”

“No, you fucking aren’t!”

I stare into the golden depths of my scotch. Bobby and Adriano have been having this fight for months. Forever it feels like. Not that they’re any closer to an agreement. I sit silently as they bicker back and forth.

“Corinne seeing January isn’t a violation of the contract —” Bobby says.

“I don’t give a damn about the contract,” Adriano snarls. “She’s been keeping January from her sister and now she’s trying to get her back under her thumb in person. She needs to die.”

“You kill her right after she’s been in our club, and it’ll bring heat down on us from everyone. The pigs, Bianchi, the Whitehall family...Eli, back me up here?”

I meet Bobby’s serious brown eyes. “Back you up with what?”

“We can’t kill Corinne, right?”

“I don’t think it matters.”

“What!?”

I return my gaze to my drink, staring as though I might divine the future in my whiskey. For weeks now, I’ve sensed something building. More than sensed. Seen. Glass has cracked at the slightest touch. Blackbirds have massed on the powerlines above. Spilled olive oil. Crossed arms during toasts. Bad omens.

For close to a year, my brothers and I have lived happily with January at our sides. Our relationships cooperative, our business making money hand over fist. Adriano stopped sleeping in the woods like Bigfoot and returned to work. For the first time in years, Doc resumed tinkering with Orchard, trying to remove its fatal flaw. Everything was exactly the way it needed to be. Now my instincts tell me this was no more than borrowed time. That our allotment of good luck has run out and now the price must be paid.

“What’s wrong, Eli?” Bobby presses. “Do you think Corinne’s in league with Parker?”

My shoulder gives an involuntary twitch, as though shaking off a fly. “The contract expressly forbids it and even if

Corinne's not intelligent enough to know that, Parker is. But her showing up tonight is a bad sign."

A pained expression takes over both of my brothers' faces. They're well aware of my omen theory, though they refuse to see them as anything but baseless superstition.

Bobby closes his laptop. "Eli, I get that you're having... doubts. But the last six months have been the most profitable in Velvet House history. All our lines are up. We're turning down contracts left right and center and..." His face softens "We've got January."

Adriano gives a wordless growl of agreement.

"January is perfect," I say. "More precious than all the world. But something is wrong. I know it in my bones."

"You think Parker's going to violate the Bianchi contract?"

"I believe he wants to."

Adriano rolls his eyes. "Of course, he *wants* to. But unless he's suicidal, he's not going to."

I drain my scotch. "Perhaps. But I don't like that January's mother is attending the wedding. And I don't like that she found out where January is working."

"Why don't you call Mr. Bianchi and ask if she can be barred?" Bobby says.

"I'm not in a position to give John orders."

"It wouldn't be giving orders, he likes you. And he asked January to sing at his wedding. He must be interested in keeping her safe."

A valid point but still, I find myself hesitating. John Bianchi isn't someone you call without a very good reason. I look to Adriano, who nods. "Just ask."

I pull out my phone. Bianchi's line rings several times and I'm prepared to leave an apologetic voicemail when a gravelly voice speaks in my ear. "It's very late, Elliot."

“I’m sorry, sir, and I’m sorry for the interruption,” I say. “But it is urgent. January’s estranged stepmother claims to be going to your wedding and I wanted to know if she can be taken off the guest list.”

Bianchi gives an amused snort. “You don’t keep me waiting, Elliot. I appreciate that about you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He lets out a slow breath. “Unfortunately, Corinne Whitehall and my daughter have an existing relationship. I can’t refuse her without causing offense.”

“I see,” I say, stomach sinking. “Very well.”

There’s a short pause. Bianchi seems to be weighing up what to say next.

“I’m afraid I have more bad news.”

“What is it, sir?”

“There is...someone else attending my wedding. A person you will be even less pleased to see than Corinne Whitehall.”

My blood turns to ice. “Parker? You invited *Parker*?” The accusation is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

“I understand how disturbing this must be, but Parker and my son Carlo—you remember Carlo? They’re working on a deal. Something to do with facial recognition technology. Billions of dollars in the pipeline...”

I stay silent, my mind reeling. How is this possible? The four of us and Parker being at the same event is a complete violation of the contract *Bianchi* drew up. And January, my jewel, my princess; how am I going to tell her she and Parker will be in the same room after assuring her she’d never have to lay eyes on the man again?

“...it was a challenging decision,” Bianchi finishes. “But for the sake of *my* family and our future business dealings, I feel it’s the right one. This is the party of the year, Morelli.

The decade. It's far larger and more important than your little feud with Parker."

I note the use of my surname and know I will have to tread lightly.

"I don't understand," I say, still trying to keep the fury from my voice. "How does this comply with the contract?"

"It's all straightforward. There'll still be no communication between you and Parker at the wedding. You'll be on opposite sides of the ballroom. In fact, there's no reason the five of you should ever come into contact."

"I highly doubt that," I say. "Sir, not to question your authority, but I would like to suggest that I and all the members of Velvet House not attend your wedding."

The stony silence speaks volumes, but I don't retract my statement.

"That would be a tremendous insult," Bianchi says in a tone just below freezing. "I hope, for your sake that you're speaking out of anger, Morelli and I don't have to seriously consider what you're asking."

My stomach knots and I look at Bobby. In his eyes, I read the truth. We are not important enough for Bianchi to compromise. He isn't going to let up or give in and his power is greater than ours. He controls our contract and, to that same extent, us. To push this point, to invoke open war with New York, would be madness.

"Forgive me," I say, straining for civility. "We will be at the wedding. January is looking forward to singing."

"Good." Another icy pause. "Well, if that's all?" Bianchi says in a clipped voice.

"Yes, that's all. Thank you for letting me know John. I'll see you soon." As soon as I lay the phone down, Bobby shoves a fresh scotch into my hand. I down it in one, thanking God I befriended him in high school.

“Parker’s going to be at the wedding?” Adriano asks, his face more contorted in rage than even when threatening to kill January’s stepmother.

I nod, holding out my glass for Bobby to refill. “It’s a favor for his son. Apparently his wedding is more goddamn important than our *little feud*.”

“Shit,” Bobby whispers. “What about January?”

“Bianchi seems to think Parker will leave her alone.”

Adriano hauls himself to his feet and tosses something across the room. It shatters on the wall, and I realize it’s his phone.

“You’ll need a new one,” I say, dryly.

“Who gives a fuck?” Adriano fixes me with his electric green eyes. “This is a job. We’re being set up.”

“We don’t know that,” I say, as calmly as I can manage. My stomach glows with alcohol. I want to believe this isn’t the disaster I’ve been predicting for weeks.

“The girl can’t go to the wedding,” Adriano says.

“She’s singing the song for the first dance. To not attend would be the greatest insult—”

“Then it’s the greatest fucking insult. I’ll break her arm if I have to, she’s not going.”

I hold Adriano’s gaze. In the seconds that follow I understand that he doesn’t mean it. He’d kill himself before he laid a finger on January, he’s just terrified for the woman we love.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say slowly. “I don’t like the idea of Parker’s eyes on January but he’s in negotiations to marry an Armenian billionaire’s daughter. He’s done with the Whitehall family.”

“And the stepmother coming to the strip club?” Adriano demands. “That’s a coincidence, is it?”

There's a loud bang and all of us jump to our feet as Doc bursts in, his jaw set, eyes burning blue fire.

"How are you here already?" I say, looking at my watch.

"I broke the law," Doc says, striding to the bar and picking up a bottle of Stoli. "What's the fucking deal? Bobby says Parker's coming to the wedding?"

I look at Bobby who raises his hands. "I texted him. I thought he should know."

"*Porca misera*," I mutter. "Where's—"

"Daddy!"

Just hearing her voice is like a balm smeared across my soul. I whirl around and see January rushing toward me. She throws herself into my arms and as her softness engulfs me, I know it as well as I've known anything—I would die for her. This precious slip of a girl.

I kiss the top of her head. "How are you feeling, my ruby?"

"Okay," she says into my chest. "No, that's a lie. I'm scared."

"That's perfectly understandable," I say. "But I will protect you at any cost. I promise you."

"I know, Daddy," she says snuggling into my arms. "I love you."

My mind swims and I kiss the top of her head again. I should tell her I love her. Bobby and Adriano do and even Doc managed it once. But I can't quite make myself do it. It feels like handing her a weapon she could threaten me with for the rest of my life. She hugs me tighter then lets go, moving to embrace Bobby. I watch her, feeling strangely empty.

"Does she know?" Adriano demands.

"Know what?" January asks.

I glance at Doc, who's drinking straight from the Stolli bottle. He shakes his head, still swallowing vodka. I sigh. "I have bad news, *bella*. Parker will be at the Bianchi wedding."

January deflates in front of me. "I... How is that possible?"

"Bianchi's son and Parker are in business. It's a political decision. As hard as it might be to hear, it has nothing to do with us."

She pulls away from Bobby, her shoulders creeping to her ears. I forget how much she's changed over the last twelve months but as she shrinks back into the scared wallflower she used to be, my anger toward Bianchi returns.

"Do not be scared," I say. "Parker won't touch you or talk to you. He won't even come near you. Bianchi will shoot him between the eyes if he tries."

January doesn't look reassured. "Doesn't this, like, show Parker that he can be around us if he spends enough money? That the contract doesn't really apply to him?"

All of us exchange glances. January's right, as she so often is these days. Her honesty and perceptiveness unearth truths the rest of us shy away from. Not that it's always comfortable to hear the truth.

"We'll figure something out," I tell her, reminding myself of my mother promising my father she was coming home soon. "You must be tired. Why don't you go to bed?"

"Yeah, Tits," Doc says, unexpectedly backing me up. "Bobby can take you for a bath."

January looks doubtfully between us. "Okay...but are you guys alright? I know it'll be a big deal for you to see Parker too."

Adriano, Doc, and I plaster smiles on our faces.

"We're fine," I lie. "Go and enjoy the last of your birthday, my ruby."

January kisses us goodnight then leaves with Bobby.

As the dining room door closes, I sigh. Along with everything else I have to deal with, I can't give her my other gift. A unicorn saddle vibrator in beautiful pastel colors and a pretty little tail for her asshole. Sex could have provided some levity in a night severely lacking in it, but we need to address the Parker situation before that's an option. Doc pours the three of us a fresh round of drinks and then sits at the table. "So, what are we gonna do?"

From the look in his eyes, I know he's thinking of throttling Parker with piano wire at the wedding.

"We're not violating the contract," I say. "We need to call the Baskerville twins and see what they know."

"So do it," Doc says grumpily. He hates the Baskerville twins.

Archie Baskerville picks up on the second ring. "Evenin' boss."

I can hear a woman laughing in the background. "Where are you?"

"Keepin' company with some women of loose morals." There's the sound of a door shutting, the crunch of feet on gravel. "I'm alone now."

"Good. What do you know about Parker attending the Bianchi wedding?"

"Nothing." Archie sounds surprised. "You gonna be there too? Doesn't that violate the contract?"

"Apparently that's of no concern to John Bianchi," I say, a headache pricking at my temples. "We're going to need round-the-clock intel on Parker. What he's planning, who with, and when. If he's coming to the wedding to hurt January, to do anything, we need to know about it."

"Right," Archie says, but there's a bite to his voice.

"What?" I snarl, my temper straining at its leash.

“Nothin’, boss. We’ll get you what you want to know, but it’s been over a year and we’re still bowing and scraping to this asshole. Bill and I were hoping we’d be working for Velvet House by now.”

I sigh, rubbing the side of my head. “I understand your frustration, but it’s useful to have someone on his crew feeding us information.”

“And when is that not gonna be useful? Once Parker’s dead of old age?”

“Don’t push me, Baskerville,” I say. “We want to help you, but it’s not as easy as clicking our fingers.”

A moment’s silence. “Okay, I’ll get you what you want to know.”

“Appreciate it,” I say and hang up.

“He still pissy?” Doc asks.

“Mightily.”

Doc swirls the bottle in his hand, making a little vodka tornado. “Can’t say I blame him. If I worked for Parker, I’d have shot him between the eyes by now.”

“Well, the twins don’t know anything about the wedding,” I say. “Maybe Parker’s not going to violate the contract. Maybe he *is* just showing up to rub elbows.”

“No fucking way,” Adriano growls.

“Yeah, he’s planning something,” Doc says.

Ice forms in my stomach once again, freezing the scotch warming my insides. It’s the same feeling as the last time I broke a wineglass.

An omen.

A bad sign.

But one I refuse to endorse.

“If Parker attempts anything at the wedding he’ll die,” I say simply. “He can’t plan an attack, and neither can we. To be

known to even be considering retaliation would violate the contract. There'll be no attempts at counter-surveillance or damage control. Understood?"

Adriano nods.

"Understood?" I demand of Doc.

He raises both hands. "Understood. *Jesus.*"

"Good."

Doc takes another swig of vodka and stands.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"To go sit on the sidelines at January's bath. See if I can't get involved."

"A tempting prospect. But if you leave, you'll miss me speaking to Corinne Whitehall."

Doc's mouth hangs open. "What?"

"We can't do anything about Parker," I say. "But seeing as this is the night of distressing phone calls, I don't see why we can't remind Mrs. Whitehall of how precarious her position on this mortal coil is."

Doc's face breaks into an evil smile as he drops back into his seat.

"I need an encrypted line," I tell Adriano. "Call Gretzky. And get him to bring another bottle of Chivas."

It's entirely easy to reach Corinne Whitehall. She picks up my video call within seconds. She's sitting behind what looks like her late husband's desk in a fine pink dress. She's a good-looking woman, slim and fair but her eyes are as cold as glass.

"Mr. Morelli," she says in her tinkling Connecticut accent. "It's so lovely to hear from you again."

Six months ago, I arranged a video conference with Corinne to request she let January and her sister speak to one another. I offered her a million dollars to comply, but the bitch

demanded five. Paying her would only lead her to believe she had power over me, so I refused.

“Mrs. Whitehall,” I say in my calmest voice. “I understand you went against my wishes and spoke to your stepdaughter this evening.”

“I am her mother.”

“You’re no such thing,” I say lightly. “You were a caretaker and a poor one at that.”

Mrs. Whitehall leans closer to the camera, her dress gaping to expose her cleavage and the tops of a lace bra. “You have such a lovely accent, Mr. Morelli,” she purrs. “I’m surprised it hasn’t gone after all these years in America.”

Beside me, Doc makes a vomiting sound. I bite back a scowl. “Well, you know what they say—nothing you love ever truly leaves you.”

“So true,” Mrs. Whitehall sighs. “Have you changed your mind, Mr. Morelli? Are you willing to let my stepdaughter see her sister?”

“Not on your terms, you narcissistic black hole of want.”

Mrs. Whitehall absorbs the insult without batting an eyelid. “What a shame.”

“It is a shame, but it’s nothing compared to what will happen to you if you attempt to approach your ex-stepdaughter ever again.”

The woman gives me an indulgent smile, as though she just swallowed a spoonful of cream. “That will be difficult seeing as January agreed to take a photograph with me at the Bianchi wedding.”

I glare at her. “I was referring to after the wedding, although I should warn you that my companions are very unhappy about your arrangement.”

“The blond thug?” she suggests, toying with her neckline.

“Domenico,” I agree. “Although Adriano should be your larger concern. He has more skill with a sniper rifle.”

Mrs. Whitehall laughs. “I’m not worried about that. In fact, it might be you gentlemen who should be worried.”

The hair on the back of my neck stands up. “Are you threatening us?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she says sweetly. “Although I could guess that Zachery Parker still has plenty of reasons to want the four of you out of the way.”

Out of frame, I grip the edges of my desk so hard my knuckles pulse. “That sounds dangerously like you might be in contact with Parker, Mrs. Whitehall. Which would violate the Bianchi contract and result in both of you dying tonight.”

She laughs. “Things are often a lot more complicated than that, Mr. Morelli. You know, for all your business sense, sometimes you sound as simple as January.”

Adriano sucks in a sharp breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, lightning flashes, staining my office white and gray. Another bad omen.

“How dare you speak about January that way,” I snarl. “You don’t know the first thing about her. You’re a loveless woman, as cold as you are superficial, and this conversation is over.”

I float my finger to the *end* button, but Mrs. Whitehall leans forward. “It’s a shame we didn’t meet years ago, Elliot. I think we’d make quite a match. And Lord knows January needed a father figure.”

I flash her a wide smile. “There’s no need for a middleman. January already calls me *Daddy*. Have a good evening.”

I end the call, my pulse hammering in my throat. “What a fucking disaster.”

Adriano nods, his gaze fixed on the wall across from us.

“She was threatening us,” Doc says. “And I don’t care what the Baskerville twins think, Parker’s planning something.”

“I agree.”

“So, what now?” Adriano growls.

None of us say anything. I sit and watch the lightning split the sky, illuminating the grounds of Velvet House in bursts. Things are in motion, and I have no ability to control them.



CHAPTER FOUR

January Whitehall

I WAKE UP late, my head still full of crazy dreams. I usually sleep badly after bar shifts, but this is different. Mr. Parker feels close. Very close. In my nightmare, he had smoke for a head and followed me down the halls of Velvet House swinging a sword, screaming my name. Not *January*, some other name I can't remember. Trying to recall the details sends ice pricking down my neck and spine.

I sit up, clutching my sheets to my bare boobs. I'm alone. I have vague memories of Doc and Bobby kissing me on the cheeks and forehead as they crept away to work or swim or whatever they have planned for today. It's rare for me to wake up by myself and usually I like it, goofing around on my phone until someone, mostly Adriano, brings me cereal and juice in bed.

Today it feels spooky.

I get up and quickly dress in a loose T-shirt and shorts. Hanging in my walk-in closet is the gown I'm wearing to the Bianchi wedding, a gorgeous pink Dior dress that Eli helped pick out. The wedding is now only six days away. It shouldn't feel like it's crept up on me. I've had three dress fittings and booked a hairstylist and makeup artist, yet it still feels like a surprise.

Or maybe more like a nightmare.

I was worried enough about having to sing in front of hundreds of strangers but now Corinne and Mr. Parker will be

there too. The worst additions to a celebration of love I could possibly imagine. In the last year I've tried to block Mr. Parker from my mind—pretend as though he doesn't exist the way the boys do. But he never quite goes away. Instead, he hangs around like the smoke-headed monster he was in my dream. Sometimes I wonder if it's because he's thinking of me, forcing my attention back to him.

I wish Doc was here. Whenever I have a bad dream, he gets me to draw a picture of it and then he stabs it over and over with his butterfly knife, tearing it to shreds as he yells, *get the fuck away from my woman*.

A crazy ritual, but it usually makes me laugh and always makes me feel better.

I wander toward my guilt-edged mirror and pick up a discarded lipstick, a pale pink that doesn't really suit me, but it would look perfect on Emilia, Mr. Parker's redheaded girlfriend.

I've only met her once, but I think of her as a kind of shadow twin. I was supposed to live under Mr. Parker's heel, but the Velvet House boys kidnapped me at our wedding and made me their own. Now, Emilia is the one who lives with Mr. Parker, satisfying his sexual needs and listening to his ramblings.

I wonder who Emilia was before she came to him, what she dreams of, what food she likes. More than anything I want to rescue her, get her away from Mr. Parker. But it's impossible. When I confided my fears in Bobby, he reminded me that the Bianchi contract goes both ways. Mr. Parker would be killed for messing with Velvet House, but I'd be killed for messing with Mr. Parker. And kidnapping would definitely fall under the category of messing with Mr. Parker.

"You have to hope she leaves him," Bobby says. "He's going to marry someone else, maybe she'll be let go."

I wanted to believe him, but I know it's not true. I saw the look in Mr. Parker's eyes when he was making Emilia go

down on him in his limo. He thinks he owns her, and he'll want to keep owning her no matter who he marries.

A wave of helplessness washes over me, a sadness only one thing can cure. I put down the lipstick and practically run downstairs to my cleaning cupboard. I pull out rubber gloves, a bucket, cream cleaner, and a package of fresh sponges. I fill the bucket with warm water, lace it with cleaner and then make my way to the dusty Morelli ballroom. I focus on an old fireplace and as I run my sponge through the grey dust and coal, the red and gold panelled wood beneath starts to shine.

When in doubt, clean it out.

It's a little mantra I've given myself in the past year as I've slowly but surely worked my way through the whole Velvet House mansion. The boys were worried all my housework was OCD or some kind of traumatic response to being double kidnapped, and maybe it is, but it also works. When I step back and see something that was once full of cobwebs all gleaming and lovely, I feel a huge rush of pride. It's tangible proof that I changed something. Made it better.

I wipe until my bucket of water is filthy, then I tip it out, refill it and start again. By the third bucket, I feel calm, by the fifth, I'm singing Dolly Parton. When the seventh bucket comes around, I imagine Zia Teresa. She's smiling at me, proud of the way I'm handling myself.

That's another reason why I like cleaning, it always makes Zia feel close. Of course, thinking about her brings me right back to Mr. Parker. He had her killed out of spite a year ago, robbing me of the only real mother figure I'd ever known.

I do a swift sign of the cross to Zia's memory and wonder how she'd feel about where I am now. The cleaning she would approve of but my four boyfriends? The working in a strip club? The singing at a mafioso's wedding?

"Hello, my ruby."

I turn to see Eli lounging against the ballroom doorframe, looking perfectly elegant in a white linen shirt.

I hurriedly wipe my rubber gloves down my sides, as though that might make me more presentable. “Good afternoon, Mr. Morelli.”

“Afternoon,” he says, looking amused. “Have you been down here all day?”

“I... I guess so.” I turn and see I’ve cleaned out a huge space. The whole fireplace and most of the surrounding walls and floor. “Wow, I’ve really been working.”

“You have.” Eli swaggers forward, his wingtips clicking on the dusty ballroom floor. “You know I try my hardest to spoil you, Miss Whitehall, but whenever I turn my back, I find you toiling on my floors like a servant girl.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. What an interesting woman you are.”

I peel off my gloves. “You know cleaning relaxes me.”

“It’s *one* of the things that relaxes you,” Eli corrects with a wolfish smile.

I feel myself blush.

“*Come mai il mio angioletto pulisce così tanto oggi?*” he asks. *And why is my little angel cleaning so thoroughly today?*

Eli is speaking Italian to me more and more. He says it’s because I sound sexy when I reply but a part of me thinks it’s because it reminds him of his childhood in Naples. Either way, I’m happy to go along with it and my Italian has improved a lot.

“*Avevo solamente bisogno di calmarmi dopo aver visto la mia matrigna,*” I say. *I just needed to calm down after seeing my stepmom.*

Eli’s smile remains but his dark brown eyes take on a cold gleam. “*Bella*, I apologize a hundred times for what happened at Dreams and the news about the wedding. Never did I think you would be put in this position. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

I fold my used rubber gloves over and place them on the floor. Coming from Eli it's an extravagant apology. Usually, he's very businesslike and tends to downplay accidents and mistakes rather than cause panic. That he's being so nice makes my nerves spike all over again.

"January?" Eli prompts.

"It's okay." I look up at him. "I know you and Doc, Bobby and Adriano will protect me."

"With our lives." Eli closes the distance between us and to my surprise gets on his knees on the dusty floor. "I will do everything in my power to keep you from your stepmother and that *animale*."

I don't have to ask who the *animale* is, though the angry intensity in Eli's face makes me duck my head. It's been a long time since I slept in the dark cage downstairs but part of me will always remember what it was like to be Eli Morelli's prisoner. To desire and fear him in equal measure.

"I believe you," I whisper, and Eli cups my jaw.

"*Bella?*"

"Uh-huh?" I ask my lap.

"I must once again apologize for the way you were treated when you first came to my house." Eli's voice is low, and there's a throb of genuine sadness inside it.

"You don't need to say sorry again, Daddy. I know you regret it."

"You'll never know how much I regret it." His fingers caress my cheek as though I'm a kitten. "If I could go back and change what happened...to treat you like the angel you are. To give you the comfort and reassurance you needed..."

I smile at the thought of a parallel Velvet House where my men were exactly as they are now. Bobby helping me cook pasta. Doc and I watching animated movies. Eli walking me around his rose gardens the way he does now, pointing out squirrels and kissing my cheeks. Adriano massaging my feet

and painting pictures of me and calling me Pryntsesa. But as sweet as that image is, it's also absurd.

"I think it had to be the way it was," I tell Eli. "We all had so much growing to do. And as hard as it was, it brought us here. I like where we are now."

Eli lets out a sigh. "You're right as always, my ruby. But Parker has taken many things from me. That I allowed my anger toward him to terrorize the woman of my dreams... I'll never forgive myself for it."

"But I forgive you," I say, stroking his leg. "Doesn't that count?"

"It counts for everything, I only wish—"

"Wishes are for fools," I say, quoting my Zia Teresa.

Eli laughs. He has the perfect laugh, rich and ringing. "Again, you're right, even if you are a little brat."

I bite back a smirk and adopt my sweetest most wide-eyed expression. "Have I done a good enough job cleaning for you Mr. Morelli?"

Eli's face changes. His angular jaw juts and his brows lower over shining dark eyes. "I think it's more than adequate, *cameriera*." *Housemaid*.

My heart starts pulsing in double time, the way it always does when Eli focuses his dark intensity on me. "Is there anything else I can do to assist you before dinner?"

He makes a face as though he's bored and contemplating how to be less so. "Why don't you take your little T-shirt off?"

My stomach drops as though he really is my boss. "I... I don't know if I should...?"

"You asked what you could do to assist me," he says lightly. "I want to see if you look as good underneath your clothes as you do in them."

"But—"

Eli gets up and takes a step backward. “I suppose my father will have to hear about you disobeying me, *cameriera*. And I don’t know that he’ll give you a letter of referral before he sends you on your way.”

Humiliation mixes with my nerves and heat surges into my underwear. I don’t know why I like being treated this way, but I’ve learned not to question it. To just go where my body takes me. I fumble for the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head. “Is that...okay?”

Eli studies my torso, his face expressionless. “Take off your bra.”

With trembling fingers, I unsnap the plain pink lace and free my breasts. They’ve gotten bigger, swelling to F cups in the past year. I raise my hands and cover my nipples, pushing them together. “Is this okay, Mr. Morelli?”

“Call me *Sir*.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I kneel uncomfortably on the hard floor, letting Eli look at me. A self-conscious flush burns across my cheeks, matched by the warmth between my legs.

Eli grips my jaw, harder than before turning my face from side to side. “You’re quite pretty for a servant girl.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Although you’re filthy. And you smell like cleaning products.”

My flush intensifies. “I’m sorry, Sir.”

Eli lets go of my face and reaches for his fly. “That being the case, I won’t fuck you, *cameriera*. Part your pretty lips.”

My pulse spikes as he pulls down his fly, the sound deafening in the empty ballroom. Eli withdraws his cock, already semi-hard and I stare, transfixed as he strokes it to its full length. “Mr. Morelli...”

“*Sir.*” He offers his cock to me like it’s a glass of wine. “Open your mouth, I have dinner reservations.”

I let go of my breasts. “Sir, I don’t think your father would —”

Eli wraps his free hand around my neck. “Be grateful my father hasn’t already taken you for himself. And don’t tell me you haven’t thought about being mine. I’ve seen you watching me.”

He gives me a wicked smile and I give into the fantasy. I’m a worker in the Morelli household, secretly in love with the handsome, prince-like son. Watching him climb into his sportscars and play tennis on the grounds, romance beautiful girls who aren’t me. Looking up at him, I feel a kind of delicious heartsickness. The desire to be seen that’s alleviated by the fact that I am seen, that I have been seen by Eli Morelli for the longest time. I part my lips and close my eyes in wordless consent to be used.

“Good,” Eli mutters, and the thick head of his cock slides into my mouth. I lap at it with my tongue, lubricating the way as he lets out a low groan.

“Yes, my little housemaid. I can do whatever I want to you, can’t I?”

I nod, reaching up to wrap a fist around him, but Eli flicks my forehead. “No. No touching with your sudsy little hands. Just suck.”

Humiliation burns through me like fire, and I redouble my efforts drawing him deeper into my mouth, fluttering my tongue around his slit. I taste precum as Eli grips my hair, still in its loose plait, and thrusts into my face. I choke and sputter but the feel of it only makes him go faster.

“You’ve been thinking about this, haven’t you? Servicing my cock?” Eli demands.

“Yergsh,” I manage to say around his pumping shaft.

“Of course, you have. Scurrying around the house in your tight little skirts. You’re mine, *cameriera* and this is your new job. Polishing my dick.”

I moan my pleasure, feeling wetness swelling from between my legs and soaking my cotton panties.

“You’ll do it day and night,” Eli says, his head bumping the back of my throat and triggering my gag reflex. “Whenever I’m bored, whenever I come home from a date with some stuck-up bitch who wouldn’t fuck me, you’ll be here to suck my cock. My free piece of pussy. My little safe bet.”

Jealousy scorches through me and my flower contracts, slippery excitement coating my folds. I don’t know why Eli taunting me this way is so hot, but it is. In over a year, none of my men have given me the slightest indication they’d cheat, but the fantasy that I’m beneath Eli, that I’m just the mistress he once threatened to make me, is so sexy.

“Concentrate.” Eli pulls my hair harder as he forces his way into my throat. He’s rough but he knows what he’s doing, withdrawing before it causes me any pain, giving me breaks to let me catch my breath.

It might look degrading from the outside, but blowjobs always make me feel powerful. I’m on my knees but with one snap of my teeth, I could snap Eli’s penis in half. How could I not be in charge? As for pretending to be his sex slave, some part of me aches, thinking of Emilia, forced to give Mr. Parker head in his limousine. But I refuse to let those dark wandering memories corrupt this fantasy. I love being this girl for Eli, his legitimate girlfriend, and his sidepiece at once.

Soon Eli is pulsing deeply in my throat and breathing in the way that tells me he’s going to come. I keep my mouth wide, laving him with my tongue, cleaning it with the same thoroughness that I cleaned the fireplace.

“Here comes your reward, *cameriera*,” Eli rasps. “Swallow my cum. That’s all you’re good for.”

His fists sink into my hair, deliciously tight as my tongue is lashed with hot, salty cum. I swallow obediently, still sucking and worshiping and listening to the man I love moaning in pleasure. Soon he's oversensitive, withdrawing from my mouth and muttering Italian curse words. I sit back on my heels, feeling proud of myself. "Was that good?" I ask.

Eli runs a thumb over my lip, wiping away a little saliva. "That was perfect, my ruby. *You* are perfect."

I smile up at him, the illusion that we aren't equal is broken. He is my handsome boyfriend. The man I love and who cares for me. Eli brushes my cheek softly. "What can I do for you? Do you want me to lick your pussy, or will I bend you over the fireplace and fuck your little cunt with my fingers?"

I smile and shake my head.

"Do you want a performance? Would you like me to play Prince Charming to your Cinderella? Take you up to my bedroom and sweep you off your feet?"

It's a lovely idea, but I shake my head.

He frowns. "Am I being too vanilla, my ruby? Should I call all my brothers into this dusty ballroom to fuck you into unconsciousness? Fill you until you can barely walk?"

The thought sends heat racing through me, but I bite my lip. "Actually, I was thinking that I really want to have a shower and I feel like...waiting."

Eli's beautiful face breaks into a smirk. "My little ruby wants to be put into chastity?"

I slap him on the thigh. "Don't say it like that!"

I didn't even know what that was until Doc showed me a bunch of weird leather underpants with keyholes in them. I don't want to be put into an underwear cage, but after a year of being screwed day and night, I've learned that I like being left all hot and frustrated sometimes. Especially when I've been with Eli. He's so bossy that it feels more natural. And then

later, when he or anyone else touches me, my orgasms are twice as strong.

“Is that okay?” I ask Eli.

“Of course, *bella*.” He tilts his head to one side and studies me long and hard like I’m a famous painting.

“What?” I ask touching my hair. “Is something wrong?”

He shakes his head with a smile.

“Then what?”

“I suppose I’m wondering when I’ll get to finish inside you. When you’ll finally agree to have my children.”

My already overused heart derails like a train off a track. I look away. “I... I don’t know.”

“Are you worried it will ruin your body? Because it won’t. You’re healthy and strong and you can take all the time you need to recover, and, in any case, we will adore you no matter how you look.”

“I know.”

Once I wouldn’t have believed it, I thought the proud men of Velvet House wanted nothing but virgins and supermodels and preferably virgin supermodels. But a few months ago, I accidentally cut my wrist while I was hunting deer with Adriano and the boys were as fascinated and proud of my scar as they were with any fancy dress or lingerie I’d ever worn.

“You’re one of us now, Tits,” Doc said, tracing the purple line with his tattooed fingers. “It’s fucking hot, you all scarred up and dangerous.”

I’ve no doubt that any stretch marks and bruises I gain as a result of having kids would be treated the same way by my four men and in my heart, I can feel the call to have children, sweet, beautiful babies that I can play with and care for. But I also have my reasons for insisting everyone continues to pull out of me. Good reasons.

“January.” Eli squats in front of me, resting on his heels. He looks me right in the eyes. “You don’t have to answer if you’re not ready, but are you scared to have children because your mother passed when she had you?”

I gnaw my lower lip.

“Obstetric care has improved tenfold since your mother died. You would have the very best obstetricians and midwives and—”

I press a finger to his lips. “It’s not that.”

“But your mother passed, and I can’t imagine how traumatizing—”

“She didn’t have to die,” I say softly. “Zia Teresa told me...”

Eli waits expectantly, but my stomach twists. It feels like I’m betraying both my mother and Zia telling the truth.

“Zia Teresa told me Mama’s doctor wanted her to have a c-section,” I finish. “Mama said no, she wanted to have me at home. And when she changed her mind, it was too late. So, she didn’t need to die having me. It was a mistake. A tragedy.”

Eli lowers his gaze. “I’m sorry, sweet girl.”

“Me too.” I picture the mama I know from portraits and my siblings’ memories, her blue-black hair, and round eyes. I wish I could have known her, that we could have had some kind of relationship. But as Zia always says, as I just told Eli, wishes are for fools. I need to focus on the practical.

“Say I was ready for babies,” I say to Eli. “You and the others would still have to figure out how I’m going to get pregnant.”

He shrugs. “All four of us are in agreement, *bella*.”

“About what?”

“The method by which we will get you pregnant.”

I stare at him. For months my men have been arguing their options, whether Eli as the head of the Velvet House family should have the first child, or if they should use a ballot system or just continue sleeping with me and see what happens. “You’ve actually decided?”

“Yes.”

“And no one died in a knife fight?”

“Domenico tried to initiate several but was successfully ignored.” Eli smiles. “Fate will decide who fathers our first child.”

My mouth falls open. “You’re leaving it to chance?”

“Yes,” he says, without hesitation.

I can’t believe it. Of my four lovers, Eli is the most controlling and the proudest. I was sure he’d strong-arm the others into letting him be my baby daddy. “And if my first child isn’t biologically yours?”

Eli lifts his head like a jungle cat. “Any child you bear will be my son or daughter.”

My heart gives a little pang. “That’s sweet.”

“So, why can’t we begin our little family? Be honest, January.”

I draw a deep breath. “I’m worried about how overprotective you are. How all four of you are. I’m scared if we have kids, you’ll be super controlling, and I grew up controlled and it was the loneliest thing in the world.”

Eli’s face falls, but he doesn’t say anything, and I press on.

“I don’t want to have babies who grow up in chains. If we have a daughter, I know you’ll all be incredibly worried about her and make her feel awful for wanting to travel the world or explore her sexuality—”

Eli chokes on nothing. “Explore her—”

“*Explore her sexuality,*” I repeat loudly. “You know, the way you guys did with hundreds of women who weren’t me?”

He has the sense to look humbled.

“If we have a boy,” I continue. “I worry about what he’ll learn from the four of you.”

“*Learn from us?*”

“You all work in a dangerous and competitive field. He might think he needs to live up to your reputation. To be even meaner and bossier than you.”

Eli shakes his head. “Our son can do what he likes. Architecture. Acting. He can dig ditches if that will make him happy.”

“You say that now, but I feel like he’d feel pressured to join the business.”

Eli gives me a considering look. “Velvet House is moving away from our more...illegitimate activities. Soon we’ll be an entirely lawful enterprise, one our children could be proud to be a part of.”

I say nothing. Eli could be telling me the truth, but he also could be telling me what he *hopes* will be true, which is very different.

“What is your ideal situation?” Eli asks. “What does your perfect world look like?”

My breath catches in my throat. Not because I don’t know the answer. Because I do. I’ve imagined it a hundred times. A thousand. I love food and I love restaurants. When I was younger, I dreamed of opening a sleepy little café with Zia Teresa, serving lattes and *pettole* to friendly customers. But over the past year, I’ve gotten actual service industry experience at Dreams and a lot of business experience from being at Velvet House and I know what I want. I want to open a proper restaurant. Somewhere that serves the delicious, rustic Italian food Zia Teresa taught me to love. I want to find,

decorate, and run a beautiful space where people can come to drink wine, relax, and enjoy life.

In my perfect world, I would work on dinner menus with my chefs while my baby slept in a pretty basket beside me. And throughout the day my men would come in and I could give them slices of continental cake and cups of espresso. And then on special occasions we could close the restaurant down and host dinner parties for our friends and business partners...

But it's impossible. My men have enemies, and my being alone in an exposed public location much of the time would be too big a risk, let alone if we had children. But in my perfect world, that's where I am.

Eli gives me a rueful smile. "Are you thinking about your restaurant?"

I'm surprised but I shouldn't be. I told Adriano about this fantasy months ago. He must have texted the others in the group chat where they exchange football scores and naked photos of me.

"I am thinking about owning a restaurant," I tell Eli. "But I know it can't happen."

"Maybe, but you want it, don't you? Your heart sings for it." Eli takes my hand. "You've been corrupted by *Dreams, bella*. And strangely not by the stripping, but the service industry."

I give him a small smile. "I like being around people and I like giving them things they enjoy."

"And I suppose it's unrealistic of me to hope a girl as sociable as you would be content to live here alone, raising my babies?"

I tug my hand away. "Yes. I spent my whole life alone. I need to be *free*."

Eli's face stills.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out. "I know you only want to keep me safe. I love you."

A loaded silence descends, and I internally kick myself. Like Doc, Eli can't handle hearing that I love him—he's never come close to voicing his feelings—but I say it all the time. It just slips out.

I reach for my discarded T-shirt and pull it over my head. "You don't have to tell me you love me back," I say, getting to my feet. "And we don't have to talk about any of this stuff anymore. I'm gonna go have a shower and then start dinner. *Parmigiana di melanzane*, won't that be—"

Eli stands and grips my hips, pulling me close. "January Whitehall. I adore you with my entire being. You are the only woman for me, and I take your concerns as seriously as I've ever taken anything."

I smile. Sometimes Eli can be dramatic, but I like it. It's very Italian. "Thank you, and I mean it, you don't have to say I love you."

Eli frowns. "I wish I could... I mean... It's just... I do not understand—"

"It's really okay." I stroke the silky dark hairs on his forearm. "You and Doc should talk about why it's hard for you to express emotions."

"I have nothing in common with that *idiota*."

"He can't say he loves me either. Although I know he does."

Eli grimaces. "*Bella?*"

"Yes?"

"From what you've told me, the thing keeping you from having our children is fear that myself, Adriano, Doc, and Bobby do not trust you enough to let you be free and that we will treat our babies the same way?"

It hurts to hear it said so bluntly, but he's right. "Yes."

Eli touches a finger to my lips. "Shower. Tonight, my brothers and I will resolve this issue."

“I... How?”

“You will see. We’ll meet for dinner at 8 p.m.” He turns me towards the door and slaps my ass. “And *bella?*”

“Yes?”

“Do not touch your little cunt before then or I will beat you.”

I turn, a smile creeping across my face.



CHAPTER FIVE

January Whitehall

I PUT ON a simple white slip dress and sandals and leave my hair long and flowing for our family dinner meeting. A stripped-down look is better for important discussions. If I dress too sexy the boys tend to get distracted.

I'm shocked to find the dining room lit by a hundred candles, the warm glow casting the four men I love into shadow. They're sitting in their usual spots around the table and as I look from face to face, I'm reminded of when I first arrived at Velvet House. When they were wild and unknown to me.

Adriano's beard is neatly trimmed, and his biceps are almost bursting out of his green Henley, his arms folded across his chest. Doc smirks at me over his glass of vodka, his usual gaping T-shirts exposing his tattooed rib cage. Bobby's thick brown hair is neatly combed, and his blue checked shirt is open at the collar. Only Eli looks different. He looks a mess with his red tie loose around his neck and his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. He has a glass of scotch in one hand and a cigarette burning between his fingers.

I press a hand to my lips. "Are you okay, Eli?"

He nods but I can see he's shaking, making the liquor in the glass rock back and forth. I wait for the others to tease him, but their faces are strangely tense. Almost remote.

"Sit, Pryntsesa," Adriano says, gesturing to my regular place. I do as I'm told, tucking my white silk dress underneath

me so it won't wrinkle. Everyone's gaze goes to Eli, so I look at him too. As the seconds tick by I wonder if it would be rude to bring up my parmigiana and whether anyone is going to serve the food I spent the rest of the afternoon making.

"January..." Eli clears his throat then seems to lose his nerve, staring into his scotch. I fight back a nervous giggle, trying to keep my face calmly sympathetic, like a real mafioso wife.

"January—" Eli repeats, then coughs into his fist.

"Fuck's sake," Doc mutters and Bobby punches him in the leg.

"Should I, um...come back later?" I ask, looking around.

"No." Eli shoves back his chair and gets to his feet. "January, the four of us have discussed what our plans should be going forward regarding you, your desire to open a restaurant, your desire for freedom, and your concerns around the freedom of our future children."

"Oh. That sounds like...a lot of information."

"We've been in here for fucking hours," Doc says into his vodka.

"We've made our decision," Eli says loudly, drowning Doc out as usual. "And if you agree to our terms, I think we can lay these issues to rest."

I wait for him to tell me what the terms are, but he just stares at me, unblinkingly, his cigarette steadily turning to ash between his fingers.

"...What is it?" I ask, still trying not to laugh. "I, um, feel like I've walked into a play or something."

Eli juts his jaw. "Well, before we get into our agreement, I have to tell you something."

My stomach falls. What could have possibly gone wrong now? I can't imagine anything worse than Corinne and Mr. Parker attending the Bianchi wedding, but maybe some other

murderous criminal will be there too. Some supervillain so mean I couldn't even imagine him yet.

Eli plunges the last of his cigarette into an empty espresso cup and shoves a hand through his hair making it stand up like a glossy cornfield. "I... Elliot Morelli... I think... That is to say..."

I stare at him. He looks like he's about to choke. Doc's shoved his fist into his mouth and even Bobby looks like he's stopping himself from laughing by a thread.

"January Whitehall." Eli points a finger at me like a TV lawyer.

"Um, yes...?"

"I... I-I-I..." His whole face twists, making him look unattractive for the first time ever and my heart stops, because I'm sure he's about to tell me he can't be with me. That he's going back to Italy to marry someone else, some normal woman who doesn't want to own a restaurant and have four boyfriends. But then he spits out the last of his sentence. "...I care about you deeply."

"Oh," I press my hands to my mouth, trying not to hide my smile. "Um, thank you."

Eli collapses back into his seat as though deflated.

"Christ," Bobby groans. "It's three words. Get it together, Morelli."

"Yeah, get it together, Morelli," Doc agrees.

"Shut your common mouths," Eli mutters. "It's not easy to bare your soul."

"It's okay," I say brightly. "I know you love me. You've loved me for ages. You just can't say it."

Eli gives me an irritable look and Doc laughs.

"Fuck you, Valente," Eli snaps. "You can't say it either."

Doc's smile fades. "I can do it. It's just... I dunno..."

“Boys,” I say gently. “Is this what this meeting is about? You all telling me that you love me?”

“No,” Eli says at once.

“Okay, good. So, what did you decide about, um, my freedom? And everything?”

Silence falls over the dining table and fear flutters in my middle again. I don't believe they'd ever go back to treating me like a captive, but what if they've decided that my children belong to them? That Velvet House has the right to control them?

Then I won't have children with these men.

The answer comes from deep inside, the strongest, clearest part of me. The part that didn't speak until I got away from my stepmother and Mr. Parker. My life isn't like it was before. And it will never be again. I love my boyfriends, but I have a few different passports and my own bank account. I have friends from Dreams. If I wanted to get away from Velvet House, I could. I hold Eli's gaze squarely and wait for him to tell me what they've decided.

“We, that is to say, my brothers and I, have always seen ourselves as a family,” Eli says. “A family that is united. Unbreakable. Closer than blood.”

“Of course,” I say.

“But you are the beating heart of that family, Pryntsesa,” Adriano says gruffly. “The world we built before you arrived no longer exists.”

I pinch my lower lip, pulling it down. “What does that mean?”

“It means everything's changed,” Bobby says lightly. “For the last twelve months, we've been moving away from the illegal stuff, selling off businesses we no longer want to be associated with.”

“Going legitimate,” I say, repeating Eli's words.

“Yeah,” Doc says. “But we don’t just want to be *not crooked*, Tits. We want to give you the life you deserve. That’s why you’re allowed to pick up as many shifts at Dreams as you want.”

“Allowed?”

Doc rolls his eyes. “Encouraged. Whatever. The point is we want you to make decisions because it’s what you want.”

I let go of my lip. “So I could maybe...open a restaurant?”

“Yes,” Doc says. “But I’ve got a *lotta* opinions about food safety that you *will* be taking into consideration.”

I bring my hands together at my mouth, which has fallen into a wide O. “Seriously! I can have a restaurant!?”

“Of course.” Adriano reaches across the table and rubs my arm. “We will build our new world around you.”

“And our children,” Bobby says quietly.

“Yes, that being said,” Doc raises his glass of vodka to me. “Give me permission to never pull out of you again, Tits. I want babies. Beautiful blue-eyed babies.”

Bobby snorts. “Brown eyes beat blue nine times out of ten.”

“Brave of you, talking like you can get anyone pregnant, you spermless fuck.”

“The baby will have green eyes,” Adriano growls. “January’s eyes are green and mine are green—”

“That’s not how genes work,” Doc says, leaning back in his dining chair. “Anyway, I tested myself last week. I’m blasting boys like it’s my job. We’re talking two hundred and fifty million in *four milliliters* of cum. You assholes don’t stand a chance—”

“You have *not* measured that right,” Bobby interrupts. “You’re bullshitting about your jizz the way you bullshit about everything else, you no good, lazy...”

As Doc and Bobby argue back and forth, with plenty of commentary from Adriano and Eli, I anticipate the entire evening being wasted over pointless squabbles. I wouldn't normally push so hard, but this matters to me. The happiness of my future children—not having children if it means them being unhappy—is too important to let my men behave this way. I need answers and I need them now.

“Guys,” I say, slapping both hands on the table. “Does that mean when it comes to having kids you promise not to be weird and controlling?”

Everyone stops arguing about sperm and looks to Eli. He takes a slow sip of his scotch. “We’re...open to the idea of being less conservative with our views on child-rearing.”

“What does that mean?”

“We don’t know if we can change,” Eli says, looking around at his brothers. “Or what changes are possible, but we vow to try.”

I frown. “I don’t want to be rude but that doesn’t sound very convincing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when I first came down to this super-secret meeting, I was expecting a lot more than *we’ll try*. I mean, that’s not very specific. It could mean anything.”

Doc grins. “You’d make a great lawyer, Tits. You sure you don’t wanna go to law school instead of running some food joint? You can be the Busty Brunette Legally Blonde.”

I ignore him and look from Eli to Bobby. “What do you actually mean by *change*? What are you promising for our children?”

“That you’ll call the shots,” Bobby says. “You’ll be the mama and you can decide what you want the kids to get up to, where they’ll go to school, and what their hobbies and friendships look like.”

“We’ll help,” Adriano says, in a low rumble. “We’ll be there for you, but the practical decisions will be yours.”

A shiver goes down my spine at the thought of so much responsibility, but it’s a pleasurable one.

“Okay...” I say slowly then I point at Doc. “Another child hits our baby with a toy and makes them bleed. What do you do?”

A muscle jumps in Doc’s jaw. Bobby and Adriano exchange worried looks.

“Control my temper,” Doc says, through gritted teeth. “And check if our kid is okay and...do nothing else.”

I give him a small smile. “And what if another father tells his children not to play with ours because of our relationship structure?”

Doc opens his mouth but Eli cuts in. “We’ll engage him in a respectful conversation in which we’ll make it clear that if he continues to run his mouth about our family, he will meet a very unfortunate end.”

I groan. “You can’t—”

“This is what I mean, *bella*.” Eli sits up in his chair and flattens his stuck-up hair. He adjusts his tie, rolls down his sleeves, and suddenly looks every inch the Italian prince. His dark brown gaze locks on mine. “We will compromise. We are willing to be calm and gentle with our children, but we will not be calm and gentle with the world. Our family comes first. Always. And any threat made against us by someone who would like to think they have power over our family must be dealt with.”

“I thought we were moving away from illegal activity?”

“We’re not gonna cut some asshole dad’s hands off and drop him in the Hudson,” Doc says. “But when it comes to putting pricks in their place, we have a responsibility to take care of our own.”

“Think about it, JJ,” Bobby says. “If someone was picking on Margot or your brothers, wouldn’t you want them taken care of? Looked after?”

My thoughts go to my stepmother, the only person who really picked on us Whitehall kids. To be honest, if Eli had marched through our front door and told Corinne to stop being mean to us or he’d ruin her life...I would have liked it.

“I guess I can understand,” I say. “But what about dating?”

Identical frowns crumple their faces.

“Not us,” I explain. “Our children. When they hit puberty, what are you going to do? Especially if they’re girls?”

There is a short silence, but I know it’s something they must have discussed because all of their jaws tighten. “This is what I mean, if you’re going to do the whole, *I’ve got a shotgun and I’m not afraid to use it* thing our girls will suffer. They should be as free to explore as the boys.”

“I agree,” Bobby says.

“So do I,” Adriano adds.

I beam at him. “Really?”

“Of course. As long as I can show all our kids how to use a knife and throw a punch, they can do whatever they want.”

“That’s amazing,” I say happily, then turn to Eli and Doc. “What about you two?”

“I will respect that our daughter will do whatever she wants,” Eli says stiffly. “Though it will be challenging.”

“I know, but we can get through that if you’re willing to talk.” I turn to Doc. “Nico?”

He makes a face. “I dunno, Tits. I want little Domenica to have fun and whatever—”

“*Domenica?!?*”

“Or whatever we decide to call her. But I was a pig to chicks in high school. I don’t want anyone treating my baby

that way.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have been such a jerk. And if we’re respectful to our children and teach them to value themselves and *ignore* idiot teenage boys who have a point to prove, I’m sure they’ll make better decisions than anyone who slept with you.”

Eli and Bobby laugh.

“Fine,” Doc says with a scowl. “But she’s going on birth control as soon as she *thinks* about banging someone.”

“I agree.”

“So, it’s decided?” Eli asks. “Are you prepared to commit to starting a family with us?”

I lick my lips trying to think over my last concerns. “There are just so many things that could happen. What if our baby’s gay? Or trans? Or really into... I don’t know Pokémon or something lame that embarrasses you?”

Eli gives a dry smile. “*Bella*, you can’t anticipate every possible problem. A chance for healthy children who look like their mother is all we’re asking for.”

“Or at least kids that don’t look like Adriano,” Doc interjects.

I press a hand to my heart. I feel so different from that girl who first arrived at Velvet House, she might as well have been another person. Back then I was little more than a baby in high heels and lingerie. Now I’m a woman. A year has passed, but I’m older in ways that have nothing to do with time. I’ve become a real and whole person, someone who knows what she wants. And looking at Eli, Doc, Bobby, and Adriano I know I can say no. That I want five more years before children. Ten. Yet I can feel the idea calling to me. Small kissy lips and long lashes. Smooth skin and the joy of knowing I created something new and wonderful to take care of.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s have a baby.”

Eli goes still. Bobby grins. Doc looks like someone's hit him on the head with a frying pan. Adriano gives a curt nod, green eyes shining. "So, it begins."

"I guess it does," I say, a great lightness spreading through me.

"Then there's something you should see." Adriano looks at the others. "All at once."

I watch, confused as every man reaches for his collar. Bobby and Eli open their shirts, Doc and Adriano yank the material aside and I see each of them have a similar mark over their left pectoral muscle. A sword through an apple.

"What...?" I lean forward. "Adriano gave you all new tattoos?"

"For you," Adriano says gruffly.

"For all of us," Eli corrects. "Take a closer look."

Doc, the nearest turns, and I see the design is exquisite, as all of Adriano's tattoos are. The detail on the sword handle and the shadow and shine on the apple are amazing.

"Read what's written on the side of the blade," Doc says.

I stand and go to him. Leaning in I see that right above where the sword enters the apple there's a tiny word in curling script *January*.

My throat closes over. "Oh my gosh..."

I move to Eli and see my name engraved on his chest too. "You...you have my name on you."

"Yes," Eli says quietly. "Forever."

My heart squeezes so hard that I feel dizzy. "But you barely have any tattoos."

He nods. "It's a commitment, *bella*. Something beyond words to show what you mean to us."

"And if you should be impressed by anyone, it's me," Doc says, tapping his chest. "I've been saving this space for a

decade and a half.”

“You’re amazing,” I say, tears coming to my eyes. “You’re all amazing.”

“We know,” Adriano says, getting to his feet. “Now it’s your turn.”

My mouth falls open. “You’re letting me get a tattoo?”

“I was against it,” Eli says with a scowl. “I was overruled.”

I let out a little squeal. “Oh my gosh, I’m so excited!”

“Told you,” Doc says to Bobby. “Where do you want it, Tits?”

I look around in amazement. “Now?”

“Why not?” Adriano places a big black machine on the table. “You don’t have to get the apple—”

“I want to,” I say at once. “I want the same as all of you.”

“Not possible,” Adriano growls. “Your design is more delicate, with four swords.”

“One for each of you,” I breathe. “What about the apple? Is it for Orchard? Or is it the official fruit of Velvet House or something?”

“My God, she really doesn’t care about getting a tattoo,” Eli says darkly, moving toward the bar. “The apple is for you. It’s the fruit of January.”

“And it’s the same color as your lips,” Bobby adds. “We thought it was the perfect way to show you that you’re ours. The center of our hearts and we’ll spend the rest of our lives taking care of you.”

“The others thought that,” Doc says with a smirk. “I wanted a couple of melons, but I was overruled.”

I ignore him, focusing on Adriano, the man who swore he’d never ink me. “Can I really have a tattoo?”

Adriano inclines his head. “It’s a sign that we can compromise, Pryntsesa. Or whatever you want to call it.”

I understand what he means. It's evidence that the four cold, cruel men who've fallen in love with me can change, even more than they already have. Tears burn in the backs of my eyes, and I move toward Adriano, kissing him on his scratchy, scarred cheek. "I love you."

"And I love you," he rasps. "More than I've ever loved anything. More than the whole world."

"Simp alert," Doc mutters.

I reach past Adriano and swat him.

"So where should I get my apple?" I ask. I look at Eli, still refilling his scotch at the bar. Surely Mr. Control Freak will be the one in charge of where my tattoo goes? But he just shakes his head.

"That's your decision, *bella*."

"Don't take too long deciding," Doc says. "Eli was hard enough to convince as it is."

"January will look beautiful with a tattoo," Eli says shortly. "But the thought of you in pain..."

"I can handle pain."

I meant it as a throwaway line, but shame passes over the faces of each of my men. I press a hand to my heart, but I don't say anything. With everything that's happened, I've done a lot of thinking about what they did to me when I was their prisoner. I've forgiven them, but I can't pretend they didn't hurt me or scare me. They did. And the guilt each of them carries for that is their own. Eventually, I hope they'll come to forgive themselves too.

"January," Bobby says quietly. "Where do you want the ink?"

I close my eyes and try to picture where my tattoo could go. On my shoulder? On my lower back? Emmy at Dreams has a tattoo on her chest that looks amazing, but I don't know that I'm cool enough to pull that off. I want something subtle, that won't be in every single photo I ever take.

Then it comes to me.

“How about on the back of my right arm?” I ask Adriano. “Just above the elbow?”

He nods once, but from the way his green eyes are gleaming, I can tell he’s pleased. He gestures to his chair and once I’m settled against the velvet seat, he turns his tattooing machine on and pulls on a pair of black latex gloves with a practiced motion.

The sight of the needle makes my stomach flip. “How big will it be? My tattoo?”

Adriano pauses. “Pryntsesa, do you trust me to make you more beautiful?”

I nod.

“Then it will be as big as it needs to be.”

“Do you want a drink?” Bobby asks. He’s rebuttoning his shirt and looks far more nervous than I feel.

“Alcohol isn’t a good idea before a tat,” Doc says. “It thins the blood. Makes it hurt more.”

His calm, matter-of-fact tone sparks an ancient irritation. In the last year, I’ve learned many things about Doc. That he speaks fluent Russian, that he wins every video game, card game, or game of chance he plays, that he makes perfect gnocchi Genovese though he hates cooking with every fiber in his body. He’s a genius, a borderline sociopath who’s capable of genuine sweetness... Yet one thing I can never confirm is whether the well of medical knowledge he pulls out whenever something physical happens is self-taught or the product of an actual degree.

“Nico,” I say, turning toward him. “For the last time, are you a real doctor?”

My handsome, blond lover smiles wide as the sun, and I expect him to deny it like he always does. Then he winks at me. “Yes. And no.”

Adriano takes my right arm, and a burst of nerves shoots through me. I focus even harder on Doc's face to steady myself. "So, you are a doctor?"

"I have a medical degree from an Italian university," he says grinning. "I did rounds there too. Qualified and everything."

"Ready, Pryntsesa?" Adriano asks.

"Sure," I say, my eyes still trained on Doc. "So, you are a *real* doctor?"

He shrugs. "I studied under a fake name, Tits. So, I am and I'm not."

The needle kisses my skin. I barely feel it. "Why would you do all that work just to throw it all away?"

"I had nothing better to do. And it's not like the coursework was hard. I showed up hungover half the time.

"Oh my gosh," I whisper. "That's totally insane."

"True," Doc says lazily. "But if that turns you on, I have a Ph.D. in biochem from Johns Hopkins, too."

"Congratu...*lations*..." Adriano's needle tracks up my arm and I shut my eyes.

"Are you okay?" four voices ask at once.

I nod. It stings, but not too badly. Far less than when I get a Brazilian. I close my eyes and take deep breaths thinking about how incredible it will be to have this matching bond with my men. How cool it'll be to show the girls at Dreams. And how annoyed Corinne will be to see it at the Bianchi wedding. It'll almost make it worth it that she's there. The minutes pass quickly, the twitchy burn moving up my skin.

"She's sitting well," Eli says sternly.

"Women always do," Adriano replies.

I open my eyes. "Really?"

“Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, women sit better than men. Men are babies.”

I smile. “Who was the worst out of Doc, Bobby, and Eli?”

“Eli,” Adriano says without hesitation.

Eli scowls.

“He was the fucking worst,” Doc says with a laugh. “Twitching all over the place. Bobby and I almost had to hold him down, Tits.”

“That wasn’t necessary,” Eli grumbles. “And you were only fine because you love pain.”

“I do,” Doc says easily. “But so does, Tits. I bet her little pussy’s dripping.”

All eyes turn toward me, and I shift in my seat. Doc’s right, but I don’t want to admit it. This is a loaded enough situation without adding sex. But I can feel the tension building within me. I kept my promise, and I haven’t touched myself since I went down on Eli all those hours ago and the slow licks of pain feel like a continuation of that sweet torture. I’ve already found myself wondering whether I could stroke Adriano’s heavy cock while he works. I wouldn’t want to ruin his technique but the thought of him all distracted and frustrated is...delicious.

“She is turned on,” Doc says, his voice taking on a familiar rasp. But before I can tell him to control himself, Adriano clears his throat. “Quiet, Valente. Tattoo comes first.”

Doc folds his arms across himself, sticking out his pouty lower lip, but he goes quiet, and I return to my meditative silence, imagining how I’ll feel once I’m a girl with a tattoo.

“Can someone serve the parmigiana?” I ask, with a sudden realization.

“Food is no longer on our list of priorities tonight,” Eli says. “Focus on how you feel right now.”

“And what we’re gonna do to you once that inks in your skin,” Doc says ominously.

And I do. I think and I dream, and I wonder how this is my life and what color my future children’s eyes will be.

An hour or so later Adriano turns off his machine. “Complete, *Pryntsesa*.”

I sit ramrod still as he coats it in a layer of petroleum jelly. I still can’t believe it’s done. Doc, Bobby, and Eli gather around me, and Doc gives a low whistle. “God, that’s fucking hot.”

“You look great,” Bobby says enthusiastically. “Perfect.”

“It’s more than adequate,” Eli murmurs. “Stand and look in the mirror, *bella*.”

I know the mirror he means. The full-length one with the gilt frame that I’ve always avoided if I can. It’s huge and everything reflected in it looks slightly different from reality. Brighter and darker at the same time. I stand, trembling slightly, and cross the carpeted floor to the mirror. Avoiding my own gaze, I turn and examine the back of my right arm. My heart flips over when I see the design. It’s *beautiful*. Smaller than the other guys, smaller than it felt when Adriano was working on it. A tiny apple, stuck through with four swords.

“One for each of you,” I say, tracing a finger in the air above them. “Are your names...?”

But as I lean in, I can see them, inked in minuscule letters along the blade.

Domenico. Roberto. Elliot. Adriano.

My eyes fill with tears. “It’s so beautiful.”

“*You’re* beautiful,” Eli corrects. “But the design takes nothing away from you.”

My men gather behind me in the mirror, pulling their shirts aside again so that all five of our new tattoos are reflected

back at us. I smile at myself. I look like a queen, tall and regal with my handsome men behind me. Proud Doc, Charming Eli, Stoic Adriano, Kind Bobby. I feel a sense of security and power flow through me like it's been given by someone else.

I am the woman who runs this house, I think. And I am safe and powerful and loved.

At that moment, I make up my mind. I find Doc's blue gaze in the mirror. "I want to do Orchard."

"Huh?"

"Tonight," I say clearly. "Before we start trying for a baby. I want to take Orchard and sleep with all of you at the same time."

Doc's face cracks into an evil smile. "You're so fucking on, Tits."



CHAPTER SIX

January Whitehall

THE ORCHARD DRIPS onto my tongue, tasting as it did the first time the guys gave it to me: a Jolly Rancher, artificial apple flavor. But the difference between that time and this couldn't be starker. I'm not on my knees in front of four strangers, held still only by the threat of violence. I'm lying in Eli Morelli's California King bed, fully clothed, Doc's hand gentle on my neck. He tips the last of the tiny vial onto my tongue, then kisses me softly.

“Buckle up, Tesorina. You're in for a hell of a ride.”

What a difference a year makes, I think and swallow the last of the aphrodisiac that both made and broke my men.

Orchard is the drug Doc invented and Mr. Parker killed for. Pleasure and pain in one sweet liquid. Discovering Orchard should have made Velvet House rich, but it has a fatal flaw. It reacts terribly with a common food stabilizer, making your throat close. Doc's sister almost died when she ate ketchup after taking Orchard and the reaction can't be fixed. It's why Doc refused to sell the drug's formula to Mr. Parker, afraid of how reckless he might have been with it.

“How do you feel?” Bobby asks, shifting nervously at the foot of the bed.

He didn't want me to take Orchard, worried that I'm already too stressed from my tattoo or that I'll accidentally eat something that will react with the drug.

“Calm your tits,” Doc snaps. “January knows the deal. For the next few days, it’s paleo or nothing.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I tell Bobby. “It’ll be like a food challenge!”

Bobby looks unconvinced but Adriano smiles at me across the room. “I’ll bring you deer meat, my *Pryntsesa*.”

“Yeah, I’ll be giving her meat too,” Doc says, running a finger down my arm. “You feel anything yet?”

I close my eyes and I don’t know if it’s a placebo effect, but I could swear spirals are going down my spine. “I...don’t know.” As soon as the words are out of my mouth my pussy draws tight sending a bright, almost violent sensation rushing through me. I arch my back.

“Oh my *gossssssssh!*”

“Yeah, that’s what I wanna hear.” Doc hauls up the hem of my dress and then he’s between my legs, licking me. No hesitation, no tenderness, his lips close around my pussy and suck. I grip Doc’s messy blond hair and scream. This always feels good but, my flower is molten hot, and Doc’s thick, eager tongue is like the best vibrator on earth. Better. It feels like I’m already mid-orgasm, and the sensation is only getting stronger and stronger. I babble nonsense words, clawing at Doc hard enough to hurt but he doesn’t care. As he told Eli—as he’ll tell anyone—he likes pain.

On the corners of my vision, my men gather around the bed, Adriano unzipping his fly, Bobby pulling off his shirt, Eli undoing his cufflinks. It’s so sexy, the threat of all their male aggression; their desire.

As I grind uselessly on Doc’s face, I make eye contact with Eli. The corner of his mouth kicks up.

“You little whore,” he says in his honeyed Italian accent. “We’re going to pound your little cunt until you can’t walk.”

At that, I finish, screaming and shrieking as Doc’s tongue plunges between my lips and deep inside me. I throw my head

back into Eli's pillow and feel it happen, the release I refuse to call *squirting*. A collective groan goes through the room.

Doc gives a greedy moan and drinks me down like I'm vodka. I can feel him pushing into the mattress as though he's fucking it and when he rises, swiping a tattooed hand over his mouth, I wait for him to plunge inside me. Instead, he moves across the bed. "Basher? Get in here."

A naked Bobby is immediately above me, inside me. His body is so heavily muscled it's like a living wall and when he shoves his thick cock between my legs I scream. I feel like a ripe mission fig, split open and plundered, my juices slicking both of us.

"*Slut*," Bobby mutters in my ear, sending a second wave of heat through me. Bobby's rarely mean, but when he is, it's such a turn-on. He hates himself afterward, but maybe that's part of the fun.

Bobby starts pounding, and the swirling heat burns through me, mixing with the Orchard and nearly lifting the top of my head through the roof.

"This is so amazing," I hear myself chanting. "It's so, so good! I love it. I love it. I love all of you. *I love this*."

I find Doc kneeling on the mattress, his cock in his hand. "Thank... You. For. Making me. Feel... *Oh my God*... Like. This," I say through Bobby's vicious thrusts.

Doc smirks down at me. "You might wanna thank the man inside you, Tits."

"I mean the Orchard," I gasp, but he already knows that. His hand works its way between me and Bobby and finds the front of my silk dress.

"Careful of the tat," Adriano snarls.

"Fuck yourself, Bigfoot," Doc says and tears my dress open. My breasts bounce free, and the tickling drag of loose silk over my nipples makes me tighten around Bobby's cock.

“Oh fuck,” he grunts, understanding before I do. I’m whimpering as I come, my eyes rolling back in my head when Doc grips my jaw and shoves his dick in my mouth. I sputter, my teeth scraping his shaft, but he doesn’t care.

“Enough talking,” he hisses as Bobby hammers inside me. “Suck my dick, Tesorina. Be the good little cunt you were born to be.”

So I suck. I suck as Bobby kneels, wrapping my thighs around him like a sweater tied to his waist, and thrusts into me with every ounce of strength in his body.

“You fuckin’ whore. You little slut,” he moans, and even with Doc in my mouth I can see Bobby, the shame and pleasure rushing over his face like clouds, and I realize he’s about to come. I don’t want him to pull out. I want him to finish inside me. To feel what it is to have a man commit that most animalistic of sexual finales.

“Roberto,” Eli says, and I moan my dismay, sure he’s about to tell Bobby to pull out, as he has so many times before.

Bobby freezes. Even Doc stops pushing the head of his cock into my mouth. We all look at Eli, comically frozen in our porno setting. Then Eli smiles. “Finish inside the whore.”

Another second of stillness in which the lack of sensation hurts, actually *hurts*. I jerk my hips against Bobby, trying to force more stimulation. He chokes out a laugh then fucks me again, hips slapping into mine. A moment later he’s there, bucking and pouring inside me.

“That’s it,” Doc hisses, massaging my throat. “You like that cum, Tesorina? You like it filling up your tiny snatch?”

In truth, I can’t really feel it, but when Bobby pulls away, muttering and moaning, the hurt between my legs comes back, only twice as bad. I’m so empty. I’m so horny. I look up at Doc, desperately trying to communicate that I need more. His dick, his tongue, his hand, anyone’s hand, anyone’s dick, anything just between my legs. I need to be fucked, fucked, *fucked*.

Doc laughs in my face. “You tragic little bitch, you’d stab your sister for a lay right now. We should tie you up and watch you suffer.”

“Nooooorgh,” I gasp around his penis, humping my legs up and down the mattress.

I’ve taken Orchard before, been made to feel this psychotic lust before, but I was able to resist it last time. Maybe because I was a virgin. Now that I know how good sex feels I need it more than air. But Doc is perfectly content to laugh at me as he pushes his heavy, perfect dick deeper into my mouth. It still feels amazing, my lips growing more sensitive with every wet thrust, but it won’t make me come. I shove my hands between my legs and feel Bobby’s thick semen sliding out of me. But as soon as I stroke myself, fingers circle around my wrists pulling them away. Tears burst from my eyes. “Norrnghhh! Morgghh!”

Cackling, Doc taps my forehead. “How much do you want to get railed, Tesorina? What would you give me for it?”

Anything, I try to say, but it comes out all wrong. My cunt is swollen, burning, so, so empty. I need dick. I need sex. All the words that I find so hard to say in real life would come easily now, but I can’t talk because Doc’s in my face. He reaches down and gives my nipple a vicious pinch. “That’s it you dumb slut, cry for me.”

I didn’t realize I was crying but as soon as he says it, I feel the tears running down my cheeks like the cum running from my pussy. I feel broken, helpless, pathetic, and yet...

I love it.

I love the names. The indignity. The pain. Orchard is taking me higher but that’s not the only thing. Under and through this humiliation is an excitement that’s ecstasy. Every Christmas morning and every birthday and every unexpected sunrise in one. And as Doc grins down at me, I can see he knows it too.

This is who I am. A girl who loves being treated this way. Who likes sex, depraved, unhinged, ugly sex. And knowing that is like having a bird flying free in my soul.

Thank you, I think and maybe I'm crazy but in Doc's cornflower blue eyes I see a response. I love you, you big-titted nightmare. Like nothing else on earth.

“Out of the way, Valente.”

The bed tips and I see Eli climbing toward me, gloriously, perfectly naked. He's hard as a spike, his shaft dark with blood. A tremor goes through me. It's a weapon. The only one I need.

He snaps a finger at Doc. “Move.”

To my surprise, Doc obeys. I flex my aching jaw for a second, but then Eli grasps my hips, flipping me onto my knees. He tears away the last of my dress, exposing me entirely.

“You want sex?” Eli asks in a cold controlled voice.

“Yes, Sir. Yes, master. Yes, Daddy,” I babble, needing to give Eli what he wants so I can get what I want.

Eli slaps my ass and I gasp. The Orchard is whirring at full speed through me, making even the uncomfortable gorgeous. He spans me again and my flower contracts.

“Please,” I beg. “I'll be a good girl. I'll do whatever you want, please just *fuck me*.”

Eli pauses. “Say that again.”

“Fuck me,” I wail, feeling zero shame about the bad word. “Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me. Fuck me like a whore. Fuck me like the dirty little girl I am. I need your cock, Daddy, I need you to fill me up and make my slutty pussy feel better.”

A shocked silence, then Adriano makes a choking sound.

“Jesus H Christ,” Bobby says under his breath as Doc laughs aloud. I turn and see genuine shock and delight on Eli's face. We smile at each other, and all pretense breaks open.

Then his face hardens once more. “Whatever my little whore desires. Adriano, lube.”

Adriano tosses him a small plastic bottle. As Eli applies it to himself, I shake my hips back and forth with anticipation. I don’t know why he needs it, I’m soaking, and Bobby is still very much...there. But when Eli grabs a handful of my hair and presses into me, I understand. His thick head isn’t penetrating my flower, it’s pushing into my asshole.

“Oh my gosh,” I pant. “*Yes, Daddy.*”

Eli growls as he slides into me, the tingling, stretching sweetness, so good I whine like an animal, bending my spine and presenting myself to him. We were made to fit together. My flower still feels empty but being full back there makes it okay. Good even. As Eli fucks my asshole, I rub back against him and the stimulation spreads into my clit.

“Christ, you’re filthy, January Whitehall,” Doc says from across the bed. “I never met a girl who liked getting done in the ass so much and I’ve met about ten thousand hookers.”

I push my face into the mattress to conceal my shame. That’s another thing I had to learn about myself. That I like anal sex. That I can come from it. That I am a girl who likes cooking and Disney movies and getting used by the men I love.

“Hold still,” Eli says, pulling on my hair. “Your needy little cunt will be full soon enough.”

Before I can question that, Eli turns us over. Now he’s beneath me, his cock settled deep in my ass. I look at the end of the bed and see Adriano staring down at me, naked and scarred. A thrill of terror goes through me.

I love Adriano but unsmiling in the dimly lit bedroom, his massive cock in his hand, he looks like an axe murderer. Like the creepy janitor who used to stalk my ballet class. I pull in a breath, squirming back on Eli’s cock. Somehow under Adriano’s judgmental green gaze, I feel more genuinely disgusting than all of Doc’s insults have managed.

Adriano seems to know it too, his mouth pulling to the side to expose his gold tooth.

“Hello, Pryntsesa,” he says, in the low tone that used to scare me senseless. “You need a fuck?”

I shake my head rapidly.

He pumps his hand up and down his shaft and I watch a glassy bead appear at the head. “Too bad, bitch. You’ve teased me with your big tits and tight ass long enough.”

His free hand reaches for me, tracing a line down my soaking pussy. I whimper, my asshole pulling tight around Eli.

Adriano circles my clit with lazy, workworn fingers. “You think you’re too sweet for me, huh? Too rich?”

Not at all, but much like Bobby wanting to be mean, this is a dark fantasy Adriano has. He wants me to treat him like a monster. To act like the only way he could be with me is by force. Only we usually play this game alone. Now I’m so aware of Doc behind me, Eli beneath me, Bobby watching from the corner of the bed.

The Orchard pulses inside me, making me braver. Letting me say what Adriano needs me to say. “You’re so ugly. You’re ugly and mean and disgusting. I don’t want to be with someone like you. Please just...leave me alone.”

He laughs, the sound so cold it sends another shudder through me. He moves closer, a shadow falling across my naked, spread-wide body.

“I’m going to tear you open,” he promises, kneeling between my legs. “I’ll break you into a thousand pieces and scatter them to the wind.”

“No,” I beg when what I mean is *yes, yes, yes*.

“You’ve already got a dick in your asshole,” Adriano says, his electric green eyes boring into mine. “You’re not a person. You’re nothing but a pretty face and three holes for men to fill with their cocks.”

I pulse as he pushes inside me, my soaking pussy accepting his giant cock without question. “Stop! I mean it, I can’t have someone like you inside me!”

“Too late,” Adriano snarls, seating himself deeper. “I’m gonna make you cream all over me, bitch. You’ll come begging for me to fuck you harder.”

I’ve done this before. Two men. But it’s always been Doc and Bobby or Bobby and Eli. Never Adriano. Not with his huge, impossibly thick penis. Maybe Adriano’s worried too because he stops about halfway. Not moving. Not saying anything.

“Holy shit,” Bobby mutters. “That’s so fucking hot.”

I moan my agreement; it feels so good to be trapped between them. I start to writhe, the most minuscule movements filling me with that orgasmic perma-bliss. I could do this forever. I *will* do this forever.

“Why’s she moaning like that?” Eli pants.

“She’s fried,” Doc says, somewhere to my left. “Totally dick crazy. Keep going, Adri. Ram her wide.”

But Adriano’s eyes are closed, his face tight with worry.

“Adriano,” Eli barks. “Fuck her cunt. Now.”

“But—”

“She needs it,” Eli and Doc say at once and I moan incoherently, hoping he believes them.

He must, because he begins to stroke inside me, filling my overheated brain with pleasure.

“Good,” Eli snarls. He lifts my hips and surges upward, both of them fucking me at once. Time seems to slow, as they slide back and forth, I gasp, moan, grip sheets and hair, drip arousal, and come again and again. My whole body is slick, my mind accelerated into some other place. I obey all orders given to me, begging for Eli’s cum as he pounds my asshole, pleading for my life as Adriano presses a hand to my throat. I

bask in the gaze of Doc and Bobby, their insults, and their praise. I feel like I'm on stage. The lead actress in the dirtiest off-Broadway show on earth.

Eli grips my hips as he finishes, his teeth in my neck, fucking me faster and faster.

"I'm filling your ass," he says with a groan. "You can feel it, can't you, *bella*?"

"Uh-huh," I lie, more concerned with Adriano petting my clit as he slowly moves inside me. As soon as Eli's gone, Adriano flips me on top of him, his hands tight on my breasts. "Fuck yourself on me, little slut. Ride my cock like it's all you're good for."

I obey, rocking my hips and bouncing as hard and fast as I can. It's not enough, soon Adriano's lifting me and pushing me back onto him, using me like his personal fuck-doll. His face goes tight, twisting as he empties himself inside me.

"Good girl," he pants.

I tumble off him, feeling like a discarded gymnast and I've barely settled into the mattress, cum leaking down my thighs when a new man climbs onto me.

"Hi, Tits." Doc shoves into me, as though trying to keep every drop of cum from spilling out. His face is hard with lust and as my overstimulated body goes into overdrive, he slaps my right breast. I gasp, the sensation like cold water splashing over me. I grip his shoulders, his wiry muscles flexing like guitar strings beneath my fingers. "Again."

He slaps me harder, then leans forward and whispers in my ear.

"You know why I'm last?"

I shake my head.

"Because I'm pumping all their cum out of you, Tits. That's what the flare on the head of my dick is for. Sperm competition. I'm gonna nut in you last and you're gonna have my baby. You're gonna be mine."

I can't tell if he's serious, or playing underhanded as always, but I don't care. I bite his chest, pull his hair, grind up and down on his cock. He's such an asshole and I love it. Cum runs down the curve of my ass, sweat slicks my breasts and still we fuck like beasts, the other guys watching, drinking whiskey, taking drags on a cigar.

Doc lifts me, spreading my thighs so wide that the only thing connecting us is his hands on my thighs and his cock in my flower. And when I'm so dizzy and dry-mouthed I can barely make a noise, when I'm sure I'm going to have to call for an end to this just to get my breath, Doc throws me onto all fours and hammers his way home.

"January," he pants, eyes rolling back in his head. "January, you... Me..."

Us, I think. I look up and see Bobby, Adriano, and Eli, I smile at them as one last wave of pleasure washes over me. An orgasm as small and sweet as a strawberry. And as Doc collapses between my legs, I close my eyes, relieved and satiated, with only the beginning of worry prickling my brain.

Suppose I *am* pregnant, or about to be, with the Bianchi wedding in less than six days. Whatever the case...everything is about to change.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Bobby Bassilotta

“**N**ERVOUS, SLUGGER?”

I ignore Doc, folding my tie around my neck as slowly and evenly as possible. I’ve already redone it five times.

“God, I look good clean-shaven.” Doc swaggers toward the mirror. He studies his skinny tie, velvet jacket, and tight suit pants before caressing his jaw. He flings a casual elbow into my chest, and I lose my careful fold.

“Fucking asshole!” I give up on the tie, pulling it off and stuffing it into my suit pocket. I’ll do what I always do: Get Eli to start it and then pull it over my head like a little kid. Better that than fucking it up.

Black tie events always make me itchy—why can’t I just stay home with a six-pack and watch NHL?—but this one takes the fucking cake. A mafioso extravaganza that includes our first encounter with our mortal enemy in twelve months. It’ll be a miracle if nothing goes wrong, and I don’t believe in miracles.

“Where’s January?” Doc asks.

I don’t want to reply because fuck him, but part of me knows his obnoxiousness is just nerves. And in the last few days, he’s barely slept because he’s been so focused on security, checking and re-checking surveillance, guns, backup transport, and scanning the guest list for potential threats.

“She’s still in her room,” I say. “Her makeup should be almost done.”

“Good.” Doc glances at the stairs as though expecting her to come down. “This’ll be the first big event we go to together.”

At first, I think he means the two of them, but he’s grinning at me in a way that says he means all five of us, which is sweet. “Shame it can’t be something less insane,” I say.

“True. Still though.” Doc gets a dreamy look on his face. “It’ll be so great to see her sing.”

On that, we can all agree. January’s performing the song for the first dance, *The Way You Look Tonight* by Sinatra. Originally, Bianchi wanted *My Heart Will Go On*, from the Titanic movie, but January politely asked for another song, because “Only Celine can do that one justice.”

She’s been practicing for ages, but I never get tired of hearing her slow, sweet version of Frank’s wedding clanger. I’m looking forward to seeing her stand up in front of everyone and perform, though if her family and Parker weren’t there it would be a hundred times better.

The thought of Parker sends sweat surging to my pits. I extend my arms determined not to sweat into my white shirt. I’m aware of my reputation as the scaredy cat of Velvet House and I’m determined not to bitch about the wedding.

Eli’s right, we had no choice but to attend. Snubbing Bianchi is asking to be cut out of a billion business deals. It’s only one night. We’ll be fine. Probably. Definitely.

Adriano comes clumping in, wearing one of the suits they make for NBA players. Doc whoops and cheers but I think he looks terrible. Adri’s at his best when he’s knee-deep in dirt and deer guts. Formalwear always makes him look like a caveman that got unfrozen ten seconds before he’s due in court. He seems to know it too, rolling his eyes at me and heading straight for the bar. He picks up Eli’s crystal decanter of scotch and drinks straight from it.

“Calm down,” Doc warns. “We need to stay sharp for this thing.”

But Adriano ignores him and keeps swigging from the decanter until Eli himself walks in looking like James Bond in his tux. He studies us with unsurprised irritation. “Of course, this is where I find you.”

“We’re ready, aren’t we?” Adriano shoots back. “And you can’t make us go to this thing sober.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Eli holds his hand out for the decanter and takes a drink. Smiling, he passes it to me. “Need help with your tie?”

“Yup,” I say, pulling the tie from my pocket. We swap, my Armani tie for the scotch, and by the time I’ve had a few swallows the tie is perfectly knotted. I slide it over my head feeling lame and grateful. I hand the decanter to Doc who refuses.

I frown at him, my expression mirrored on the face of the others.

“You’re not drinking?” Eli asks. “You?”

Doc raises his hands. “Is that so shocking?”

“Yes,” we say in unison.

Adriano narrows his brows. “What’s going on? You’re on something aren’t you?”

“No!”

All three of us keep staring at him until he raises his hands. “Fine. I’ve taken a *small* amount of blotter acid.”

“...There it is,” Eli says to the ceiling.

“And molly,” Doc adds. “And ketamine. And half an Adderall. And I’ve got backups in case it all goes to shit.”

“For fucks’ sake Doc... Where’s the logic in that?”

“Fuck you, I’m nervous and I can’t get drunk ’til we’re at the reception and I know Parker isn’t gonna do anything.” Doc

runs a hand through his shaggy blond hair. “We’re taking our girl into the eye of the hurricane. Who knows what might happen?”

It’s surprising to hear Doc say exactly what I’m thinking. Though he is by his own admission, high as balls. The four of us stand there feeling the weight of his words. Who knows what might happen? With the Whitehalls, with Parker, with anything?

There’s a small knock on the door.

“Guys,” January calls. “Can I come in?”

All of us straighten, the air of confused uncertainty vanishing along with our frowns. None of us want to worry her.

“Get in here, Tits,” Doc yells. “I wanna touch your dress. I want to stroke it like a cat.”

I groan. “Yup, that’ll be the molly.”

The door creaks open and January sticks her head around it. Her hair is piled on her head in an elaborate crown and her pink gown is covered in shimmering crystals, lightly scattered on the top but a rainbow forest at the hem. She turns, revealing her glittering train and pale back. “What do you think?”

“You’re stunning, Pryntsesa,” Adriano growls.

“Perfect,” Eli adds as Doc smooths a hand over her middle. “Mmm, silky *and* bumpy. *Textural.*”

January smiles but her color is off. She’s white underneath her rosy cheeks, and she’s shaking a little, you can see it in her chandelier earrings.

“Are you worried, JJ?” I ask.

She nods.

“About the singing or Mr. Parker? Or your stepmother?”

She grows paler. “All three?”

“That makes sense,” I say, but I can’t think of anything to add. No matter how she feels, January needs to go to this wedding. We all do.

Eli touches her back. “Would you like a whiskey or a glass of champagne, *bella*?”

“Um... Maybe not?”

I feel myself smirk. Ever since she gave us the go-ahead to start trying for a family the four of us have been chasing her around non-stop. Doc says we’re acting stupid, that it usually takes months to get a girl pregnant, but that’s not slowing him down either. I hope we have daughters first, little girls with curls and big round eyes. We could use more girls around here.

“I don’t think you’re pregnant yet, my ruby,” Eli says gently. “And even if you are, you can still have a little wine.”

January shakes her head. “You shouldn’t drink before a performance. It’s not good for your voice.”

“Okay, darling.”

A louder knock on the door.

“Boys,” Gretzky calls. “It’s time to get moving.”

“Shit,” Doc says, echoing my thoughts. “Here we fucking go.”

It’s a bitterly cold afternoon, with dark rain clouds welling overhead: Bad luck for a wedding, as my mom used to say. But it’s not *my* wedding. We practically run to the limo and January sits shivering between me and Doc, rubbing her bare arms against our shoulders to warm up. Sal is driving and Eli orders him to turn up the heat before pouring everyone but Doc a whiskey from the minibar.

The alcohol goes down like melted gold warming my insides. January hands her drink to Adriano who kisses her forehead and then downs it.

“And I thought your wedding was freezing, Tits,” Doc says with a shudder. “What inspired Bianchi to tie the knot in

this fuckin' hellmouth?"

"There were so many delays he just wanted to get it over with," Eli says, slinging a lazy arm across the back of his seat.

Doc snorts. "Romantic."

"Very. Apparently, the theme is 'Winter Wonderland.'"

We all groan. As Doc, Adriano, and Eli discuss the various assholes we're likely to run into today, I take January's freezing hand in mine.

"A few hours," I tell her. "Then we can get in the tub and soak. Or watch a movie. Anything you want."

She smiles, but I can tell her mind is miles away. I think about how good a day this would be if we were just going to a regular wedding. Able to hang out and enjoy the free booze and food and our girlfriend. I settle for imagining later tonight, the five of us on the couches in the Velvet House cinema, January sprawled in the middle, Adriano snoring after the first five minutes. All of us safe and together.

"Good," Eli mutters to his iPad. I know he's checking in with Bianchi's security. We'll be well protected for the entire time we're away from Velvet House, a fact I remind myself of over and over as we cruise along the highway behind bulletproof glass.

We pull up to St. Ignatius Cathedral with ten minutes to spare.

"Surprised this is at a Catholic church," Doc says as we climb from the limo. "I thought Yelizaveta was Russian Orthodox?"

"Fuck Russia," Adriano growls.

"She must be converting." Eli checks his phone. "We're in the tenth pew. Hurry up."

Despite the hundreds of people packed inside, the cathedral is cold as an ice box. Bianchi stands at the altar, surrounded by his ancient groomsmen. I wonder if the

bridesmaids are getting liquored up right now. They're probably young, hot Russians, like Bianchi's wife and they're gonna get their asses pinched all night by these ghouls.

We take our seats. January instantly starts shivering and is deposited between Adriano and Doc. The wooden pews are as uncomfortable as any chairs could be. I adjust my ass every five seconds and try not to think about my mom. I love her, I miss her, but when she died, I stopped getting dragged to church every Sunday and it's hard not to be grateful for that.

Ten minutes tick past, then twenty.

The guests start shuffling, the talk getting louder and louder. Bianchi doesn't look worried, but my nerves are spiking. The sooner we can get this over and done with the better.

"I'm fucking starving," Doc mutters.

"Shut up," I say, but I am too. I didn't eat breakfast and the scotch has gone straight to my head.

"Any sign of Parker?" I ask Eli.

He shakes his head.

I watch Bianchi and his groomsmen laughing at the altar. His sons are there too, I realize. Three thickset Italians in their fifties. They look happy which seems kind of fucked up to me. If my dad remarried after my mom died, I'd have shot myself through the face before I was one of his groomsmen. But whatever, maybe it's different when your dad is a mafioso.

A hum rushes through the church and music begins to play.

"Thank fuck," Doc whispers as we get to our feet.

Yelizaveta's bridesmaids are, indeed, young, and hot. They come down the aisle like a Victoria's Secret line-up and January shoots me a smile. "Enjoying the view?"

"You're the hottest woman here," I say truthfully. All the Russian chicks look like they could slit my throat and drink my blood without batting an eyelid.

The music changes and Yelizaveta appears with her father, a guy notably younger than the man waiting for her at the altar.

“Bianchi is gonna look decrepit as shit next to her,” Doc whisper-yells and Eli prods him so hard he yelps.

“She looks happy at least,” January says, and I have to agree. Despite the fact she’s marrying a guy old enough to be her grandad’s high school principal, Yelizaveta’s smile as she reaches Bianchi seems genuine. Small mercies.

The ceremony lasts an eternity, the priest making the most of the packed house to guilt trip us about not going to church more. I zone out like I always did during mass, stirring only to receive the Eucharist and do the shaking hands thing. Doc uses the opportunity to nibble January’s ear.

“You’re getting fucked to the ends of the earth after this, Tesorina. Me and the boys are gonna find all new ways to fill you with our cocks.”

“Jesus H Christ,” I mutter but it’s a pleasant enough distraction, picturing what we might do to January once the priest wraps everything up.

As Bianchi and Yelizaveta walk out arm in arm, we all breathe a sigh of relief. “No one’s getting kidnapped at this fuckin’ affair,” Doc whispers.

“Lucky them,” January says with a smile.

We filter out of the church and stand out front, stamping out frozen feet and breathing steam. Doc casts longing glances at the smokers clustered around the statue of some dead saint. “God, I want a cigarette.”

“Take some more acid,” I say sarcastically.

“I can’t or I’ll trip out.”

“So do more molly.”

“I’ll grind my teeth too hard.” Doc lets out a world-weary sigh. “You know, it’s a full-time job trying to stay fucked up at these things, Bassilotta.”

I roll my eyes.

Eli finishes a short conversation on his phone.

“Parker isn’t here,” he says, hanging up. “He must just be coming to the reception.”

“Asshole,” Adriano grumbles.

“Well, that checks out,” Doc says, hands in his pockets. “Can we get the fuck out of here and get burgers? I’m gonna die if I don’t eat.”

“Don’t be a child,” Eli says but he presses a hand to his middle. “Next time we’ll bring food in the limo. *Bella*, how are you feeling?”

January, tucked into Adriano’s side looks pale and lovely. “I’m okay, but—”

Her gaze flies over Eli’s shoulder, her mouth snapping shut.

“What?” Doc demands but I’ve already seen what’s shaken her.

January’s brothers and sister are walking toward us. It’s easy to tell the Whitehalls are siblings. They all have the same dark hair and doe eyes. The guys are good-looking but in that wet way that says they’d flinch if someone made a sudden movement. Margot, the sister, is in front, wearing a yellow dress that isn’t fancy enough for a wedding like this. Behind them, I see January’s stepmother. All three siblings are taller than her, but it doesn’t seem that way. She’s the one you look at. The one you know is in charge.

Adriano pulls January closer, but she eases away gently. “She needs a photo and I need to say hello.”

Reluctantly, Adriano releases her and him, Doc, and I move to stand close behind January like guards as Eli steps forward, hand outstretched. “Mrs. Whitehall.”

Her pretty taut face pulls into a smile. “*Elliot*.”

They shake but Corinne Whitehall's pale blue eyes are fixed on her stepdaughter. "Hello, January."

"Hi." January smiles at Margot but her sister is staring into the middle distance. All her siblings are. Maybe they're also high on blotter acid.

Corinne takes January's arm in a pincer grip and turns it to examine the tattoo on the back of her arm. "How perfectly revolting."

Doc opens his mouth and I elbow him in the ribs. January shakes her arm from Corinne's grasp. "I like my new tattoo."

Corinne's lip curls. "I'm sure you do."

Eli clears his throat. "You wanted a picture with January and her siblings?"

"I do," Corinne says, with a smile. "I've brought a photographer."

An older guy springs out from behind the Whitehall brothers, SLR camera at the ready. "Shall we shoot in front of the church?" He suggests. "With the limestone in the background for contrast?"

"Lovely," Mrs. Whitehall agrees. "Come on, January."

The four of us reluctantly watch January move to stand among her family, the photographer directing her between Margot and her oldest brother Lachlan. The Whitehalls smile the same way, nervously, with a lot of teeth. Hollywood smiles. I think of my sisters, living safely with their husbands in Ohio. When Parker killed our dad, Eli and I worked hard to bury their connection to me through new names and identities. I don't see them as often as I want to, but there's more warmth in one of our quarterly phone calls than there is in this little horror show.

The photographer rearranges the family, the boys on one side and the girls on the other and I watch as Margot shoots January a quick glance. Her face is sharper than JJ's and her

nose kicks upward as though she's somehow inherited her stepmother's looks through proximity.

"This is fucked," Doc mutters.

"Quiet," Eli says, but he looks as worried as I feel. It's just a few photos in public for appearance's sake; January's stepmother is a bloodless barracuda but what ulterior motive could she possibly have?

"Done," the photographer announces happily. "Lucky you have such a beautiful collection of children, Corinne."

Stepchildren, I think. Neglected, abused stepchildren.

Mrs. Whitehall gives him a thin smile. "Thank you, François. Well, January, I suppose that's it."

Adriano steps forward to take January's arm but she moves toward her stepmother. "You, um, told me I could have Zia Teresa's old things after we took the photo?"

Mrs. Whitehall's smile vanishes. "So, I did. Frans, go and fetch the box from our car."

François looks bummed to be ordered around, but he must have a boner for January's stepmom because he runs to do her bidding.

"Nice weather," Eli says impassively to one of January's brothers. He blinks like a stoned deer and mumbles something about the cold. Things get so awkward I'm on the verge of taking January for a walk, but the photographer returns in record time with an old wooden box. He goes to hand it to January, but I step forward to take it. It has Calderoli stamped on the side and the sight of it makes January's eyes well up. With trembling fingers, she lifts the lid. I don't know what I was expecting but it's pretty simple stuff, notebooks with loose pages, an old olive oil bottle with ceramic grapes on the side, and a plaster spoon holder. Metal stuff I assume is for cooking or cutting pasta. January lifts a little wooden thing that I recognize as a hand-carved gnocchi roller.

“Thank you,” she says to her stepmother, pressing the roller to her chest.

Mrs. Whitehall looks away, as though she can’t stand the brightness of January’s joy. “Hmm. Come, Margot. Let’s get moving, Harris, Lachlan.”

January’s siblings, still looking high as kites, turn as François clears his throat. “Corinne... Ma’am?”

“What?” she says impatiently.

“You might be forgetting the other gift...?”

Mrs. Whitehall looks to the heavens. “Oh, that. Go get it, Frans.”

As Frans dashes away again, Eli frowns. “What gift?”

“You’ll see.”

We awkwardly stand around again, looking at either the ground or the sky until François returns with a large, plastic-wrapped platter. It’s loaded with almond cookies, cannoli, profiteroles, and sugar-dusted biscotti. My stomach gives a low rumble.

“I, um, thank you,” January says, as Doc practically snatches the plate away. “...What is it?”

Mrs. Whitehall examines her nails. “The new housekeeper, Rosaelia, wanted to make some of Teresa’s recipes before they were returned to you. Some Italian superstition. I don’t know.”

“Oh.” January smiles but this time it seems forced. “Thank you and thank you to Rosaelia.”

“Hmm,” Mrs. Whitehall says. “Well, think of it as an olive branch, January. Come on children.”

She turns on her pale blue heels and departs, the Whitehall siblings trailing after her like lost ducklings.

“Total fucking freakshow,” Doc mutters. “Come on, people. Sal and Gretzky are around the back.”

We duck around other wedding guests and dive into the safety of the limo. I put my arm around January who is still holding the gnocchi roller.

“Are you okay?”

She nods, eyes full of tears. “The photo was worth it. I’m so glad to have Zia’s things again.”

“I’m so pumped for these fucking cookies,” Doc says, pulling on latex gloves. “But first things first.” He takes his laser pen from his pocket and starts scanning the platter with the thin blue beam.

“What’s that?” January asks.

“Poison tester.”

Her mouth falls open. “You think my stepmom is trying to poison us?”

“She one hundred percent *wants* to poison us. Depends, if she’s got the balls.”

“Or we could just throw the food away, *idiot*,” Eli says, pouring himself another minibar scotch.

“Fuck that, I’m dying here.” The pen gives a series of low beeps.

“Approved,” Doc says happily. “No poison. No compromising substance known to man. *Molto bene.*”

He rips off the plastic wrap and starts cramming cannoli into his mouth.

January’s forehead creases. “Where did you get that pen thingy from?”

I know she’s asking, *does it really work?*

“It’s very effective,” I tell her. “It was designed for traveling dignitaries; royalty and politicians, that kind of thing.”

She doesn’t look convinced.

“It also cost ten million bucks,” I add, still salty about it.

“Oh my God!” January says.

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” Doc demands through a mouthful of custard. “Get some asshole to taste everything we’re about to eat and wait twenty-four hours to see if they die?”

Doc passes the platter around and I take an almond cookie. It’s delicious, light, and not too sweet. As soon as I finish it, I take another and soon, everyone but January is stuffing their faces.

“Goddamn,” Doc says, his mouth full of cannoli. “Sorry your Zia died, Tits, but whoever this woman is, she can *bake*.”

January gives a soft smile. “I’m sure she can.”

“Do you want anything?” I ask her.

“No thanks. You shouldn’t eat before a performance. It lines your throat.”

“More for us,” Doc says, snatching up the last biscotti.

Eli gives him a stern look. “Leave room. Refusing food at a Bianchi wedding will cause offense.”

“Ah, everything offends that guy. He can go fuck himself, inviting our enemy to his fuckin’ wedding,” Doc shoots back. “Anyway, I need energy for what I’m gonna do to our woman.”

He grins at January. “How do you feel about getting railed by four guys in the bathroom, Tesorina?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Nico...”

“Probably not but I wanna get you pregnant. Just a quick one?”

That gets a smile out of her. “Maybe later. After my performance.”

“It might help your performance. Make it more convincing?”

She laughs and as she and Doc tease each other I feel myself relax slightly, a warm glow washing over me. Maybe it's the sugar but everything feels like it's going to be okay. The ceremony is over, January's family photo is done with, and after a few hours of drinking and dancing we'll be back at Velvet House, and all of this will be behind us.



CHAPTER EIGHT

January Whitehall

THE SECURITY TO get through the gates to the wedding reception is worse than at any airport I've been to. The boys and I are scanned, patted, questioned, and my Gucci clutch is opened and thoroughly examined. I almost have a panic attack when Doc has to turn out his pockets and show the little baggies he's carrying, but as he explains, "Security doesn't give a shit about anything except you not blowing Bianchi's brains out while he gums down cake."

"Of course, Domenico could spare us the embarrassment of actively carrying illicit substances," Eli says, guiding me along a length of blue velvet carpet. "But he won't do that, because he's *un idiota*."

"Takes one to know one, fuckhead."

We walk along a winding path surrounded by twinkling blue lights, mounds of fake snow, and giant ice sculptures. I gasp when I see the venue. It's an enormous, snowy-white mansion, at least six stories high and gleaming like a jewel in the gathering darkness. It looks old but perfectly maintained like something out of *Gone with the Wind*.

"What *is* this place?" I ask Bobby, sure I should have read about it in school.

"La Vita è Bella," he says. "A five-star Italian hotel. Back in the day, it held all these balls and dinners advocating for Italian acceptance in mainstream society. A bunch of

important people stayed here. Senators. Movie stars. That kind of thing.”

I look up at the glowing mansion, covered in slightly tacky winter decorations. “And Mr. Bianchi owns it?”

Bobby’s jaw twitches. “He does now.”

“Did he... Was he not supposed to get it?”

Bobby gives me a gentle smile and presses a finger to his lips. I go quiet at once, taking his hand and letting him lead me into the mansion.

Blue-jacketed hosts with snowflakes on their lapels direct us into an exquisite ballroom, ten times the size of the one in Velvet House.

I gape at the paintings on the gold-lined ceiling, swans and goddesses in flowing robes and men with bulging muscles. Eli moves Bobby aside: “These were all painted by Pasquale Adianta, the most talented artist since Michelangelo. The men who built the hotel couldn’t afford to have him sneeze on the walls, but Adianta was so impressed by America and their vision of a new world for their people, he worked at no cost.”

“Wow,” I say. “You know about the hotel too?”

“Every American Italian does. I stayed here with my father when I was very young, before it...” Eli’s face darkens. “Before things changed.”

I now know better than to ask what he means, especially with the number of eyes on us.

Hundreds of people are already sitting at the round white and blue tables, bottles of vodka frozen into the centerpieces in front of them. Many of the men smile and nod at my boyfriends and the women ignore them entirely. I don’t know if it’s a custom, but I do the same. My stomach is starting to flutter with pre-performance nerves and knowing Corinne and my siblings are somewhere in this ballroom doesn’t help.

Seeing Lachlan, Harris, and Margot was worse than I ever imagined. I expected them to be weird, but they refused to

even talk to me. Is it because of my relationships? Or is Corinne blackmailing them?

“Here, Pryntsesa.” Adriano pulls out a silver-backed chair and I realize we’ve arrived at our table. It’s right next to the dance floor, and the head table where Mr. Bianchi and Yelizaveta will sit. We take our places and waiters immediately start pouring champagne and handing around smoked salmon canapés. My men fall on them like wolves, demolishing the little fish disks in seconds.

“Aren’t you going to test them?” I ask.

“Bianchi’s team will have run everything through the same wringer I did,” Doc says, his mouth full. “There’s better security than the Pentagon at this shit.”

There’s a twelve-piece band playing on a stage across the room. I see a raised circular platform and guess that’s where I’ll stand to sing the first song. My stomach flips and I reach for my glass of chilled water, almost knocking it over.

Eli touches my hand. “How are you, my ruby?”

“Okay,” I lie. “Tell me more about the hotel. The people who stayed here. The food.”

With a smile, Eli bends his head to mine. I listen to him talk about pheasant and poached pears, Elizabeth Taylor, and Joe DiMaggio, as the room continues to fill. The crowd grows rowdier, and the band plays even louder to be heard over them.

Doc, Bobby, and Adriano are constantly scanning the guests. I know, when their faces go still, that they’ve seen the person we’ve been dreading.

“Eleven o’clock,” Bobby mutters. “Across the dance floor.”

My spine stiffens, and I inwardly say *screw you* to Mr. Bianchi. Mr. Parker and I were supposed to be separated by threat of death and ruin, not a dance floor. I refuse to look at him as my men shoot daggers across the table.

“God, it would be so easy,” Doc mutters. “So easy to smash his fuckin’ head in.”

“Calm yourself,” Eli says coldly. “If anyone hears you, we won’t get out of here alive.”

The statement makes me feel better and worse. Better because Mr. Parker will be held to the same standard. Worse because we shouldn’t be in this situation. Not after the contract.

Eli turns his head and studies Mr. Parker’s table out of the corner of his eye. To my amazement, he smiles. “Parker’s brought his new fiancée.”

The guys crane their necks to follow Eli’s line of sight and identical grins appear on their faces.

“What?” I ask. “What’s funny?”

“Look,” Doc says.

I don’t want to, but curiosity gets the better of me. I turn and see Mr. Parker, pink-faced and puffy-lipped, his hair combed flat across his head. He’s chatting to the bodyguards dotting his table, but to his left is a girl in a red dress. Her dark hair is pulled up like mine and her boobs are almost falling into her champagne. I turn back to my table, slightly annoyed. “You guys shouldn’t laugh at women’s bodies.”

“We’re not laughing because she’s got huge, fuck-off cans,” Doc says. “We’re laughing because Parker’s got himself a dollar store January.”

I whirl back around. I don’t think we look exactly alike, but there are plenty of similarities, including our breasts. I press a hand to my face. “Do you think... Is it on purpose?”

Four faces look incredulously back at me, and I realize I’m being naïve. Of course, it’s on purpose. Mr. Parker hand-chose me for his bride when I was very young. He obviously has a type, and me and whoever this girl is, are it.

But then why is Emilia his girlfriend? An inner voice asks. And where is she?

I know better than to bring it up with the guys though. Not in this loud, dangerous place.

A chill passes over me as I feel Mr. Parker staring at me. I sit completely still like a mouse hoping to hide from a cat. The men around me straighten, expand their shoulders, and clench their jaws.

“Don’t you fucking look at her,” Bobby mutters and as always, I’m shocked to hear the rage in his voice. He’s always sweet, and always calm but Parker brings out the dark side in him like nothing else.

You shouldn’t be here, bella.

Zia Teresa’s voice comes through clear as a bell.

I know Zia, I think. But we have no choice.

You have a—

A loud bang makes me jump half out of my skin.

I’m not alone, around me men yelp, women shriek, and people spill vodka down their fronts and drop salmon. The band grinds to a halt and half the ballroom turns to see what made the noise. The answer comes at once. A blackbird has flown into one of the gilded windows. It peels itself off, flapping its wings clumsily, and everyone laughs with relief. The band kicks back into *Louie Louie* and Doc refills his water glass.

“Are you really not going to drink?” Bobby asks.

“You will at the toast,” Eli answers for him. “If you don’t it will—

“Cause offense.” Doc rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

I keep staring at the spot where the bird hit the window. It shouldn’t have been so loud. It doesn’t make sense.

I notice Eli isn’t laughing either. He’s silently watching the glass like I am, his face drawn. “That,” he says softly, “Is a bad omen.”

A ripple goes across my scalp, lifting my hair, making me feel every strand. “It is.”

He turns to me, brow furrowed. “You agree with me?”

“Of course! It’s almost dark. I’ve never even seen a blackbird out this late before.”

Eli’s hand closes over my own. “I think that—”

“January Whitehall?”

We turn. A woman with a silver clipboard is smiling maniacally down at me.

“Miss Whitehall, you need to get ready for your performance. *Now.*”

I look to Eli. He slides his hand from mine. “Go, *bella*. Good luck.”

“Yeah, rock out,” Doc says, raising his glass to me. Adriano and Bobby follow suit and I try to smile but my insides feel like they’re melting. I follow the clipboard woman around the tables and out of the ballroom.

“Nervous?” The woman asks, leading me down a huge hallway.

“A little. There are a lot of people here.”

“Almost fifteen hundred,” she says with satisfaction. “Now, the stage is still being organized, so I have to put you in a holding place. Wait for me in there.”

She points to a set of double doors, guarded by men in black suits with AK-47s in their arms.

“Do I...need a pass or something?” I squeak.

The woman rolls her eyes, grabs my elbow, and practically drags me to the bodyguards. “Brett, Colin, let her in.”

“Of course, Miss Williams.”

“Right away.”

The guys pull open the doors and I'm let inside. I thought the room would be tiny and I thought I'd be alone. I'm wrong on both counts. It's huge and full of people. Bridesmaids catching champagne in glasses from a sparkling fountain, old guys smoking cigars, young guys vaping, people studying sheets of paper clearly rehearsing speeches. I must be in some kind of wedding green room. Although *green* isn't the right word. Everything is blue. There are fake blue snowflakes strung across the ceiling, blue-striped silk couches and blue rugs, and huge ice sculptures of women everywhere. I guess it's to go with the winter wonderland theme, but it feels more like a Frozen tribute party. I circle around trying to figure out what's going on, not wanting to wander too far from the doors in case Miss Williams returns right away.

"Champagne?" A waitress asks.

I smile and shake my head. I kind of wish everyone would stop offering me drinks. I feel so rude turning them down.

I half-hide behind an ice sculpture of a lady Viking and realize I left my phone—my whole bag—on my chair with the boys. Hopefully, they look after it, although I doubt anyone at this party needs to steal anything. From my hiding space, I can see an actress from a CW Zombie show talking to Chloe Fantana. I sang her song *Passionate* all the time when I was little. God knows why Mr. Bianchi didn't ask her to perform instead of me tonight. I realize I'm clenching my teeth and deliberately loosen my jaw.

I just have to get through this song. After I'm done, I'll pretend to be sick, pretend to be dying, anything, to get out of this strange hotel full of creepy birds and mobsters.

"Excuse me, miss, this isn't an all-access area."

"I *know*. That's why I want to go *in*."

I glance at the roped-off entrance. One of the black-suited bouncers is blocking a girl in a red dress.

My stomach hits the floor. It's Mr. Parker's fiancée.

“I’m a princess,” she says, her voice getting louder and louder. “I was told by my fiancé, Zachery Parker, that I was *more than welcome here*. Are you saying I’m not?”

The bouncer looks around in a panic. “I... uh...”

“Are you really going to make me go back to my table and have my fiancé *accompany me* into the room?”

Other guests are looking at the red-dress lady now and I can see from the bouncer’s mortified expression that he’s going to let her in just to get her to stop yelling. I tuck myself even further behind the ice statue. It won’t hide me, but it should distort the way I look to anyone who sees me through it.

“Go on in, miss,” the bouncer says and Mr. Parker’s fiancée swirls into the room like a red hurricane. I watch her grab a champagne from a passing tray and cast a dismissive eye over the actress and the vaping dudes. When she sees Chloe Fantana, she actually snorts then she pulls out her phone and starts examining herself in her camera.

I’ve met girls like her before, people so rich and privileged they’re like aliens from another planet. They’re also the meanest humans I knew before Mr. Parker showed his true colors.

One thing is for sure, this girl really does look like me. Up close, it’s kind of uncanny. We’re exactly the same height and our eyes and lips are the same shape. Did Mr. Parker pay the FBI to find her? Or was she his backup plan all along? Did he only not choose her because he couldn’t control this girl the way he controlled me—having Corinne force me into ballet and keeping me untouched by everyone but him?

I find myself stroking my tattoo. The mark tying me to the men who love me. I’m no longer trapped. No longer alone. Mr. Parker might be close, but he’ll never have me again.

The fiancée’s phone rings. “*Ola!*” she says. “No, of *course*, I can talk. I’m so fucking *bored*.”

She's very loud and the person on the other end of the line is too. "*I miss you, Marisella! Tell me why this wedding is so boring.*"

Other blue room guests glare at Marisella, and she gives them a level five stink-eye back.

One of the waiters approaches her. "Miss, there are no phones in here."

Marisella simply walks away from him, continuing her conversation. "No, I wore the red dress. No, I *know*. I wanted the sparkly pink one *too*."

The waiter looks on helplessly as I press myself against the wall behind the ice statue. She's coming right toward me, and I pray we don't lock eyes.

"Urgh, you're so *right*, I shouldn't have worn red," she says. "But Zachy was like, 'you look so elegant,' and well... He's the one who counts, you know?"

If I didn't hate Mr. Parker with every molecule in my body, I'd almost be happy for him, it seems like he's found the perfect person.

"No, I can't leave yet," Marisella lowers her voice a little. "Zach has some work thing to do. No, yes, *at* the wedding. It's *so* stupid. Some grudge with another company or something."

My heart stops. I feel it congealing in my chest, turning to New York street sludge.

Marisella laughs. "No, it's in their food or something. It's not, like, a big deal. I just have to be here to watch and after, Zachy and I are going to the Four Seasons. He's booked the presidential suite. It shouldn't be too long after the first dance, maybe I can come meet you...?"

She keeps yammering about her plans as my body reels. She can't be talking about my men. Whatever problem Mr. Parker has with someone here, it can't be Velvet House. He isn't silly enough to mess with a contract, especially not at Mr. Bianchi's wedding.

And yet...I know Mr. Parker. He hates restrictions. Hates being reminded there is anyone on earth more powerful than he is. It would appeal to him like nothing else, undermine my men and Mr. Bianchi and the contract at the same time.

In their food or something, Marisella said. But the food here is being checked, Doc said so. And I've seen enough cooking shows to know chefs work shoulder to shoulder at events like this, practically on top of each other, with runners and waiters moving in and out at the same time. It would be incredibly hard to mess with someone's food and not be seen —

“January?”

I jump right into the ice sculpture, burning my skin on the ice but it's just Miss Williams, the silver clipboard lady. “Time to go,” she says, not asking why I'm hiding behind a statue.

I emerge sheepishly, my mind still turning like a hamster on a wheel. Marisella and I come face to face. Her eyes are liquid brown, but she looks more like me than Margot does. She smiles, a mean little snake smile. “Oh *hello, there.*”

“Hi,” I say automatically as Miss Williams jabs me in the back. “Move please, January. Right away.”

Relieved, I hustle past the bouncers.

“Tell everyone to get back to their tables,” Miss Williams snaps at them. “The first dance is in five minutes.”

I follow Miss Williams up a long hallway. We turn a series of tight corners, past serving staff and cleaning ladies.

My mind spins faster. I know I'm forgetting something, missing something, no matter how hard I think it won't appear.

“Can I borrow your phone?” I ask Miss Williams. I know Eli's number by heart. I could text him not to eat anything. Miss Williams looks at me like I just announced I can't read.

“I don't have a phone, just this.” She taps her headset. “Up the stairs please, wait at the top.”

I climb a narrow staircase, vibrating with the music from the band. My heart is thumping almost as loudly.

It's okay, I reassure myself. The food hasn't been served and it probably won't be until I've finished my song and the first dance is over. I can rush back and tell everyone not to eat. Refusing to eat at an Italian wedding will be almost as big an insult as poisoning someone, but we can deal with that later.

The band finishes playing Moonlight Sonata and the ballroom shakes with applause. I feel a hand on my back and realize Miss Williams has grabbed my dress, restraining me like a toddler. "Wait."

"I will—"

"Champagne and hibiscus syrup," she snarls, and I realize she's talking into her headset. "All the guests need a glass before the first dance. You have sixty seconds before January Whitehall takes the stage."

A man says something affirmative and cold sweat breaks out on my brow. I inhale. Exhale. Try not to throw up.

Sing and get back to the table, that's all I have to do.

"*Apple cider*," Miss Whitehall barks. "If they're pregnant or fucking sober they get apple fucking cider! *Fucking hurry up!*"

I smile to myself. I loved drinking apple cider out of champagne glasses when I was little. I loved that crisp not-as-sweet-as-soda taste. I wonder if I could ask for some after my performance and then it hits me like the blackbird striking the window.

Orchard.

A deadly poison. One Mr. Parker has kept for years deteriorating in his tree safe. Images flow through my mind like beads on a string. The platter of cakes my stepmom brought over. The boys eating them in our limo with zero risk to other wedding guests. The desserts would have been enough to lace the apple candy taste of Orchard and it didn't show up

on Doc's poison scanner because how could it? Doc invented Orchard. Barely anyone knows it exists.

The guys didn't get turned on, my mind protests. But I know Orchard doesn't work on men. They can get a little flirty but not half-crazy with lust the way I've been when I've taken it. And Orchard is like a time-release grenade, only dangerous until it reacts with preservatives.

It shouldn't be too long after the first dance, Marisella said. What if the hibiscus syrup...

I press my hands to my mouth, too scared to scream, too numb to move.

"Ten seconds," Miss Williams screeches into her headset. Then she's shoving me in the back. "Go, January. Good luck."

I move on autopilot into the glittering ballroom. The crowd is a sea of strangers. An ocean of insect heads. And then I see the waiters swirling around with trays of champagne, billowing pink syrup floating through it and I'm sure, one hundred percent convinced that this is the preservative. The poison. "Here to perform the song for the newlywed's first dance, please welcome January Whitehall," an unseen emcee announces. Applause rings around the ballroom as I stumble onto the stage. The lights dim and a spotlight fixes itself on my face so I can't see anything. I reach for the microphone, my mind churning. What am I going to do? *What am I going to do?*

"Hello," I whisper.

The crowd cheers and I swear I can hear Bobby and Adriano. I can picture all four of them, holding their glasses of pinkish wine, waiting for the first toast.

Another spotlight appears and Mr. Bianchi and Yelizaveta walk onto the dance floor to chaotic applause. They look so much like grandfather and granddaughter it's weird. My heart is beating so hard that I feel like I'm going to puke blood. The man starts playing and then I know: I have to say something. I

hold up my hand to the band's conductor, a tiny man in his fifties and then I open my mouth.

"I'm so excited to be here," I say, my voice cracking on the *cited*. "And I'm so happy for Mr. Bianchi and Yelizaveta."

More cheering, more whistling. No one seems to notice that I'm ruining the first dance and if they do, it's clear they're not going to stop me.

"I'll start singing in a sec," I say. "But first I'd like to thank the men who brought me here tonight. There are so many artificial things in life we should avoid, but you're like apples. I feel like I invented you myself."

Mr. Bianchi frowns up at me, clearly wondering when and how I lost my mind.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Miss Williams hisses behind me, but I ignore her. My eyes have adjusted to the spotlight. I can see my men sitting at their table, see Doc in particular, holding his pink champagne. I lock eyes with him, making my voice ring loud and clear. "I wish Alessia was here tonight."

Doc puts down his glass and motions to the others. Relief goes through me like nothing I've ever felt before, it almost drops me like a stone. I cling to the microphone stand to keep myself upright.

"Okay, thanks," I say. "And without further ado..."

I wave to the conductor who looks like he wants nothing more than to slap me into the next century, but he gestures for the band. As the opening bars to *The Way You Look Tonight* start to play again, my whole body goes slack with relief. I inhale for what feels like the first time in hours and I launch into the song with such power, I surprise myself. My voice is sweet and strong, vibrating with the hope the universe has just handed me. I've never sung so beautifully.

Mr. Bianchi and his blonde bride start to dance, and I close my eyes and smile. I've done it. No matter how stupid and bad

it was, I know Doc got my message. He won't eat or drink; won't let the others do it either. We're going to be okay.

A loud snap. Another.

My eyes fly open. I look at the windows. Look for the birds that must have flown into the glass, but there aren't any. Instead, there's Bobby, sitting at the table with his hand pressed to his shoulder, blood pouring from it like wine.

I hear my singing turn to a scream. Watch as tables turn over, people leaping to their feet, shouting, and shrieking. Another loud snap and a champagne glass exactly where Doc's head used to be explodes.

I scream again and my gaze swings to Mr. Parker's table. He's smiling, his teeth bared like a dog. He's going to kill all of us. It doesn't matter that I stopped the poisoning. We're all going to die at this wedding.



CHAPTER NINE

Adriano Rossi

WE HAVE A protocol for this—*whatever the fuck this is*.

If, and when, things go to shit in a public place, Eli scopes the surroundings for an escape, Doc repairs the injured, Bobby contacts the Velvet House crew to extract us. I protect January.

There are still gunshots snapping through the air when I get to my feet, sprinting around overturned tables and screaming guests to the side of the ballroom. I'd crawl but the ground is covered in broken glass and that poisoned champagne. One cut and the Orchard in my system turns to cyanide. I try to assess the best route to the stage. It's a shitshow. Guests have surged to every exit creating bottlenecks everywhere.

“What’s happening?” A man shouts. “Who would do this?”

The answer is obvious.

Parker.

I could find him in the chaos and snap his neck. I'd do it, fuck the contract and the consequences but my job is more important—protecting January. I can't see her on the stage, and I pray to whatever bloodthirsty hypocritical god built this world that it's because she's taking cover.

She can't be dead. I'll tear this hotel to the ground first.

More shots ring out and an old guy's head comes off to fresh screams. The remaining band members on stage throw

their instruments and jump into the frantic crowd. Whoever Parker put up to do this is a butcher. But why? Starting a gunfight at a Bianchi wedding is a death wish. And if the fucker's gonna keep shooting until he does what he's told and kills Velvet House, I need to crawl.

I snatch a tablecloth off the nearest table, wind it around my fists and drop to all fours. As I work my way between the tables the old gunshot wound in my side aches. I'm not as young as I was, and my skin is tired of re-knitting. Tired of keeping me alive. It doesn't matter. I keep crawling. When I reach the stage, I take a quick glance, see no one looking, and haul myself onto the raised platform.

There she is, curled on her side like I showed her.

“Divchynko moya, ty v bezpetsi. Ty zhyva.” My little girl, you are safe. You are alive.

In my panic, the Ukrainian comes out of me like water. Luckily January looks up. Her expression as she recognizes me is the sweetest thing I've ever known.

“Adriano, you found me.”

“Always, Pryntsesa.”

She struggles to sit up. “Are the others okay? What's happening?”

I take her hand. “We need to leave.”

“But where are the others?” January asks a panicky note in her voice.

“On their way to Gretzky and the car probably.”

“I saw Bobby get shot. Is he okay?”

“He's fine. It's just through his shoulder.”

I have no idea if that's true, but it's not something we can focus on. I see the small stage steps she must have climbed up for her performance. “Get down there. Now.”

January makes her way to the stairs. She struggles to find her footing in her long dress and heels, and I want to tear them from her body. Fucking female clothes. If we get out of this alive, my Pryntsesa will live in sneakers and a bulletproof vest.

I follow January down the steps and, ignoring her protests, bundle her into my arms and carry her through the hotel hallway. It's clearly a back-of-house area, far less fancy than the ballroom and full of silver drink trolleys and abandoned trays. There's no one around and that's promising. The staff must have had better access to exits. I enter an abandoned industrial kitchen. There's a skinny chef cowering in the corner, hands to his ears.

"Get out," I bark, and he runs like a scared rabbit, through a back door that leads to some kind of courtyard.

Perfect.

I place January on an empty countertop and yank knives from the magnetic rack on the wall. There are only short ones, but they're sharp as razors and it's better than nothing. I rummage through the drawers and to my relief find a roll of thick electrical tape.

My phone pings. A text from Eli.

Heading through the woods to Charlemont Road. Bobby unconscious.

Get a car and meet us. No outside contact.

I swear softly. If Eli isn't getting Gretzky to pick us up, it means he's either dead, or we can't trust anyone. "We need to go," I tell January. She's holding an empty jar. Hibiscus flowers in syrup.

"They put this in the champagne," she whispers. "It has resavitorol in it. The Orchard additive."

I remember watching her on stage, rambling so incoherently I wondered if someone had drugged her, but we were the ones who'd been poisoned. "You were right, Pryntsesa. You saved us. Now I have to save you. Take off your shoes."

She obediently kicks off her high heels and I use one of the kitchen knives to hack a bunch of floaty material from the bottom of her ballgown, bringing it to her knees.

“We’ll need to run,” I tell her, tossing away the material and pulling out the tape. “Out the back door and down into the garden. I’d carry you, but we’ll be faster on our own. Follow behind me as closely as you can and move from side to side as much as possible, no matter how stupid it feels. And don’t stop for any reason, not if you hurt your feet or you get shot or you think I’ve been shot. Got that?”

January’s lip quivers but the nod she gives me is determined. I thank the same criminal god that we’ve spent months hunting together, that she understands how to follow orders, that she’s a hundred times more intelligent than I gave her credit for when watching her in the ballet studio. I wrap her small feet in thick wads of electrical tape. It’s not much but it’ll give her some protection as we run.

Once her feet are in their makeshift shoes, I haul her off the kitchen counter. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she says and there’s an artificial strength in her voice that threatens to tip me into white-hot rage. Tonight, Parker signed his own death warrant in a thousand different ways—breaking a contract, poisoning wedding guests, and opening fire on a crowd of innocents and international criminals alike. But it doesn’t matter. I know why he did this. Because he’s a small, psychotic man who’d rather burn every scrap of happiness in the world than let my Pryntsesa be free. And he’s so close to succeeding.

I shove away my anger. It won’t serve me now. Instead, I take January’s hand and lead her to the back door. The small concrete courtyard is littered with cigarette butts and beer cans. I point to the thick line of trees just beyond it. “That’s where we’re going, okay?”

“Okay,” she agrees and with a last reassuring squeeze of hands, we run.

The ground is rough, littered with old branches, loose sticks, and pinecones. I slip and slide in my dress shoes, and I can only imagine how January feels, but she keeps going and so do I. My skin crawls as we enter clearings, spots where any sniper worth their salt could blow our brains out, but eventually we make it to the trees. There's a high brick wall that marks the edge of the hotel grounds.

“What do we do?” January pants, and it strikes me how beautiful she is with her red cheeks, and her hair coming loose from its strange updo, and my cock throbs.

I blink, trying to clear my mind. Orchard isn't as effective on men, but it's definitely fucking with me tonight. A distraction I don't need.

“We follow the wall until we get to the front gate,” I tell her. “There'll be more people there and we'll blend with the crowd.”

The minutes spent creeping next to the wall are the longest of my life; listening to the distant wailing of guests, January's shallow breathing, trying not to think of Bobby, and of Parker.

Finally, we reach the open gate. It's thick with guests pressing their way into the street, running away. Sons outstripping daughters. Men dragging wives. I pick up January and carry her through the throng, looking around for a car I can steal. Without a gun or a laptop, it won't be easy to start a keyless car. And every car around this fucking hotel will be keyless. I walk January a little further, scanning the parked luxury cars and SUVs for something cheap. Something old. Then a screech of tires, a black van swinging onto the street, Parker's ZP logo on the side.

“Fuck,” I mutter, putting January on her feet. “Pryntsesa, you need to run.”

“But—”

Too late, the van door slides open and four guys in black windbreakers jump out. The last, the driver, is a huge redhead. I recognize him from the hospital where January's Zia was

smothered to death. He recognizes me right back, his face breaking into a huge smile. “Rossi! Good to see you again.”

I say nothing as I shove January behind me.

The redhead laughs. “Still protecting the Whitehall bitch?”

He’s a big guy, forty or so with the straight spine of an ex-marine, but the other three goons are mid-twenties at the oldest. This is a rush job. A poorly planned kidnapping.

“Your boss just torched a mafioso wedding,” I say. “If you’ve got any sense, you’ll get the fuck out of here.”

The redhead’s smile fades. “Just get in the van Rossi and if you’re lucky we won’t fuck your girl in front of you.”

I feel January tremble behind my back. “Close your eyes, Pryntsesa. I don’t want you to see this.”

“See what?” the redhead taunts. “Trust me, she’s gonna see plenty soo—”

The chef’s knife goes through his nose, splitting bone and skin, and cartilage. The other three guys fumble for their guns and, praying January obeyed orders, I snatch the redhead’s Glock from his holster. He blinks at me like a child in the schoolyard. I put the barrel to his head and shoot him. I kill the others in quick succession, before turning back to January, who has her hands over her face.

“Sorry,” she pants. “I should help. I should do... something.”

“You did exactly what I asked you to, Pryntsesa. Now get in the back of the van and close the door.”

She obeys and the second the van door slides shut I go to work, stripping the bodies for guns, ammo, torches, knives, phones, and keys. The redhead and I are the closest match size-wise, so I take his jacket, tearing Parker’s logo from the breast pocket. I do the same to the shortest guy, taking his cargo pants and shoes. Everything’ll swim on January, but it’s better than a fucking wedding gown and taped feet. My phone pings, another text from Eli.

You have our location pin. I'm destroying my phone. Come as fast as you can. If you can't find us enact Firebird.

January's waiting in the back of the van balled up in the corner with her hands over her face. I gently pull them away. "Pryntsesa, you've been so strong. You need to keep going. Change into these."

I hand her the stolen clothes and January pulls them on without complaint, tears running silently down her cheeks. "Did a lot of people die in the ballroom?"

I want to lie to her, but I know better. "Yes, baby girl."

Her mouth turns down at the corners and I curse Parker for saddling her with more survivor's guilt. More trauma. We were trying to move her away from this, the stress, and the worry. I step forward and stroke her arm where my tattoo lies forever embedded in her skin.

"Pryntsesa, you are not allowed to burden yourself with this. Whatever happened it wasn't your fault."

"But Parker was trying to get to me. To hurt me. And Eli and the others—"

"We don't know what happened to them. That's what we need to find out. You stay back here and I'm gonna drive to where they said they are."

I give her a rough kiss on the head and climb into the driver's seat. The traffic is insane, cops and medics and a million guests leaving and arriving at once. We crawl bumper to bumper until I can turn off onto a small dirt road that leads to Eli's pin. I drive until the track disappears, before parking the van and getting out.

"Stay in the car," I tell January, but the van door's already open and she's on her feet, drowning in the oversized bulletproof vest and jacket. Her face is set, and I know she won't go back inside without me imprisoning her, something I've vowed never to do again.

We walk for five minutes with only the moon lighting the way, tripping on the uneven ground, and scanning the trees for any sign of life, friendly or otherwise. The sounds of sirens are still audible from the hotel and I'm just starting to worry the boys were found and maybe we need to return to the van when January screams. Doc, Eli, and Bobby are sitting under a pine tree, their suits torn, their faces covered in blood and dirt. But they're all alive.

Relief hits me like a truck. January sprints toward them and Eli stands, pulling her into an embrace.

"*Bella*, who dressed you this way?"

"Adriano," she says half-laughing, half-sobbing as she lets go and wraps her arms around Doc. "You're alive! Are you okay?"

"No," Doc growls.

"Better now," Bobby says in a quiet voice. He's still sitting in the dirt, his eyes glazed. A dress shirt tourniquet is wrapped around his shoulder, most of it black with blood.

"We need to go," Eli says, snapping to action. "What did you drive?"

"One of Parker's vans."

Eli gapes at me. "Are you a madman?"

"It's a long story but I don't like it any more than you do."

"Fine." Eli checks his watch. "Let's move."

Doc and I grab Bobby by his armpits and haul him up. He sways slightly on his feet.

"How bad's the wound?" I ask Doc.

"Not great but blood's the issue. He needs some of yours."

"Stick me as soon as we get somewhere secure," I say, as we move back to the van.

"Somewhere secure?" January asks. "Aren't we going back to Velvet House?"

Eli looks to me. “You didn’t tell her...?”

Bobby starts slipping down my chest. I haul him up higher with difficulty, the old injury in my side throbbing. “I had a lot on my plate, *Elliot*.”

Eli returns my glare with interest, then turns to January. “We were betrayed. We can’t go home until we know by who.”

January blinks at him. “But it was Mr. Parker. And...and my stepmom.”

“Your stepmother was most likely involved,” Eli says, wrapping an arm around her. “But Parker’s gunmen must have been posted around the hotel. That Bianchi’s security didn’t weed them out implies something else.”

“What else?”

Eli’s face hardens. “We don’t know who’s involved in this, *bella*, and until we do, we trust no one.”

“But...what does that mean?” January asks, looking around at all of us. I stare at the ground, unwilling to be the one to tell her, this precious girl I was supposed to protect. To keep from harm for the rest of her life.

“We’re going on the run, Tits,” Doc says. “But if you’re a good girl, I promise I’ll make it sexy for you.”

January doesn’t register the joke. “We’re going on the...”

“Run,” Doc repeats through gritted teeth. I can tell Bobby’s weight is getting to him, but I also know he’d rather die than ask Eli to take over. “Just the five of us heading out into the great unknown.”

“Where?”

“We have a safe house,” Eli says shortly. “That’s all we can say in the open.”

January nods but I can see tears brewing in her eyes again. I don’t blame her. In a life previously ruled by chaos,

mistakes, and cruelty, this still has to be a shock. Maybe Doc knows it because he clears his throat. “Thanks though, Tits.”

“What for?”

“Saving our lives. If you didn’t give that batshit speech we’d have frothed our way into early graves. And here we are, limping our way through the forest instead.”

That gets a small smile out of January. “I’m glad you understood what I was saying.”

“Right away.” Doc juts his jaw. “How’d you find out Parker doped us?”

“Mr. Parker’s fiancée was talking about it on the phone in the VIP room.”

I think of the girl who looked so much, and yet so little, like my Pryntsesa. How stupid would the woman have to have been to blurt out Parker’s plans on the phone? “She said out loud that he’d poisoned us?”

January gives me a small smile. “Not that obviously. She said she was there with Mr. Parker for work and something about ‘it was in the food.’ I guessed that the only thing that wouldn’t show up on the poison scanners was Orchard.”

Doc laughs. “You’re a genius, Tits. I apologize for every time I said you were a dumb big-titted bimbo.”

“That’s, like, four million apologies,” January says huffily, and I laugh.

“He’ll give you every one of them when we get to the safe house, I promise.”

“When will that be?”

“A few hours,” I say, not wanting to give away too much.

“Okay.” January’s smile fades. “Can I ask you guys something?”

“Of course,” Eli says.

“My stepmom gave you guys poison...”

No one says anything. Eli and I lock eyes. He nods and I know I've been given the job of addressing this. "Yes, Pryntsesa," I say. "It seems like she's still working with Parker."

January turns to me, her eyes huge in the moonlight. "Does that mean you're going to...?"

I know what she's asking and I'm glad she can't finish the sentence. Velvet House has a free run on killing Corinne Whitehall now. All the angels in heaven couldn't keep her on this plane of existence. But now might be the worst time imaginable to bring that up.

"She tried to kill me too," January whispers. "She wanted me to die."

Bobby stirs in my arms, lifting his head. "She knows you don't eat before you sing. She was after us, JJ. Not you."

"But my brothers and sisters..."

"Had no idea," Bobby says thickly. "They're just accessories to her, the way you were. They had no fucking clue."

"That shouldn't make me feel better," January says with a sob. "But it does."

Eli holds her closer, kissing the side of her head.

Family, I think, is always too fucking complicated.

We make it back to the van. Eli gets behind the wheel as Doc hunts around for a medical kit. He finds one and sets up a transfusion, bleeding me into Bobby as he lies slumped in a seat like a corpse.

"I can donate," January says.

"Wouldn't work, Tits," Doc replies, a scalpel between his teeth. "Adri's a universal donor. You're A neg."

"You know my blood type?"

“I know all our blood types. I’m A pos. Morelli’s AB. Bobby’s B neg. Adriano’s the only one who can give Basher blood.”

“It’s fine, Pryntsesa,” I say, pumping my fist to keep the blood flowing. I swallow hard and ask the question I’ve been biting back. “I would like some company if you wanna...if you could sit near me?”

January practically launches herself at me, wrapping her arms around my middle and carefully avoiding the tube running from me to Bobby. “I love you, big bear,” she whispers in my ear. “You’re the bravest, kindest man in the whole world.”

“Hey,” Doc protests as he cleans Bobby’s wound. “You’re hurting my fuckin’ feelings over here, Tesorina.”

“Equally bravest,” January corrects. “You are much nicer than Doc though.”

I grin. “Obviously.”

“Heyyyy,” Bobby rasps. “What about me?”

“You’re equally as nice as Adriano,” she admits.

“But...evennn...sexier,” Bobby slurs and we laugh. I pull January close, kissing her tiny ear. She smells a little like hairspray and fear sweat but beneath is the sweet vanilla scent that comes only from her and as I inhale, I allow gratitude to take me over.

“We’re still here,” I say as much to myself as anyone else. “We’re here with the girl we love. Everything is good.”

“Well said,” Eli calls from the front. “But enough talking. You all need to conserve your energy.”

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THE DRIVE PASSES in fits and bursts. I doze, drink Doc-approved water, and eat a few dry orange slices from a sleepy gas station.

“Nothing but fruit and vegetables for another forty-eight hours,” Doc says. “Orchard’s a hell of a drug.”

Halfway to Vermont, I take over driving from Eli. He looks battered, his golden skin ashen. The betrayal of being shot at a wedding, the violation of it has hit him hard. To Italians, weddings are sacred as church. Maybe more so. The repercussions of it will be with him for a long time.

When the road becomes thick with snow, when the forest closes in on us from all sides, I know we’re close. Doc’s already jammed the van’s GPS, making us impossible to track, but when we get to the last town before the safe house, I pull over at the storage unit we keep for this purpose.

January and Bobby are deposited in our Ford SUV, and we all work to put the snow chains on the wheels. Then Eli stocks the back with food and clean clothes as Doc and I tear the license plates off Parker’s van. We drive it to a nearby glade and slosh gasoline all over it.

“Shame,” Doc says, striking a match. “It’s not a bad ride.”

“It can go to hell along with anything else Parker’s paid for.

Once the van’s gone up like the Fourth of July we return to the SUV. January is shivering in the back seat. “Not to sound like a little kid, but are we almost there?”

“Almost,” I reassure her. “Another hour, Pryntsesa.”

The drive up the mountain is difficult. Even with the chains, the roads are slippery and seem like they haven’t been driven on for months. My eyes are heavy with exhaustion, and I accept Eli’s offer of a Marlboro, willing the nicotine to keep my brain sharp.

Some hopeless part of me is convinced the cabin won’t be there. That it’s been bombed or burned into nothing but when I turn right at the wooden stake we use as a signpost, there it is. Our cabin safe house, the last place in the world where anyone should or could find us.

“Here,” Bobby slurs with relief. He’s full of every sedative Doc could find and I’m surprised he’s still awake.

I pull up and notice January staring at the cabin with a frown. I don’t blame her. From where she’s sitting it looks like a shack, not much bigger than the one I built on the grounds of Velvet House. For the first time in hours, I feel a stab of pleasure. I’ll get to see her face when we lead her inside.

We get out, my hair and eyelashes instantly freezing from the cold.

“Excited to experience your new home, Tits?” Doc asks with a sly nudge.

“I...um, will we be able to wash inside?”

“You’ll see.”

Eli uses his retina to unlock the front door and then each of us has to press our eyes to the lens and then a palm to the electronic pad behind a hidden panel.

“*Confirming January Joy Whitehall is present,*” the computer announces when January puts her hand on the screen.

She blinks. “You guys already have me on the system?”

“Yeah, otherwise you’ll be shot,” Doc explains. “Any weirdos come within a hundred feet of this place, the facial recognition guns’ll take them out.”

January looks a little disturbed, at least until we open the front door. When Eli flicks on the lights and she sees the inside of the safe house, she lights up like it’s Christmas. “What *is* this place?”

“Our safe house, *bella,*” Eli says with a trace of a smile. “Did you expect us to sleep in one room?”

“Um, kind of.” January turns on her heels, taking in the spacious, wood-lined walls, the sloping staircase that leads to a huge underground living area, and probably the fact the place

has already been remotely heated to 72 degrees. “This is *amazing*.”

“There are seven bedrooms and four bathrooms,” Eli says. “A fully stocked kitchen and pantry, a hot tub, a weapons room, everything we could ever want, my ruby. Now if you don’t mind, I need to go to bed.”

Without waiting for an answer, he stomps off downstairs.

“Should I go with him?” January asks in a small voice.

“Nope, let him breathe.” Doc wraps an arm around Bobby. “And I better get this one to the med room to inject him with an ass-load of morphine. I’ll see you in a bit, Tesorina.”

“Bye guys,” she says softly, before turning to me. “What now?”

I look down at her. She has dark shadows under her eyes, and her glitter and black makeup is smeared across her cheeks. The sight of it tears at my insides. This morning we were going to a wedding, a tense public event for us to grit our teeth through. Now we’ve pulled the ripcord on our lives, fled to a place we come to only when every other safety measure has failed us.

I reach for January, pulling her into my arms. “Now we have a shower and sleep.”

“That sounds nice.”

But we don’t move. Instead, we hold each other for a while, swaying slightly until January presses her face into my chest. “Will we, um, will we be here for a while?”

The pain in her voice breaks me a little wider, and again I fight the urge to lie to her. “I don’t know, Pryntsesa. I don’t think any of us do.”



CHAPTER TEN

January Whitehall

FIVE WEEKS IN the cabin pass like the blink of an eye. When I woke up in Adriano's room the first morning, I was sure we'd have everything cleared up that day. That Mr. Bianchi would call to apologize about the shooting and he and Eli would make plans to work everything out in that big scary conference room where we first signed the contract.

Not so much.

Instead, the boys have long circular conversations about who we can trust and the risk we'd take in contacting them. The general agreement is that Mr. Parker has decided to torch everything, and end Velvet House and that Mr. Bianchi might have approved the wedding poisoning, if not the shooting.

That seems insane to me, but I'm hardly an expert and there's no denying that whoever shot Bobby was trying to kill him and until we know we're not going to be murdered, we should stay in the safe house.

I know where we are now. In the outer forests of Vermont, miles away from the police, the public, and even the park rangers that patrol the area. We're completely alone, but it doesn't feel that way. The five of us are always together and even though I'd never say it, there are times when it almost feels like a winter vacation. We play cards, drink wine by the huge fireplace, and eat whatever I can throw together.

The boys don't like going into town for food in case we draw attention to ourselves so mostly we eat deer, wild turkey,

brook trout, and grouse—whatever Adriano can hunt—along with bitter salads that I sweeten with balsamic vinaigrette and olive oil.

Cooking has become my obsession. I've always enjoyed it, but some part of me is convinced I can make everything better if I figure out how to make tasty, interesting meals out of venison and frozen peas. I use the dried and canned supplies in the pantry to bake honey cakes and flatbread and brew fresh coffee every morning.

“You're going to make me as soft as your dough,” Eli complains, but I know he's only joking. The four of them are doing so much hunting and hiking to monitor the area, they've all lost weight, their bodies taking on the leanness that only Doc had before. They're changing in other ways too. Growing wilder, I think. Doc, Eli, and Bobby all have short beards now and Adriano's hair is almost to his shoulders. Sometimes he lets me brush it in front of the fire. Unless I'm busy doing something else. Because that's the other thing about the cabin—if I'm not roasting nuts for trail mix or stirring tallow into gravy, I'm getting laid.

Like, all the time.

It started the second night we were here. Everyone was wandering around the safe house looking shell-shocked, fidgeting with things that didn't need to be moved, picking up books and maps and putting them down again until finally Doc went to the huge liquor cabinet on one side of the living room and threw the door open.

“Drink,” he bellowed to the rest of the house.

“I don't know if I should—” Bobby began.

“Get over here and drink or I'll shoot you for real.”

“Doc,” I warned. “Inappropriate!”

“I'll get in-a-your-appropriate,” he said with the same manic grin I remember all too well from when he kidnapped me. He poured out five glasses of whiskey and handed them to each of us.

“We’re stuck here,” he said. “It’s shit. We almost died, and we still might die but if we stand around thinking about that, we’ll go fucking crazy. I’ll be damned if I’m putting any of you down like Ol’ Yeller. So, we’re having a little lock-in party. Blowing off some steam.”

“But my shoulder—” Bobby started.

“Your shoulder’s gonna be fine. Take a shot or get shot.”

We all looked at each other, waiting for someone—Eli—to reject the idea, but he looked as cautiously amused as everyone else. So, we obediently tapped glasses and drank our liquor. It burned like honey fire and the boys immediately held out their glasses for refills.

“Good men,” Doc said in a soothing faux-doctor voice. “What doesn’t kill you, isn’t Parker.”

For some silly reason, probably the whiskey, I burst out laughing. The sensation was so lovely that I laughed even harder and as Bobby joined me, I realized that only Doc could do this. Make us laugh even when everything is objectively terrible. The thought sent warmth flooding through me; a hundred times more comforting than a glass of whiskey. I went behind Doc and hugged him, pressing my face into his back.

“What’s up, Tits?” Doc said, sounding surprised. “You lit already?”

“No. I just love you.”

He didn’t say anything, but I felt his muscles tremble and I can tell you, it’s really something, making a man like Domenico Valente speechless.

The men took another shot and then another and then Eli put on music and Adriano started loading logs into the fireplace and Bobby pulled me into his arms and kissed me lightly on the lips. “Have I ever told you you’re the most beautiful woman in the world?”

“Maybe...” I tease, careful not to hurt his shoulder.

“Then I’m saying it again, you’re the most—

“More shots,” Doc interrupted.

“We don’t have an infinite supply of liquor,” Eli warned.

“Tonight, we do.”

We all took another drink, and I eyed Bobby, handsome and already a little glassy-eyed.

“Are you sure he should be drinking?” I asked Doc.

“He’ll be fine, Pryntsesa,” Adriano said. “He’s a brave boy. Even if he’s a little old to get his first bullet wound.”

Doc cackled. “Holy shit, it is. *Salut.*”

He and Bobby tapped glasses as I gaped at my boyfriends. “You guys have all been shot?”

“Obviously,” Adriano said smugly.

Doc tapped his thigh. “Right here, baby.”

I turned to Eli. “What about you?”

He rolled his liquid dark eyes. “Of course, I’ve never been shot. Bullet none since ’91.”

“You were born in ’88, you old fuck,” Doc said. “But now you’re the odd one out. Sure, you don’t want a little one?”

“Very.”

“Then it’s time to move on to the next item on the party agenda.” Doc gave me a slow considering look. “I want to see our little angel on all fours.”

My hands rose to my hair, loose and fluffy from the lack of safe house conditioner. “I... Right now?”

“I don’t see why not.” Doc raised his glass of whiskey to me. “But take everything off first, Tesorina. Get ’em out or get out.”

I looked to the others and from their blank, heavy-lidded expressions, I knew they were more than game. I lifted my cotton T-shirt over my head and my heart started beating like a drum. Thankfully, the liquor chased away any anxieties I

might have had about my lack of makeup or sexy lingerie. It was good to feel wanted, to think about nothing but what might happen when I was naked.

“Bra,” Doc demanded. “And do it slow, like the wannabe stripper you are.”

My pussy fluttered, fast as my heartbeat and I was glad he was being a dick, it meant I could be submissive. Quiet. Eager to please. All of my new favorite things. I unclasped my bra and let it tumble off, the cups peeling slowly away from my breasts.

Adriano let out a small grunt.

“Those things could kill a man,” Eli said, raising his scotch to toast my breasts.

“And one day they surely will,” Doc said. “Turn around and lose the pants, baby girl.”

As I peeled off my jeans it occurred to me that none of them were sitting the way they usually were when we played. There was an order, a hierarchy to the way my men took me, some coming forward, others hanging back. This time they were all still there, standing around me like hungry wolves.

“Panties,” Bobby said. “Show me that perfect ass.”

I let my pink underwear fall to the floor and clutched my hands to my chest, playing at being the shy, self-conscious girl I was a year ago. I got the response I wanted, they drew closer, circling me like schoolyard bullies.

Doc snapped his fingers at the floor. “Knees.”

I knelt and they all towered over me, closing in like a living wall. For a moment, we stayed that way, me looking up at them, them looking at me, fully clothed, teeth bared.

“You know what we’ve never done,” Doc said in a conversational tone. “Cum all over her at once.”

“But—” I began, and Doc pushed a finger to my lips. “You’re done talking, Tits.”

I closed my mouth as Doc unbuttoned his jeans. “Get them out, boys.”

I watched as all of them followed suit, producing four, thick, blood-darkened cocks.

When I was a virgin I never really thought about penises. I knew about them, obviously, but out of the context of a naked man, they seemed kind of silly or weird. They changed shape. They turned from one thing to another like a magician’s trick. When I thought about being with guys, when I touched myself and imagined having sex, I pictured flexing muscles and slamming hips, how heavy and strong a man would feel on top of me. In my year with Velvet House, I’d grown familiar with every aspect of the male body but kneeling, surrounded by so many cocks I felt lucky, almost dizzy with how openly greedy I could be with this most male thing.

My men stroked themselves as they looked at me, dividing me into parts with their eyes—lips, tits, stomach, ass, legs. I leaned back, arching up toward them and it felt so good to be lots of little things, instead of a woman, instead of someone who had to worry and think and plan and imagine. I could just feel. Just take it. My heart almost bottomed out at the filthiness of it, the four of them standing around me with their cocks in my face. All of them are there to use me. Doc grinning as he pumped himself. Eli’s slow strokes. Bobby’s strangled grip. Adriano rubbing the head of his massive, tattooed penis. All for me, all of them.

Eli was the first to touch me. He rubbed his head over my lips in a slow, almost tender movement. “*Apri la boca.*” *Open your mouth.*

I complied and he pressed into my throat. I gagged theatrically, and Bobby gripped my head from behind and pushed me forward. “She’s all yours, boss.”

“Good,” Eli snarled. “I’m going to fill that sweet mouth with cum.”

“Hurry the fuck up,” Doc said, rubbing his cock against my cheek. “I want those lips on me.”

“Get in line,” Adriano grunted, grabbing my hand, and wrapping it tightly around himself. He began to pump his scarred tattooed dick through my fingers, using my hand like a sleeve.

“Good idea,” Doc said, taking my other hand. “Pull fast, little slut. Make me cum all over your pretty face.”

I was enclosed, immersed in dick, slurping at Eli, while Bobby moved my head, pushing me back and forth. I jacked Doc and Adriano sloppily, trying to coordinate my movements as my empty pussy throbbed and contracted. I wanted one of them to stop what they were doing and fuck me, but I also never wanted this to end.

“Faster,” Eli groaned. “Faster.”

I could barely control my head, let alone go faster but when Bobby grunted in affirmation, I understood Eli was talking to him, not me. As his pace quickened the realization that two of my men were pleasuring each other *through me* sent wetness slipping down my thighs. My men never touch one another, never want to, but the idea was so hot, I almost came contracting into myself like a girl humping her pillow.

“Yes,” Eli hissed. “Fuck yes.”

I tasted his orgasm, drinking it down as on my right and left Doc and Adriano moved faster, pushing into my closed fists, cursing, and panting. They had been waiting for this, for Eli to finish. As soon as he pulled away from my mouth—

“Get ready, Tits,” Doc growled. “Me and Adri are gonna make a fuckin’ mess of you.”

I moaned helplessly as wetness soaked me from both sides, the sleaziest, dirtiest spray. I closed my eyes and felt them finish on my cheeks and forehead, in my hair and down my neck, across my breasts. It felt like I could taste the two of them with Eli still lingering on my tongue.

“Look at her,” Adriano said with something close to rapture. *“Look at her.”*

But I wasn’t done, three pairs of hands grabbed me, turned me around, rearranging me onto all fours.

Yes, I thought ecstatically, Someone’s going to fuck me.

I was wrong.

“Open that slut mouth,” Doc snarled, and a fresh cock was pushed between my lips—Bobby’s. I’d know that thickness anywhere. I swallowed eagerly, so aware of my naked body, my aching pussy, the cooling liquid across my skin dripping onto the carpet. My men standing over me like gods.

“That pussy wants fucking,” Eli said languidly, as I wrapped my lips tight around Bobby, lapping at the flared head of his cock.

“It always does,” Doc said. “She’s been dripping since she got her tits out.”

“You wanna go first?”

“Nope, I’ve got just the thing for our little whore.”

A moment to wonder what he meant and then I felt it, something cold and smooth pressing deep inside me. Something that wasn’t a cock. I moaned, trying to turn and look but Bobby grabbed both sides of my face. “You stay here. You stay here ’til I nut down your throat.”

Trapped, I sucked Bobby harder as the thing began to move inside me, pulsing slowly, stretching me wider with every thrust. I shouldn’t have liked it, being penetrated by something unknown. I shouldn’t have ground back on it, moaning and shaking my hips.

But I did.

And I got higher with every evil laugh from Doc, with every mocking comment from Eli and Adriano. With that, Doc pulled out whatever he’d been penetrating me with, and returned with something bigger. Harder.

“Such a good little girl,” Eli purred. “I remember when you couldn’t look me in the eyes. Now you’re covered in cum, sucking one of my men while another fucks you with anything we can find.”

“She loves it,” Adriano said. “She doesn’t even care what it is, she’ll come all over it.”

“We’ve trained her well.”

“Too well. She can’t go an hour without getting her little pussy rammed full.”

“Not just that,” Doc crowed, and I felt his thumb press into my asshole. I screamed as he thrust inside me.

“She’s airtight,” Doc laughed. “How’s that feel bitch?”

It felt like an orgasm rushing through me, hot and sweet and shuddering. Bobby slid a finger into my mouth to keep me from biting him and I came, totally helpless, getting fucked in every single hole.

“Coming,” Bobby moaned. “Oh fuck, I’m there.”

I didn’t have the strength to swallow, I let his semen slide from my mouth, onto my swinging breasts and the floor.

“God-fucking-dammit,” Adriano whispered.

“Perfection,” Eli agreed. “Absolute and total perfection.”

A second later, it was like a switch was flipped. Warm, wet towels appeared from nowhere, wiping me clean, gentle hands stroking my cheeks and brushing my sweaty hair from my eyes.

“You are so loved,” Bobby crooned. “So, so, loved, January Whitehall.”

“Adored,” Adriano agreed.

“Worshiped.”

I could hear from Doc’s voice he was concentrating on something. I turned and saw him wiping a dildo clean. Just a

standard, pink fleshy dildo. Beside him was another, smaller one. “Oh, thank God!”

Doc frowned. “What?”

“I thought you were using a...police baton or a Pringles can! Or-or something really messed up!”

The others burst out laughing but Doc looked offended. “Give me a fuckin’ break, Tesorina. I’m not a sadist.”

Eli rubbed his warm washcloth over my shoulder. “Yes, you are.”

“Yeah, but like... I’d never bang a girl with a Pringles can.”

We kept laughing. Adriano bent down to gently clean my new tattoo, a look of softness on his scarred face.

“Come on guys, back me up here.” Doc looked at Bobby. “You believe me, right?”

Bobby slumped onto the couch with his eyes closed. “Shut up, Valente.”

When I was clean, Eli dragged me to the master bathroom and put me in the tub with about four pounds of Epsom salts.

“You are going to be seduced a great deal here,” he warned as he massaged the balls of my feet. “We’re stressed and we will need relief. But if you ever get sick of us pawing at you, just say the word and I’ll make everyone leave you alone.”

I remembered smiling at the sweetness and unnecessariness of the statement. “I think I’ll be fine.”

“I want you to be more than fine, my ruby. I want you to be happy.”

I gave him a tiny salute. “At your service, Mr. Morelli.”

Eli narrowed his eyes at me. “Are you trying to get fucked in the bath, little girl? Do you want another load in your slutty little pussy?”

I nodded.

Eli was right though. Since that night the sex has been non-stop. I'm sleeping with him and Bobby in the morning and then Adriano and Doc in the afternoon and sometimes one of them will get bored and join in again. In the evenings it's usually a three-way or a foursome with whoever's interested and a few times I've taken turns going down on them, while they watch TV, servicing them one after the other. I can only imagine what strangers might think, but to me, it's the best kind of fake degradation. The idea that I've been paid for, that I'm a maid these four gorgeous men have hired to use in their cabin hideaway.

I don't think the sex is a bad thing. It's purifying all of us. Reminding us that we're human and that even if someone hurts us, we can still feel pleasure. That we're alive and whole and able to take care of each other.

There is one problem. I never got my phone back after the wedding which means I can't track my cycle...and I'm pretty sure my period is late. That's not such a huge deal but I'm usually regular and my nipples are sore. And things are starting to smell weird. I was basting a venison roast last night and something about the rich, bloody smell almost made me throw up into the tray.

I know what that means, but I can't say it. I can't even think it. To acknowledge it, even in my own mind is too terrifying. Who knows how long we're going to be in this cabin and if I tell the guys I'm...*different* they might do something drastic. Doc will want to take me to a hospital and hook me up to every medical device there is. Eli might decide to send me away to Naples—which he debated when we first came to the safe house. Adriano could decide there's no way he can let my baby and Mr. Parker exist at the same time and try to invade Parker's compound and kill him. And Bobby... well, Bobby is the most reasonable one, but he'd still tell the others.

So, it's my secret.

Besides, people have gotten and stayed...the way I am... for tens of thousands of years without medicine. And Zia Teresa once told me a lot of women miscarry in the first few weeks of...this. That could easily happen to me. Maybe it would be better if it did. It doesn't feel like the right time.

In fact, I'm sure it's not.

Which is why this morning when Eli retreated to the secure room and Doc, Bobby, and Adriano went hunting, I focused on making walnut soda bread and rabbit and red wine stew. And now the bread is baking, and the soup is simmering away while I'm sitting at the kitchen counter reading an old copy of Vogue magazine and drinking peppermint tea.

There's no need to panic. None at all.

"Hello, *bella*."

I turn and see Eli climbing the stairs to the kitchen. His dark hair is longer than I've ever seen it, curling, almost to his collar. He hates it but I think it suits him. It makes him look like an old-fashioned knight. A romantic hero from some other time. He's wearing a crimson sweater with a small hole in the neck and somehow, he makes it look like high fashion.

"How's work?" I ask.

He shrugs, which means there are no changes. "How are you? Are your men still off hunting moose?"

I raise a brow. "Moose?"

"Adriano claims it tastes more like steak than venison. I doubt that very much, but I think they need the challenge."

I laugh though inwardly I'm wondering what the heck I'll do with moose meat. I've never even heard of cooking moose. I notice Eli watching me with such naked affection I have to glance away. "Um... Hi?"

"Hello." Eli walks up to my chair and wraps his arms around me. "If I didn't know you were an angel before, I have absolutely no doubt of it now."

I smile. “Thank you, Daddy.”

He presses his stubbled face against my cheek. “You like being here.”

“I do,” I admit. “At least I like the cooking. And how close we all are. Living at Velvet House is like living in an old-timey mall sometimes.”

He huffs a laugh into my hair then his hands drop to my breasts, braless through my T-shirt as they usually are these days. He gently teases my nipples through the fabric. “You’re my little goddess of the hearth. My Esther.”

To my surprise, I feel tears burning in my eyes. It can be overwhelming sometimes, to be so loved. Like a few days ago when Adriano, Bobby, and Doc, all separately brought me wildflowers. It’s like a skill to be so adored, to expand your heart and take them all in. To adore them in return.

“When we get home, I will drown you in diamonds,” Eli mutters. “I will give you everything your heart desires. You will only have to think it and it will be yours.”

I smile. “Thank you, but I’m starting to like second-hand clothes. That way it doesn’t matter if I get food on them. Or anything else.”

“You’re better than we deserve, *bella*.” Eli moves away from me, stretching his arms above his head, and it occurs to me that his skin looks brighter, the whites of his eyes whiter.

“You like it here too,” I accuse. “You look well rested and...happy.”

“I agree I’m sleeping better,” he says. “I’m drinking less too. But still...”

He pins me with a very different look from the soft one he gave me before. Like he can see all through me, every thought, every random dream. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me?”

I fight to keep my hands from my belly. “N-no.”

“Hmm.” He moves closer, his hands stroking from my shoulders to my sides. I suck in a breath. He can’t know. All four of my men have been touching me like this ever since they began finishing inside me.

“You are my beautiful little love,” Eli says and the note in his voice scares me. Not hard exactly, but sharp.

“Thank you,” I whisper, wishing I was better at lying.

Eli’s finger lifts my chin, draws my gaze to his. “There is nothing you can do or say that will change how I feel for you.”

Something inside me glows, as though what’s happening will not, cannot be denied. I take a deep breath. “Elliot?”

Eli’s eyes are steady, serious, as fixed on me as the sunlight on the moon. “Yes?”

A knock on the door makes us both laugh.

“Saved by the returning conquerors,” Eli says, striding to the entrance. “But you will tell me, as soon as—”

He throws open the door and time freezes.

It’s not Doc, Bobby, or Adriano. It’s not a cop or a stranger. It’s Mr. Parker, in bright red snow gear with a gun in his hand.

“Outside,” he says. “Both of you. Now.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

January Whitehall

“I’LL GIVE YOU credit, Morelli. You were hard to find, but we got there in the end.” Mr. Parker grins over the barrel of his gun, gesturing us forward. Eli and I move onto the front steps, our hands raised. Time seems to have slowed down. I can see every swirling flake of snow, hear every creak of wood under our feet, the male shouts from the distant woods. I can’t believe we opened the door without checking who it was. We’ve grown relaxed as the weeks passed and now here we are, on the edge of another nightmare.

The boys, I think. Where are the others?

There’s a van waiting in the snow, a huge grey one like the type we stole from outside the wedding, and a dozen men standing around it, holding huge guns.

“Have you been expecting this?” Mr. Parker drawls. “Or did you really think you could hide away forever?”

Eli says nothing, the contempt pouring from him like waves. There’s no fear, no panic, only pure unadulterated disgust. Mr. Parker tries to hold his gaze, but he fails and glances away. “Get in the fucking van, Morelli.”

Eli gives a half-laugh. “Why would I agree to that?”

“Because your men are still alive, but it doesn’t have to stay that way.”

“Proof?”

Mr. Parker pulls out his phone and hits the screen. “Bronson. Proof of life.”

A second later he shows Eli the screen. It’s a photo of Doc, Bobby, and Adriano sitting in the snow. Blood is dripping from Bobby’s hairline and one of Adriano’s eyes has swollen shut but they’re alive. Doc looks completely unharmed but totally different. Like someone was wearing a Halloween costume of his skin. His eyes are open, his irises ice blue against white. His teeth bared.

“That could be an old photograph. They could still be dead,” Eli says with a coolness that once would have shocked me. Since my time at Velvet House, I know I’ve changed—there is steel in my soul. I am standing silently; I am not crying. I am in control.

“Fair point.” Mr. Parker dials his phone again. “Get them to sing, Bronson.”

Eli and I listen as Doc, Bobby, and Adriano are made to grunt in turn. My stomach flips and I press my hands to my belly, willing myself not to react. They’re alive. They’re all still here, which means everything can still be okay.

“What exactly is your plan, Zachery?” Eli says in that same cool, teacher-pointing-out-your-mistake voice. “Are you going to kill me on my doorstep?”

“My plan is you’re getting in the fucking van.” Mr. Parker points his gun at the vehicle. “Hurry along now.”

Eli doesn’t move. “You’re not taking January.”

Mr. Parker’s gaze finds mine for the first time and his thick lips curl into a greasy smile. “That’s a-perfect-a,” he says, mocking Eli’s accent. “Because I have no intention of bringing the cunt.”

My vision goes wavy as water. “He’s going to kill me. I’m going to die.”

Mr. Parker laughs and I realize I said it aloud.

“I’m not killing her,” Mr. Parker tells Eli. “I’m not fucking up the Bianchi contract that badly.”

“What do you mean?” Eli demands. “You’ve fucked up the Bianchi contract, irreparably.”

“That’s what you think.”

“You can’t seriously believe the contract is still in play after you shot up Bianchi’s wedding?”

“Why not?”

Eli stares at him, not wanting to play his game but clearly baffled.

“Bianchi’s on my side,” Parker says. “Or he will be. He understands I did what I had to reclaim respect and more importantly, his son is one of Orchard’s biggest investors. He’ll back me to the hilt and so will Bianchi.”

“In other words, you’ve been hiding from him, terrified he’ll put you in your place,” Eli says with a ghost of a smile.

Mr. Parker shakes his head. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know Orchard isn’t yours. It belongs to Velvet House and that will be the story regardless of what lies you tell.”

“Not if you’re dead.”

Eli straightens. “Even if you say you invented the drug, you can’t release it. There’s no chance you’ve counteracted the poisonous elements.”

“Why not?”

“Because if Domenico Valente couldn’t do it, then you don’t stand a chance.”

Mr. Parker laughs. “I’ve got a team of scientists, Morelli. Guys from Japan, South Korea, Sweden. Twenty different minds on one tiny little problem. It’s only a matter of time. Especially when the creator is going to be involved.”

“That’s why you’re kidnapping us?”

“Partly. The rest is because I want to fucking kill you.”

“Then you might as well do it now,” Eli snarls. “Doc would cut his hands off before he worked for you.”

“Maybe,” Mr. Parker says casually. “But I’d imagine he’ll cave before he watches me splatter Roberto Bassilotta’s head like an old Halloween pumpkin. Or if I threaten to change my mind about leaving your little sister-wife alone, track her down and have every man that works for me line up and rape her.” He gestures at me with his gun. “You don’t want the little whore getting hurt, do you, Elliot?”

Eli stays silent and Mr. Parker cackles. “You wanted to make me suffer through January. Now I’ll make you suffer the same way. Worse. She was never more than a name and a virgin pussy to me. But you four...” He whistles.

Eli turns to look at me and I can see him mentally running down his options.

Don’t, I think, don’t try to negotiate with him. He’ll only use it against you.

But Eli returns his gaze to Mr. Parker, one hand on his chest. “Zachery, everything I have, my family’s wealth, my jewels, Velvet House, the rights to Orchard. I will give them all to you, just let us go. Let us leave the US. We’ll never come back.”

Mr. Parker laughs. “What so you can bide your time and come after me again?”

“No. All we want is to live in peace with our family.”

The way he says *family* makes my heart buckle like a train track. He knows the thing I can’t even admit out loud. That I’m pregnant. That I’m carrying their baby.

“Fuck you, I don’t need your money,” Mr. Parker says. “Once I synthesize Orchard, I’ll be the richest man on earth. People will say *Parker* the way they say Gates. Jobs. Musk.”

“I can think of better men to compare you to,” Eli says. “Gaddafi. Ceaușescu. Mussolini.”

“Bateman,” I add, and Eli laughs.

Mr. Parker’s face grows dark as thunder. He points the blind barrel of the gun at me. “Get back in your little safe house and shut the door, bitch.”

I don’t move, but my mind starts doing somersaults. There are so many guns and weapons behind me, but I don’t know how to use them well enough to save Eli. Mr. Parker must have disabled our security system and God knows I can’t make it start again.

“January,” Eli’s voice is low. “Go inside the cabin.”

I grab his arm. “Not without you.”

A flash of red catches my eye. Staggering out of the van is Emilia. She looks terrible. Cold sores crust her lips, and her pupils are big as houses and pointing in different directions. She doesn’t seem to know where she is.

“Boss,” one of the thugs calls. “She’s uh, *out*.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Mr. Parker howls. “Get back in the fucking van!”

Emilia sways on her feet. Her jacket is beautiful, pony skin with a fur lining and her thick copper hair is loose around her shoulders, but I know the look on her face. She’s going to puke. I take an involuntary step toward her, and Eli holds me back. “No, *bella*.”

We watch as Emilia vomits into the snow. A short greenish stream that looks like Slurpee. Despite everything else that’s happening my heart scrunches like a paper ball.

“Goddammit,” Parker shouts. “Charlie, get her a fucking wet wipe!”

As everyone’s distracted, Eli pulls me close, kisses my ear. “Go inside, my ruby, wait until you know we’re gone and—”

“Hey,” Mr. Parker demands. “Shut the fuck up!”

His face is very pink, and I know he’s angry this isn’t going the way he wanted. That nothing ever does. He lives in a

fantasy world where he's cool and powerful and all anyone does is disappoint him by being real.

As though to prove this, Emilia makes a sound somewhere between a snort and a moan and falls on all fours into her own puke. I move without thinking, run toward her and turn her over. She's thin as bones and the color beneath her makeup is terrible. I use my sweater sleeve to wipe her mouth.

"Are you okay?" I ask. "Can you breathe?"

For a second she stares at me, vacant as an empty house and then she blinks and it's like a new woman is looking through her face. Her gaze focuses, and I know what she's thinking.

I hate him. I hate myself. I would do anything to get out of this.

Then her hand fumbles, she pulls open her fur-lined jacket and I see a short hunting knife. The kind Adriano would use to skin a rabbit.

Take it, her eyes say. Kill him.

My heart stops. I could take it and stab Mr. Parker. The guards might try to shoot me, but Eli could run back into the cabin and get a gun. Turn the security system back on. Mouth dry, I reach for the knife...and Emilia closes her jacket.

"No..." she moans. "No."

"There, there," I say loudly, trying to open her coat and get the knife but she pulls back, batting my hand away.

Asshole!

Behind me, Mr. Parker snorts. "She doesn't want your help you dumb twat. Get away from her."

Strong hands grip my shoulders and haul me back onto my feet. Mr. Parker's guards. They walk me back to the house and before I can call out to Eli, they toss me inside and slam the door. I try to open it but one of them is holding it closed. I rush to the window and see Eli nodding. Watch him allow Mr.

Parker's men to zip-tie his hands. Watch him walk to the van, his handsome head bowed. I'm screaming. Screaming and pounding on the glass, but I know he can't hear me. No one can. The cabin is soundproofed.

Mr. Parker hauls Emilia up by her fur collar and slaps her like he's punctuating a sentence. She goes limp in his arms, and he drags her into the van behind Eli. Then he approaches the front door. My brain goes blank. He lied to Eli. He's coming back to kill me. I look around for a weapon, picking up a fire poker and raising it just as the door opens.

"Not a chance," Mr. Parker says, pointing the gun at me. "I just want to tell you something."

"What?"

"Your stepmother helped me plan all of this. She wants you dead."

I frown. Surely, he doesn't think that's news?

Frustration flashes over Mr. Parker's face. "You heard me, bitch? Your stepmother tried to get you killed."

"Oh no..." I say, trying for sincere shock.

Mr. Parker grins. "Yup, but we're going to see her right after this, sweetie. That money-grubbing whore's gonna get what's coming to her."

Panic, real, liquid panic tears through me. I lower the poker. "What do you mean? Are you going to Corinne's house?"

Mr. Parker beams at me. He looks like a little boy who finally got the reaction he wanted. "I guess you'll find out."

"What does that mean? *What do you mean?*"

But Mr. Parker just grins and slams the door shut, leaving me all alone.



CHAPTER TWELVE

January Whitehall

I MOVE LIKE I'm underwater, my insides shifting and turning. I make it to the operations room, peering into the retinal scanner to unlock it. There's a speakerphone in the middle of the table, a secure emergency line to the outside world. Beside it is Eli's small, leather-bound book of contacts. I pick it up and wonder who I could possibly call. Who could come and help me? No one from my past. No one from Velvet House. Zia Teresa is dead and there's a chance Mr. Bianchi is fine with all of this. I need to find someone I can trust. I flip through pages of unknown names and wonder if I could save my men myself. But that's so unrealistic. Adriano taught me to hunt, to shoot, but I can barely kill a deer without crying, let alone break locks or kick down doors. What I am is a nineteen-year-old pregnant bartender.

Because I am pregnant. That is undeniable. I'm pregnant with a kidnapped man's baby and I need to get all its potential fathers back. My hands start to shake, and I lean on the table to steady myself, then I remember the last time I felt like I was in an impossible situation. Trapped in a limo with Mr. Parker on my way to be forced to marry him in Vegas until—

The Baskerville twins. Bill and Archie. The ones who rescued me from that helpless place. The gun-toting, gangster enforcers who want to be a part of Velvet House.

"Please," I whisper, flipping through the contact book. "Please be here. Please."

Both numbers are. Baskerville, Archie and Baskerville, Bill.

I dial Archie with shaky fingers, holding my breath in case I scare him away.

“Hello,” says a slow southern drawl. “What can I do for you?”

“*Archie,*” to my surprise my voice comes out clipped. Strong. “It’s January Whitehall. Are you okay to talk?”

A short pause.

“Sure, Kitten? Where have you all been? No one’s seen you since—”

“You need to come and help me. You and Bill, right away.”

“I—what?”

“The boys have been taken by Mr. Parker. He came to our Vermont safe house and abducted all of them and left me behind and I need you to come get me and help me rescue them.”

That all sounds straightforward to me, but it takes a long time to explain things to Archie and when I’m done, he puts me on speaker and makes me explain it to Bill all over again.

“Shit,” Bill says when I’m done. “Where do you think he’s taken them?”

“I don’t know,” I say, tears spilling from my eyes. “Do you know? Has Mr. Parker told you anything?”

“No, but we’ve been in Miami running a job. Did he say anything, anything about where he might be going?”

I think about what Mr. Parker told me when he returned to the safe house. “My stepmother. They’ve been working together. He was going to see her at my old house. Maybe she knows where Mr. Parker took the boys?”

That sounds bananas to me, but Bill makes a thoughtful noise. “I wouldn’t be surprised, Kitten. They’ve been real

close these last couple months.”

There’s a pause and I know we’re all thinking about Corinne and Mr. Parker sleeping together. I press a hand to my chest, willing my heart to keep beating, keep me and the tiny human inside me alive. “Okay, well what do we do?”

There’s a sound like keys being picked up.

“We’re coming to you, Kitten,” Archie says. “Right away, we’ll fly to Vermont and—”

“But you don’t know where I am,” I say frantically. “We’re near a town called Staybrooke, but that’s like an hour away. We’re in the forest and—”

“That’s not a problem,” Bill says. His voice is slightly deeper and slower than Archie’s.

“I can get into Parker’s system. I can see his helicopter landed in the state forest two hours ago and—”

“Yes,” I practically scream. “That’s where we are!”

“Then stay put,” Bill says firmly. “Lock the doors and stay put. We’ll be with you in ten hours. Less if we’re lucky.”

“Thank you,” I babble. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Don’t thank us,” Archie says. “This has been a long time coming, Kitten.”

And before I can ask what he means, the line disconnects.

The hours pass in painful slowness. I try to sleep, try to eat, and I can’t manage either. So, I focus on singing, just like I did when I was alone in the Velvet House basement. I sing every song that comes to mind. I sing until my voice gives out, but I keep going because whenever I stop, I see Mr. Parker and his gun. The photo of Doc, Bobby, and Adriano in the snow. Emilia throwing up.

Finally, when my vocal cords have nothing left to give and I’m forced into silence, I curl up on the couch with Bobby’s patchwork blanket. I imagine what’s happening to my men.

The fathers of my child. My husbands. Because that's what they are. My heart begins to pulse so hard it hurts. It would be so easy to slip into panic, to run out into the snow screaming and pleading for Eli to come back but I can't allow that to happen. If I'm going to be any use to the twins and to the men I love, I need to be brave.

Although I've never felt less tired, I must have fallen asleep because I wake to the sound of glass breaking.

My whole body goes stiff with panic, freezing me solid until I hear a voice. "It's us, Kitten. Bill and Archie."

I stand, the blanket falling to the floor. "I'm here! I'm coming!"

I love my husbands like no one else, but the sight of the Baskerville twins, handsome and identical in their bulletproof vests, brings tears to my eyes. "You guys! You came!"

"Of course, we did," Archie says, pulling me into a one-armed hug. "How are you?"

I can't think of an answer, so I just hug him and then Bill, avoiding the guns shoved strapped to their sides. Bill releases me quickly. "What's the plan?"

I gape at them. "I thought you... Do you know where Mr. Parker is?"

Bill shakes his head. "He's closed ranks. In the time we were getting here, everyone's been locked out of his system."

My heart falls to my shoes. "So, what do we do? Do we go to my stepmom's house?"

Bill and Archie exchange looks. "Is that...? Do you wanna go home?" Archie asks.

"No, but Mr. Parker was there. She'll know where he is. She must."

Bill nods slowly. "It's something."

"It's nothing," Archie says. "It's a Nancy Drew conspiracy from some teenage piece of ass—no offense, sweetheart."

I glare at him. “Offense taken. I’ve been living at Velvet House for a year. I know about this stuff. Maybe not as well as you and Bill but since you don’t have any ideas, we’ll do my one.”

“New York is six hours away,” Archie says.

“So? Why did you come here if it wasn’t to help me save the guys?”

“To protect you,” Bill says simply. “We saved you in that limo, Kitten. We don’t want you to die out here on your own.”

“But I don’t want my men to die,” I shout back. “You have to help me find them.”

Archie laughs, though his eyes are cold. “We don’t work for free, Kitten. Especially when it’s a suicide mission. Which this is.”

“Fine.” I put my hands on my hips. “If you help me on *my suicide mission*, I will give you everything in my bank account which is five million dollars.”

Archie and Bill exchange looks. Archie tilts his head and Bill frowns as though they’re having a whole conversation.

My stomach gurgles and I press a hand to it, thinking of the tiny thing growing in me. The thought of mentioning the baby comes and I dismiss it... I will not appeal to them with softness. I will use my strength and cunning and power like Eli and the others would.

“Do you need proof I mean business?” I ask. “Fine.”

I walk to Eli’s corner safe and enter the combination—34, 78, 92—and pull out my ruby necklace, the one Eli put around my neck when I first came to Velvet House.

“Here’s the down payment,” I tell the twins. “Take it.”

Archie stares at the stones, his eyes glittering like a snake’s, and I see longing but also fear. “If your men come out of this alive, they’ll kill us for taking your cash.”

“If my men come out of this alive, I’ll remind them that we saved them, and they’ll have no choice but to appreciate that,” I say, again surprised by how calm I sound.

Archie gives me a rueful smile. “You make a nice point.”

I hold out the necklace. “So, take this, and let’s go to my stepmom’s house.”

“But Mr. Morelli—”

“Is captured,” I remind him. “And if he dies, he won’t be able to be angry about anything, much less rubies.”

Bill shakes his sandy head. “This is a wild goose chase, Kitten. Your men could already be dead, or worse.”

“No,” I say loudly. “Mr. Parker isn’t going to kill anyone until he can convince Doc to help him make Orchard. Are you taking me to New York or not?”

Archie and Bill swap another glance then Bill steps forward and takes the necklace from my hand. “Go get changed into boots and jeans. Lots of layers.”

It takes half an hour to dress, collect supplies, and get on the road. Archie and Bill are all strapped up like we’re going to war and I’m in my special-order fatigues and bulletproof vest, my gun strapped to my leg, just the way Adriano wears his. It might be overkill, but it makes me feel better. Less unprepared.

Archie and Bill abandon the beat-up Corolla they drove to the safe house, and we climb into Doc’s truck. It smells like Eli’s lavender cologne and as I buckle myself into the back seat tears burn in my eyes. I swipe them away, furious with myself for letting the emotions escape.

“Six hours to Manhattan,” Archie says, cranking up the heating.

I turn and watch the safe house shrink in the rear window. Who knows if I’ll ever see it again? If I’ll ever want to.

Please, I pray. Let them be okay. Let me find them, Zia, God, whoever. Please let me save them.

Snow swirls past as Bill slowly makes his way down the mountain, when we hit the main road, Archie looks back at me. “Did Parker really shoot up the Bianchi wedding?”

“I think so. He definitely tried to poison...the guys with Orchard,” I finish, unable to say their names. “When that didn’t work, I think he tried to shoot them, but he only got Bobby in the shoulder.”

Archie stares through me, his mind clearly a million miles away. “Shooting up a mafia wedding,” he says slowly. “I know Parker’s a dumbass but even I can’t believe he’d be that stupid.”

I remember the look in his eyes as he watched Emilia be sick. His manic stare when he came back to talk to me in the safe house. “I don’t think he’s very sane anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter if he’s crazier than a bag of Roadhouse cats,” Bill says quietly. “He’s got enough men and enough firepower to end us a hundred times over. Bianchi too maybe. He’s managed to survive this long.”

We sit in silence, weighing that fact.

But the boys are alive, I tell myself. Doc will help Mr. Parker with Orchard. He’ll keep the others safe until we get there.

Bill’s blue eyes find mine in the mirror. “This could end badly, Kitten. In fact, it probably will. You know that?”

I subtly press a hand to my belly. “Yes. But I need to try. I won’t be able to live with myself otherwise.”

Bill nods. “That’s all we need to know.”

The hours slip by as we race along grey freeways. The pain in my chest and heart increases as I keep a tight grip on the door handle. I trust Archie and Bill, at least not to sell me out but part of me is ready to jump from the car and run. To do whatever I have to survive and find the men I love.

It's night time when we reach my old neighborhood. As we pass familiar parks and houses a cold sweat rushes down my spine and I wrap my fingers even more tightly around the door handle. I haven't been back here since my botched wedding to Mr. Parker. I hoped I'd never be back.

"Ready?" Archie asks.

"Of course," I lie.

Standing in the shadow of my old house, I feel as small as I always did. It's five stories tall but it feels bigger. Full of secrets and grudges and lies. My mama died here. My daddy died here too, behind his desk. But neither of those things is as terrifying as the knowledge Corinne is inside, darkening the Whitehall mansion with her dark, selfish moods.

Archie slams the car door behind me, making me start.

"Sorry," he says. "You sure you can handle this, Kitten?"

"Yes." I straighten my shoulders and touch the gun on my thigh. I'm not the best shot, but at close range, I don't have to be. If Corinne tries to hurt me, I'm not going to let her.

We walk up the painfully familiar garden path, Archie, and Bill behind me like my bodyguards Kurt and Theo used to do. I wonder where Theo is now. Probably on an island, eating barbecue pork ribs with no shoes on.

I use the heavy knocker, the way the family always does when they've left their keys somewhere else. Footsteps approach and all three of us draw a breath. But the woman who opens the door is a stranger. She's small and middle-aged and her puffy eyes make it seem like she's been crying for hours. She catches one sight of us and tries to slam the door but Archie shoves past me, keeping it open.

"No more!" The woman wails in a heavy Italian accent. "No more."

"I'm sorry," I say in a soothing voice. "This is my old house. I'm January Whitehall, who are you?"

"Rosaelia. *Housekeeper.*"

I look at the small woman. She's the one who baked the Orchard into all the treats. Or was made to. I swallow my anger and point to the winding staircase. "Where is my stepmother? Is she up here?"

Rosaelia takes one look at me and runs away, down the hall toward the kitchen.

Archie takes a step after her, but I put a hand on his arm. "Let her go. She's not our problem. Corinne will be upstairs."

"You're the boss, Kitten."

I lead them up the staircase and onto the first floor. Everything looks familiar but with tiny differences: new vases, new positions for lamps and houseplants.

Archie pauses in front of Daddy's Francis Bacon painting. "This is where you grew up?"

He sounds a little dazed and I understand why. It's not as old as Velvet House but Daddy's mansion is beautiful. We could be walking through a house in the 1920s, men in three-piece suits and hats, and women in drop-waist dresses coming down the hall for cocktail hour. We climb the stairs to the second floor and pause. I can hear a woman sobbing, someone who isn't Rosaelia. For a moment I wonder if Corinne is crying, and what I'll do if she is, then the noise grows louder, and I realize it's Margot in one of the spare bedrooms. "Margot?"

The crying stops abruptly. "January?"

I try the door handle, but it's locked. "What are you doing? Can you let me in?"

"I can't. It's locked from the outside." There's a patter of feet and I feel Margot press into the other side of the door. "How did you get here? What's happening?"

"I need to find Mr. Parker," I tell her. "Did he come here? Does Corinne know where he is?"

Margot begins to sob again, loud violent sobs. I turn to the twins who look as confused as I feel.

“Is he still here?” I ask. “Did he lock you in?”

“No,” Margot wails. “He left.”

A huge jolt of adrenaline goes through me. “But he was here?”

She says something but it’s impossible to hear through her crying.

“Did he hurt you?” I call through the door. “What did he do?”

Bill touches my shoulder. “We need to keep moving.”

I chew my lip. I want to comfort Margot, or even just let her out but she doesn’t seem to be in physical pain or danger.

“We’ll be back,” I tell my sister and lead Archie and Bill further up the hall.

“At least we know he was here,” Archie mutters. “Apologies, Nancy Drew.”

“That’s fine,” I say primly. We clear the second floor and go up another level. As soon as we hit the third floor there’s a rattle from my brother Harris’s old bedroom.

“Corinne?” I call as Archie and Bill raise their guns.

“No, you fucking asshole! It’s me.”

I start. It’s my brother, Harris. “What are you doing here?” I ask. “Why are you so angry?”

The doorknob shakes violently. “Because I’m locked in here with no bathroom, no water, no food, and if you’d married that asshole none of this would have happened. Let me the fuck out!”

I stare at the door, frantically trying to wrap my head around what’s happening. Harris wasn’t living at home when I was engaged to Mr. Parker, I have no idea why he’d be here.

“January, you useless slut.” Harris kicks his door. “Let me out now!”

I gasp, wounded by the words and Archie bangs on the door with his fist. “Pipe the fuck down or I’ll come in there and shoot you.”

“I... Who are you?” Harris asks in a completely different voice.

“None of your business, son.” Archie turns to me. “Is your whole family here?”

“I... Yes. Maybe,” I manage, still shocked by Harris’s insults. “I don’t know why.”

“I do,” Archie says grimly. “Lemme guess, son. Parker offered you money to show up here today? Maybe a cushy job? Maybe both?”

Silence from behind Harris’ door.

“Mystery solved.” Archie kicks the door. “You’re lucky you’re not dead, rich kid.” He turns to me. “Let’s keep moving, Kitten.”

“No,” Harris whines. “January, I didn’t mean it. Tell your boyfriend I’m sorry.”

I push a hand to my chest, the idea that Eli, Doc, Bobby, or Adriano is here is more painful than any of the insults.

“January,” Harris repeats. “You need to let me out. Parker came here. He hurt Corinne.”

“What do you mean, ‘hurt her?’” Archie asks. “She dead?”

“No. He...” Harris falls silent and the spiraling seconds that follow are scarier than anything he could have said. I watch the door, waiting for the answer.

Bill takes my arm. “We need to go. Come on.”

“Please let me out?” Harris begs.

Archie kicks the door again. “No chance dickhead. You’ll keep.” He points his gun up the hall. “Lead the way, Kitten. We’ve got your back.”

I cast my brother's door one last look and we continue searching. We pass Lachlan's room and as I try to reassure him that I'll come back and let him out, he punches a wall and calls me a skank bitch.

"Christ," Bill mutters. "Your brothers are a pair of assholes."

I'm too numb, too overwhelmed to defend Harris and Lachlan. "Pretty much."

As the three of us make our way down the empty halls, a voice gets louder in the back of my mind, telling me to turn and run. I grit my teeth in response and picture my men. Bobby. Doc. Adriano. Eli. I picture them smiling, laughing, and the looks on their faces when I find them and free them. They need me. *I can keep going for them.*

Finally, we reach the room where in my heart I knew my stepmother would be. The master dining room. She's sitting at her usual chair at the fourteen-seater table, fingering a crystal glass full to the brim with vodka or gin. Only she's wearing a long black veil. It reminds me of the one I wore to Zia Teresa's funeral so no one would know I was there.

Mr. Parker must have hit her.

The thought brings me no pleasure. It's as ugly as everything else in this haunted house. I take a step toward the table. "Hello, Corinne."

She says nothing.

I feel Archie and Bill moving at my back and I draw strength from our numbers. Their guns. I'm determined not to screw this up. To act like the scared, intimidated girl I once was.

I draw a deep breath. "I need to know where Mr. Parker is. I know he's been here. Where is he going? Where did he take Eli and the others?"

She says nothing.

A drop of sweat drips from my hairline, down the back of my neck. I press a palm to the gun on my thigh. I was praying I wouldn't have to threaten her but we're running out of time. I try again. "Corinne, I need to know where Mr. Parker is, and if you don't tell me—"

"He's gone."

My stepmother's voice is raspy, like she's been crying, or singing, for hours.

I swallow. "Gone where?"

"To his compound. He's got your men too. Or what's left of them."

My mouth fills with bile. "You saw them?"

The veil shakes.

"But Mr. Parker told you he's got them?"

A nod.

I turn to the twins. "Can you guys still get us into his compound?"

"Maybe..." Archie's eyes are on the shrouded figure of Corinne. "How do you know she's not lying, Kitten? This could be a trap."

A thin laugh makes me whip around. "What?" I demand.

"Sorry," my stepmother touches her cheek through her veil. "But the idea I'd bother deceiving you is hilarious. It's over my *darling stepdaughter*. Parker got everything he wanted. He's taken your men and they're probably already dead. All of them except the blond. He needs him for Orchard."

A shock goes through me at hearing her mention the drug Doc invented. "Doc is never going to help him make Orchard if he kills the others."

She shrugs. "Then he'll kill him too."

"You don't know that."

Another tinkling laugh. “I know Parker better than anyone. He wants Orchard. He’s been obsessed with it for years. Marrying you was more than just about getting your virginity or your name. Your uncle Wilson sits on the board for Procter & Gamble. He wants the funding to be able to manufacture it. Sell it to the world. It’s all he cares about.”

“And what do you care about?” Archie asks roughly. “What the fuck did you want out of all of this?”

Corinne tilts her head toward him and even through the cloth I know she’s sneering. “I wanted what I was owed.”

“And that is?”

Corinne turns back toward me and when she speaks it’s in a light almost dreamy voice. “You know I used to want children of my own. I wanted to secure my future with your father, but then I watched your stupid mother die in the middle of her bed giving birth to *you* and there went *that* idea.”

I flinch.

“You asked what I wanted,” Corinne says quietly to Archie. “All I wanted was security. To be safe and happy and now... I have nothing.”

“That’s not true,” I say before I can stop myself. “You had Daddy for years and this house and...and *us*. How could you have done this to Margot and the boys and me?”

It sounds pathetic, even to my ears but I still wasn’t expecting her to laugh, a real laugh, rich as butter.

“How?” she laughs again. “Because I hate all of you. Your pathetic brothers, your miserable sister. You stole my youth. Ruined my life. Your father was supposed to take care of me, instead, he died and left me in this mess.”

She waves her hand around as though she’s sitting in a garbage heap instead of at a mahogany table in a gorgeous manor house and I realize that she and Mr. Parker are the same. Life is never enough for them. Nothing is. Their eyes

are always fixed on the horizon, their mouths open, consuming everything, tasting nothing.

“Then stay in this mess,” I tell my ex-stepmother. “It’s all yours.”

I turn away from her in disgust.

“We need to go,” I say to Archie and Bill. “We need to get to the compound and—”

“You’re a stubborn disobedient whore,” Corinne says, and I hear the alcohol slur in her voice. “I should have sent your Zia away. She corrupted you.”

I ignore her and focus on Archie and Bill. “Should we take a different car? Corinne’s Bugatti or—”

“I let Parker’s men into the house to attack her.”

The blow lands with a dull thud, obliterating every other thought. I turn back to the shadow of my stepmother. “You... what?”

Corinne laughs, her fake tinkling laugh. “After your father died, Teresa offered to take you. To adopt you or let you live in her house. I refused, not because I loved you but because I knew you were my golden goose. My way out of this shithole.”

“You’re so *awful*,” I say, pressing a hand to my chest. “You’re just the meanest, worst person.”

Another thin laugh. “Maybe. But you don’t need to worry about revenge darling *daughter*. Parker has already taken care of that.”

In a swift motion, she pulls the veil away from her face.

“Fuck off,” Archie says.

Bill takes a step backward. “*Christ.*”

There are three thick, black lines running down Corinne’s forehead, more lines under her eyes, lines across her cheeks. My friend Elisa once dressed up as a witch for Halloween and

she drew the same lines across her face with eyeliner to make it look saggy and prematurely aged. I blink, wondering if Parker attacked Corinne with a Sharpie or something and then I see that every line is surrounded by angry red flesh. The same marks I had after Adriano gave me my tattoo.

My stomach turns. “He didn’t...?”

“He did,” Corinne says, touching the puffy line running from her nose to her ear. “That’s what I get for helping him. He’s destroyed me.”

I bend at the knees, about to puke on the ground like Emilia. Archie or Bill grabs me by the back of my bulletproof vest and holds me up. “Let’s get out of here.”

“He wanted you so badly, January,” Corinne says quietly. “I thought if I helped him kill your boyfriends, he’d forgive me. I was...wrong.”

All my rage floods away like water down a storm drain. I want to say something to express my pity, my sorrow, but looking into her cold blue eyes I see that it wouldn’t matter. She would hate me more for trying to be nice to her.

“Give me those keys,” Bill says roughly. “We’re letting your other stepkids out before we go.”

Corinne snatches up the keys next to her tumbler. “No. I think I might listen to them scream and cry a bit more. Maybe a few days shitting in their bedrooms will make them feel the way I do.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Archie says. “Hand over the keys or—”

She cackles, the lines on her face flexing grotesquely. “You’ll kill me, you inbred idiot?”

Archie’s gun is raised in a second. “Say that again.”

“Archie,” Bill warns. “This ain’t our fight.”

“Listen to your brother, Hillbilly Jim.” Corinne gets to her feet. I watch as she slides the keys onto the table. It feels like a

trap.

“Do you want us to take you to the hospital?” I ask.

“No,” she says almost gently. “I want something else.”

“What is it?”

She smiles, reaching into the pocket of her pantsuit. “I hate you, January. The most out of all you Whitehall brats. I want to ruin your face too. Just as a present before I go.”

My hand is on my gun before she’s finished her sentence. My grip is steady, my head full of cool fire. “Move and I’ll shoot you in the leg.”

My stepmom gives a little scream and almost drops the knife she’s holding. “You couldn’t shoot me.”

“I don’t *want* to shoot you,” I correct. “I’ll do whatever I have to do to get away from you.”

She looks from me to Bill and Archie who are both pointing their guns at her and takes a step forward. Her face looks even worse closer up, deformed. It’s like someone has set fire to the Venus de Milo.

For a moment we wait and then Corinne screams. Screams, and tosses the knife. She runs from the dining room howling like a wild animal.

“Shit,” Archie says, shoving his gun back into his holster. “I’ll get her before she hits the street.”

“Don’t hurt her,” I yell after him. “She doesn’t have a gun. Please don’t—”

But Archie is already gone, and Bill swears and runs after his brother. I’m sure that’s the way it’s always been. Archie first, Bill chasing to protect or stop him from doing something reckless.

I snatch the keys from the dining room table, listening as feet pound on the floors above me. Corinne has gone higher, the twins in pursuit. I hesitate, unsure whether to follow or free my siblings.

I can still hear Corinne screaming, wailing like her heart is going to give out, and then men yelling. Archie saying “no, no, no,” and then Bill. “Don’t, Miss Whitehall! Don’t you even think about—”

Another scream. A winding howl of misery and a dull thump. All noise shutting off suddenly like a tap.

“*Fuck,*” Archie shouts. “Goddammit, she just...”

I sit down at my daddy’s old dining room table, my hand pressed to my stomach. Unless I’m very wrong, my stepmother is gone.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

January Whitehall

MMARGOT IS STILL crying when I unlock the door. She flies at me and for a moment I brace myself, thinking she's going to attack me, but she throws her arms around my neck and starts kissing every part of my face. "I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry, January. I'm an asshole. I don't deserve to know you. I'll get a job. I'll work at IHOP. I don't care, just take me away from here. Get me away from *her*. I'm so sorry."

Behind me, Archie is silent. He confirmed what I already knew: Corinne is dead. She jumped off the rooftop garden and fell fifty feet. Bill is with the body.

"How did you know to come here?" Margot sobs. "Who told you we were locked in?"

"No one," I say, pulling away from her. "Margot, I need to go. We have to get to Mr. Parker's compound."

"What?" Her green eyes go wide with horror. "He's a monster, you can't go near him."

"I have to," I say firmly. "He's kidnapped my men. I need to rescue them."

"But Mom—Corinne?"

I take a deep breath. "She's...dead. She jumped off the roof."

Margot lets out a low moan and buries her face against my shoulder. I turn and catch a glimpse of Archie. His hazel eyes are stormy. Impossible to read. My men wanted my

stepmother dead for months. Did he know? Did he deliberately chase her? Force her hand? I look away. They're questions for another time; we have work to do.

"You're the only one we've let out," I tell Margot. "Lachlan and Harris are too angry, and we don't know how they'll react."

"They wanted Mr. Parker to give them jobs," she says through her tears. "They thought he'd... They thought it would be different."

"I bet. But that doesn't matter now. Archie, Bill, and I have to leave, and you need to call Uncle Edgar and tell him what happened. He'll be able to handle things from here. Can you do that?"

Margot lifts her head, and I can tell she wants to refuse. Uncle Edgar is mean, old as the hills, and refers to every female member of his family as *girl*. But he'll definitely know what to do with Corinne's body and how to slap some sense into my brothers.

"Margot," I say. "I'm counting on you. If you don't call Uncle Edgar someone will phone the police. The neighbors might have already. They could have seen Corinne fall."

Margot draws her shoulders back and looks me right in the eye. "I can call Uncle Edgar. I'll do it right now."

"Good." I turn to Archie. "Let's go."

"Whatever you say, boss."

Margot pauses. "Why's he calling you 'boss?'"

"Because I'm the boss. At least for now. Okay, I'll be back soon."

Fresh tears well in Margot's eyes. "JJ, I'm so sorry—"

"I know and we'll sort it all out. Just hold on and we can talk when I'm back."

Still crying, Margot gives me one last hug and it's not until I'm sitting in Corinne's Bugatti that I realize there's a good

chance I lied, that I'm never coming back.



OUR PLAN FOR infiltrating the compound is only slightly less hair-brained than the one we made for Corinne's house. Thirty minutes away from Parker's place, I climb into the tiny car trunk and curl into the smallest ball possible.

"Our codes should still be able to get us through the gate," Bill tells me as I fold my arms around myself. "And your mom's been to Parker's enough that the Bugatti shouldn't raise the alarm with the garage staff..."

Stepmom, I think. Dead stepmom.

"...But Christ only knows what happens when we get to the underground car park," Bill continues. "All goes well, we'll overpower the night security guy and get you out. We won't have long after that. We'll head to the cells and pray to God we can free the guys."

"What about Mr. Parker?"

"I see him, he's dead," Bill says flatly. "But we've gotta see him first."

I notice his face is grey, his usually sparkling eyes flat as stone. "Bill, you don't have to do this. Even for my money. You can just drop me off and get out of there. That's enough."

He just shakes his head. "We've let this asshole get away with shit for too long."

"Suicide," Archie mutters. "That's what this is, but fuck it, the old boy's right. If we don't take him down, who will?"

He flashes me a classic Baskerville smile. "Three cowboys on a mission from hell, sweetheart. What a way to go."

I try to smile back as Bill lowers the trunk lid, surrounding me in velvet darkness.

It's cramped and hot in the trunk, but I don't mind. I'm more terrified of when we arrive, and I'll have to get out. But just when I think we'll keep driving forever, the car stops and I

hear Bill talking to someone and male laughter, then we move off again on different terrain, smoother, and I know we're on Mr. Parker's driveway.

My body feels like it's made of paper. Bubbles. The most lightweight, defenseless material. We are *in* Parker's compound. It's crazy that his guards don't just start shooting, that they can't already tell they've been breached. The car stops again, and I listen hard for grunts, gunshots, sounds of a fight but there's nothing. Then the trunk snaps open, and I almost scream as artificial light floods my face.

"You okay, boss?" Archie asks, holding out a hand.

"Fine," I say, scrambling out. We're in what looks like an airport car park, dozens of luxury cars spaced out over a football field worth of concrete. But we seem to be totally alone.

"Where is everyone?" I whisper.

"We're in luck," Archie says, talking normally. "Only one guy on and Bill's already dealt with him. Over here."

He leads me to a tiny glass office, and I see Bill sitting behind a computer.

"What's he doing?"

"Come see."

I enter the office and find a middle-aged man unconscious on the floor. "Who...?"

"Ray Teller," Bill says, not looking up from the screen. "Don't worry, he's an asshole. And he's just unconscious."

I realize I'm touching my gun and move my palm away from my thigh holster. Adriano always says the worst thing a guy can do on an assignment is get twitchy.

"The underground way to the cells looks pretty clear," Bill says, looking up. "Parker's got the whole security team with him in the northern block."

I swallow. *Block* makes it sound like we're in a prison, which I guess we are.

"Can you see inside the cells?" I ask. "Are the boys okay?"

"You can't get camera access from this network."

My heart sinks. If I could see Bobby, Doc, Eli, and Adriano, I'd feel like I could fly to the cells and let them out. The idea that I'm so close but I still don't know what's happening hurts.

Bill stays at the computer for what seems like a very long time. Archie explains he's frying as many cameras and security systems as he can but standing around makes me crazy nervous. I feel very small and female and totally useless, and I focus on steadying my breath and avoiding my gun.

We're so close, I tell myself. We can't mess this up now. Everyone's alive and we're going to save them.

Eventually, Bill gets up, hoisting his AK-47 over his shoulder. "I've done all I can do. Time to move, Kitten. As quickly and as quietly as you can."

"Of course."

I follow Bill past a gleaming Rolls Royce and cherry red Cadillac. Archie is behind me, and I feel safer in between their huge identical bodies. We reach a grey door and Bill punches in a code. I hold my breath and it swings open. We head up a long hallway, up short flights of stairs, and through empty rooms full of computers.

"Not far," Bill mutters and my heart leaps into my mouth. Could it be this easy? Just driving up to the garage and getting through the front gate? Could we really just break the boys out and leave without anyone noticing?

"Will there be guards in the cells?" I whisper.

"Depends," Bill says. "Hold tight."

We reach a door and unlike all the others it's painted bright red with a ghoulish dragon on it, its mouth wide open to show

tar-black teeth and a lolling tongue. Its clawed feet are standing on mounds of dead bodies, and I don't need Bill to tell me this leads to the cells. Mr. Parker is many things, but he's not subtle.

"Time to test our luck," Bill says and presses his thumb to a panel by the door.

The light beside it goes green and I almost lift off the floor. "You got it! We're in—"

The screen flashes blue. `PASSCODE REQUIRED`.

"*Fuck!*" Bill and Archie and I say in unison.

Time grinds to a halt as the twins try different combinations. I look around knowing at any moment Mr. Parker's guards could rain bullets on us. I press a hand to the red door, willing my men to feel my presence.

"No one, but Parker can unlock this," Archie moans after what feels like fifty failed attempts. "The code changes every fifty seconds."

Bill tries another code and `PASSCODE REQUIRED` flashes up again. "A geothermic pass would work."

Archie sinks his fists into his blond hair. "How the fuck are we gonna get one, William? Cut off Parker's hands? Pull out his eyes?"

"Can you...take the door off the hinges?" I ask weakly.

"The doors are metal," Bill says impatiently. "Come on, Arch, you know the crew. Parker's gotta have a backup pass. If he dies. If he's overseas. He's gotta have a backup."

Archie releases his hair. "Julian would know, but Parker fucking killed him. Probably because he knew where the fucking geothermic pass was. We need to get out of here, regroup, and pray we don't get shot."

I can't speak. I can't think. My brain is balling up with panic. The idea that we'd have to turn tail and run now is impossible.

“We can’t leave,” Bill says. “There’s a backup pass somewhere.”

“In South Korea maybe. Or halfway into the Atlantic Ocean.”

“Bullshit,” Bill says. “Parker’s a control freak. It’s gotta be nearby. It’s gotta be close.”

It comes like lightning like I always knew the answer. “Guys, I think I know where the pass is.”

Archie and Bill, still arguing don’t hear me.

“I know,” I practically shout. “I know! I know where the pass is!”

They round on me. “What?” Archie demands. “How?”

“Mr. Parker has a tree safe,” I explain. “I bet the pass is there. I bet a bunch of stuff is there.”

Both of them keep staring at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“How...” Archie says slowly. “Would you fuckin’ know that?”

“Hello? Mr. Parker and I were engaged,” I snap, losing my temper. “He used to say a bunch of stuff in front of me because he thought I was a stupid schoolgirl.”

The twins look doubtful.

“Remember how he told his fiancée about the Orchard poisoning at the wedding? He took a call in front of me once about a safe he’d installed in a big tree in his backyard. He sounded really excited about it.”

The twins exchange glances. “We’ve never heard of a tree safe,” Bill says.

“Maybe Mr. Parker killed everyone who knew about it, like Archie said,” I urge. “If that’s where this special pass is, he wouldn’t want you to know, would he?”

Archie and Bill give each other another long, silent look and I can tell they still think I’m nuts.

“Is there a tree Mr. Parker’s weird about?” I ask desperately. “Anything like that?”

Archie’s forehead wrinkles. “There’s this old Oak on the other side of the compound I’ve heard guys talking about.”

“What were they saying?”

“Its roots were fucking up the plumbing nearby, but Parker didn’t want them damaged,” Archie says slowly. “Shit. Maybe you’re right.”

Relief washes through me but I don’t have long to enjoy it.

“You can’t be serious?” Bill demands. “That is the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard.”

“Think about it,” Archie snarls. “Parker doesn’t give a shit about trees. He’s ripped up everything that ever stood in his way. I think we should check out the oak.” He turns to me. “Question is, can we get there? Without being shot.”

“Holy fuck, you’re serious,” Bill presses a hand to his forehead. “Tree safe.”

Archie fixes his brother with a glare. “What other choice do we have?”

After that, there doesn’t seem to be much to say. This time Archie takes the lead, moving us through underground security passages like mice in a giant maze. We don’t see anyone, but it doesn’t feel lucky. It feels like a jinx. Like Mr. Parker’s waiting for us to fall into a trap.

Eventually, Bill leads us to a set of metal stairs, and we climb. By the time we hit a huge cement door, my calves are screaming.

“This is it,” Archie mutters. “Yard door.”

I cross all my fingers that luck, or the jinx, is still on our side as it swings open. The night air is deliciously sweet. I take a step forward, and Bill puts a hand on my arm. “I couldn’t cut off the cameras outside the buildings.”

“What should we do?”

“We’re gonna have to crawl. Follow Archie.”

Archie directs us off the pretty sandy path and into the bushes. We clamber through the flower beds and past hedges shaped like swans. My skin prickles, anticipating invisible bullets but even crawling on the ground I still find time to appreciate how tacky Mr. Parker is. I went to the Palace of Versailles as a little girl, and even in the dark, I can tell this garden is a low-rent knockoff with its marble fountains and swirling lawns. I can just imagine Mr. Parker shoving a tablet with a picture of the palace to a landscaper and going, “do this.” I see the oak from a distance rising, out of the darkness like the Washington Monument. It’s twice as tall as anything around it and totally out of place with the faux French vibe.

Archie leads us right up to the trunk and stands, helping me to my feet. “This is it, boss.”

I look up at the towering trunk.

“What now?” Bill asks. “Who’s gonna get up there?”

I know he’s talking to Archie, but I raise my palm. “I can climb. That way you can both keep a lookout with the guns.”

“You sure?”

I nod. “I’m good at tree climbing and I’m not a great shot.”

“But it’s really high,” Bill shoots back. “If you fall...”

Sweat breaks out on my palms. I wipe them on my fatigue pants. “I’m not afraid of heights and my legs are strong from dancing.”

Neither of them looks too convinced.

“This is my idea,” I remind them. “And I’m the boss.”

Archie doesn’t smile, but his mouth loosens. “Okay, boss. Try not to die.”

“I will. Can I have one of your backpacks in case I find anything?”

From their expressions, Bill and Archie think I'll find nothing except leaves, but they empty one of their rucksacks full of guns and hands it to me. Bill gives me a boost onto a low-hanging branch and then both men stare at me, as though expecting me to ask to come back down. Instead, I grab the next closest limb and start hauling myself up.

To my relief, the oak is easy to climb with lots of sturdy branches and I wasn't lying. I climbed trees when I was little, and I liked it. When Daddy was alive, I went to a summer camp, and I went up a huge rope bridge without a second thought. But when he died, and I got engaged to Mr. Parker, I wasn't allowed to climb anymore but I'm relieved to find it's like riding a bike. My body remembers. The empty rucksack swings from my shoulders as I get higher and higher, the ground shrinking as I'm surrounded by branches and leaves.

"There *is* a safe," I whisper. "There's a safe and I'll get it open even if I have to pull it out and shoot it."

My hands are already scratched from crawling through the garden and soon they're raw and stinging with blood. I rub it on my top and find the residue makes my palms sticky.

"Better for gripping," I tell myself and actually find myself smiling. I'm not happy but I can't believe I'm doing this. That I could get so high. Soon I can see most of the compound. It's huge. As big as a middle school with a ton of interlocking buildings and a big pool and tennis court lit by streetlights.

I'm concentrating so hard on my climbing that I nearly miss it—a blue-grey box buried in a fork of two huge branches.

"Yes!" I scream, then press a bloody hand to my mouth. "Yes!"

Any hope of pulling the safe out instantly vanishes. It's embedded so deeply that it might as well have grown there. And shooting it seems like a good way to have a bullet ricochet into my chest. With shaking fingers, I press the dirt and leaves away from the safe. There's a little screen with a

buzzing blue light and an old-school keyboard with the numbers one through ten printed on it.

“Shit,” I whisper. What could the passcode be?

Seconds pass as I stare at the keypad. I think of Doc. Try to imagine what he’d say.

Tits, this is all super fucked.

“Not helpful, Nico,” I say. “What do you know about codes?”

It can’t be the same changing one as inside the compound, Doc says.

“Why?”

Because if you needed to get the special pass out because Parker was dead or whatever, you couldn’t use the pass to get it out.

“Oh. So, it’s like, something Parker came up with?”

The Doc in my head shrugs. *Probably, Tits. I don’t know, I’m you.*

I inspect the keypad. I might not be the brainiest girl in the world, but Mr. Parker has never struck me as very smart about things he considered beneath him, like not telling his girlfriends about his secret plans.

This safe is here in case he dies, and Mr. Parker doesn’t think he’ll ever die so he definitely would have half-assed it. So, what’s the code? His birthday? I punch in 01-21-1974 and the safe gives an angry buzz.

I press a hand to my face. What does Mr. Parker like? What does he love? Power? Revenge? Being a creepy dick...?

I close my eyes and think back to a conversation we had outside the Kensington Stables once. Mr. Parker told me that his father liked horses. The racing ones, not the riding ones. “He always bet on the same numbers...” he said, his big blue eyes scraping over my face like a butter knife. “He always chose...”

“Seven, fourteen, twenty-one,” I mutter, pressing the buttons. “Odd numbers that go up by seven, which I remember because it was so fucking stupid—”

There’s a small click and the safe door pops open. I stare at it dumbly. I can’t believe I’ve done it. Quickly, before the safe can vanish and I realize I’m actually back at the cabin dreaming, I shove the door open.

I don’t know what I was expecting but I’m struck by the obvious: bundles of important-looking papers and silk pouches that are probably full of jewels. There’s loose stuff too, gold necklaces, diamond rings, and a sapphire tiara I’m pretty sure belonged to my birth mom.

“Asshole,” I mutter, pulling the rucksack over my shoulder. I don’t bother trying to sort things and just shove everything into the bag. Once the jewelry’s gone, I find the stranger things: a pair of silver scissors, a black leather glove, a metal bull-clip-looking thing, a handful of small glass vials. They have labels on them, and I hold one close to my face to read it.

Orchard. Batch 188.

I recognize the jagged handwriting. It’s Doc’s. This is the Orchard Parker stole from him years ago. The Orchard he drugged me with when I was fifteen. I throw all the bottles into the rucksack vowing to pour it into the grass as soon as I get down the tree. It’ll never hurt anyone ever again, not if I can help it.

The safe is almost empty. I reach into the corners and find a strange little bundle of fur. I hold it up and realize it’s not fur. It’s hair. It’s dark and curls slightly at the ends. I stare at it for a moment. It’s mine. And not my hair now, the bundle is too soft and fine. It’s my hair from when I was younger. Corinne must have given him a cutting when I was just a little girl.

“Gross!” I moan, tossing it into the bag. “You’re so *fucking gross*, Parker.”

I find another bundle of hair. It's bright copper and I know that it's Emilia's.

The two of us locked in his safe. It could be for a weird cloning reason, but I don't think so. It's because Mr. Parker always has a part of us trapped in his safe. Even when he wouldn't allow himself to touch me, he was probably jerking off to my hair clippings. Ugh.

"Well fuck you," I say, tucking Emilia's hair into the bulging rucksack. "We're gone now."

I've always found it harder to climb down trees than up. It feels like gravity's trying to rip you back to earth, making you lose your footing. Even so, I practically fly down the trunk. Almost at the bottom, I hear Archie hissing. "...falling out!"

Touching the rucksack, I realize things are spilling from it, but I can't do anything about it. I keep climbing down until I can jump onto the dark grass, my heart pumping.

"Sorry," I say. "I don't know what happened."

Pulling it off, I see the silver scissors cut a hole in it and stuff started to leak out. Archie is shoving jewelry and velvet bags into his pockets and Bill is examining one of the Orchard vials.

"It's gone bad," I say quickly. "It'll make people sick."

"I wouldn't give it to someone even if it was fine." Bill hands me the vial. "You got the pass?"

"Um, I don't know," I say, shoving the ruined sack at him. "That's everything that was in there."

Bill shuffles through the papers looking more severe by the second. "It's not in here. It should look like a little iron bar—"

"You mean this thing?" Archie bends over and picks up the bull-clip from the grass.

Bill's face almost melts with relief. "That's it. Fucking Christ, that's what we need."

Archie hands it over and Bill examines the bull-clip with a look of reverence I never thought to see on his face.

“Can it unlock the prison cells?” I ask.

“It unlocks everything.”

Archie stops snuffling around the grass for stray gems. “Everything?”

“Safes. Parker’s other homes...everything.”

Bill’s voice is shaking, and I feel a stab of nerves. “I don’t want everything. I just want to get the guys and—”

A loud shout from the distance. The sound of a door slamming open.

Archie grabs me, pulling me to the ground.

“Fuck,” Bill whispers as we lie in the grass. “They know someone’s here.”

“What do we do?” I ask, a fresh spike of adrenaline rushing through me.

“Split up.” Bill holds up the scanner. “I’m fastest. I’ll get the boys. You two head for the garage, get a car, and wait.”

I’ve barely processed what he’s said before Bill’s sprinting into the darkness.

“C’mon,” Archie mutters, dragging me back to my feet. We move across the grass. No crawling this time, we go in a crouching run.

There are noises, voices, and shouting coming from everywhere, my only relief is that I can’t actually see anyone. Archie leads me to a huge white patio, pulling me across the deck and shoving me through an unlocked door. Inside is some kind of gold and white bar fitted with red velvet sofas, as tacky as the fake Versailles Garden.

“This isn’t an underground passageway,” I hiss at Archie. “This is *inside Mr. Parker’s house*.”

Archie is already opening another inner door. “No choice, Kitten. The security team’ll be using the underground. We’ve gotta go through the house.”

I hesitate, looking back at the dark lawn and seeing, for the first time, shapes moving across the lawn. “Shit.”

I run after Archie, creeping behind him as we go from room to room. We pass grand pianos and polished wooden cellos, pool tables, and wall-to-ceiling wine fridges. Oil paintings of tigers and ostriches next to Simpsons pinball machines and statues of Lara Croft. It’s the weirdest house I’ve ever been in and that includes Velvet House. But it’s quiet. No one seems to know we’re in here.

I imagine Bill heading back into the underground, releasing my men from their cages, and giving them guns. I pray they’re still there. That they’re still alive.

Archie throws open another door and then draws to a halt. “What the fuck?”

I feel the heat before I see the room, a wave of warm wetness, like being near an indoor swimming pool. Then I see what appears to be a jungle in the middle of the house. Tropical plants are practically bursting through the doorframe, and I can hear running water.

“Should we go back?” I ask.

“Naw, this is real close to the garage,” Archie says, and cautiously steps inside.

The room is huge—as big as a stadium, but it doesn’t open to the sky, there’s a glass ceiling beyond the tropical plants.

“It’s like a greenhouse,” I whisper.

“Some fuckin’ greenhouse,” Archie mutters. “Where’s the water coming from?”

As we push our way through the leafy plants, we see it. An actual proper waterfall. But it’s not real. It can’t be. The rocks around it are purple and the water is pouring in from

somewhere on the roof. The sound is crazy loud, and as we draw closer, I see the waterfall leads to a huge purple pool.

“I’ve never seen an ugly water feature before,” I tell Archie. “But this one is...”

“Disgustin’.” Archie finishes.

We stare at it for a moment, transfixed by its ugliness, then Archie points to the other side of the glasshouse. “I think we need to go through—”

The sound is so loud I cry out. A snapping, unmistakable gunshot. I wait for the rush of pain, but nothing comes. Beside me, Archie sinks to his knees, his hands pressed to his stomach. “Jan-wary. Run...”

I whirl, looking for the guards, reaching for my thigh holster. “I can’t leave you. I’ll go get Bill, I’ll—”

Mr. Parker pushes his way out of the foliage, his moon cheeks red, a huge hunting rifle in his hands. He points it at my head. “Gun on the floor.”

My fingers are doughy with panic, but I manage to toss away my gun.

“Good girl,” Mr. Parker says, and my skin crawls. He walks to Archie and smiles down at his kneeling frame. “So, the Judas tour continues. I assume your twin is the man breaking out my prisoners?”

Archie collapses onto his back, blood bubbling at the corner of his mouth.

“There are fifty men going to kill him. He might already be dead. And you...” he points the gun at my head. “You’re going to be skinned alive.”

I say nothing. There’s nothing to say. Mr. Parker’s pupils are huge, his mouth twisted with rage. Whatever he’s going to do, he’ll do it regardless of what I say. But he doesn’t like me being silent. He moves closer, the hunting rifle still pointed at my face. “I think I might fuck you before I kill you. I can’t decide.”

I look at Archie, his eyes are closed but his chest is still moving. He's still alive.

Mr. Parker taps my chin with the end of the gun. "Do I want to risk a dick infection?"

"You are a dick infection," I say without thinking, and to my surprise, Mr. Parker laughs.

"Oh January, you sweet little bitch. You have no idea how fucked you are."

"I have some idea," I say, my heart pounding. If Bill can get to the guys, if they're already free...

"I've always been lucky," Parker muses, "But I've never been so lucky in all my life as I am tonight. My enemies in chains, Orchard on the brink of development, you twisting and turning at night, torturing yourself over your dead fucking boyfriends..."

He spits the word like poison. I flinch.

Mr. Parker laughs. "You know what I think, January? I think the universe wants me to have everything I want. Isn't that right, sweetness?"

At first, I think he's talking to me, but pushing her way out of the jungle is Emilia, thinner and paler than ever, her hair hanging in front of her face. I stare at her, my shadow twin, this girl Parker has eaten alive.

"Help," I mouth.

She stares blankly ahead as though she can't even see me.

"Don't bother," Parker says with a grin. "She's lost to the world. Now do something useful and take your clothes off."

I don't move. Another snapping bang sends shock running through me. I look up and see Mr. Parker shot through his own glass ceiling. I watch the splintering crack grow larger and wonder if the glass is about to come down on all of us.

"Strip," Mr. Parker says, pointing the gun at my stomach. "Now."

I think of my baby, the sweet little life growing inside me, and pull the bulletproof vest over my head. He laughs, his disgusting little giggle, but I don't feel ashamed. With every item of clothing I pull away, I feel more powerful.

I'm beautiful and strong. I can climb trees and grow humans. I can bring men to their knees. It doesn't matter if I'm naked, but if he comes near me, tries to lay one hand on me, I'm going to tear out his throat with my teeth or die trying.

That knowledge, that line in the sand keeps me steady as I unclasp my bra. I look Mr. Parker right in the eyes as he stares greedily at my breasts. I give him the same look as the dancers at Dreams do when a guy wants a dance but won't hand over any money.

"Panties off too," Mr. Parker breathes.

I comply, kicking the material away.

"You've grown bold, haven't you, slut?"

I throw back my hair, straighten my shoulders. "Maybe."

Mr. Parker's lips curl with rage and he bares his bleached teeth. "You're still scared of me, aren't you? You're still terrified of what I can do."

I let my smile do the talking and as he comes for me, I curl my fingers into claws, ready to kick and scratch and bite.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Elliot Morelli

BOBBY NEEDS HELP. His shoulder, the one still recovering from the bullet wound, was dislocated when Parker's guys put him in the van. Doc popped it back in as we were brought to Parker's compound, but he's in a lot of pain. Adriano has been shot in the side again, but he barely seems to notice.

"I'll never die," he told me on the journey here. "It won't happen."

I wish I could believe him.

We're chained side by side in a circular room, both feet and both hands locked to the wall, meaning we can't lie down or even kneel. We've already made the requisite sex dungeon jokes. We can't stop telling jokes. Rehashing old stories. Reminiscing about times when we escaped danger or saved one another's lives.

It feels like an unspoken law that if we are going to die then we will spend every last second being grateful for our time on earth, and even more grateful that January is not here with us.

I picture her, hiding in the safe house. Although maybe she's called someone by now. Her sister or her old school friends or even the police to rescue her. She'll be safe, her and the small life inside her. I look around the cage at the shadowy cast of my brothers' faces and vow never to tell them. The torture of knowing January's pregnant, that she's carrying our child will die with me.

“What’s fucking taking so long?” Doc bursts out. “Why isn’t Parker here, threatening to cut our nuts off with rusty scissors?”

“I think he’s avoiding us,” I say slowly. “He’s never liked it when we’re all together.”

“So why doesn’t he separate us?”

I let out a humorless laugh. “I’m sure he will, Domenico.”

We fall silent. We all know Doc is the one he wants, to help him with Orchard. The rest of us are just leverage. Our plan is to escape and kill Parker once and for all, but if that can’t be managed...

“I think she’s pregnant,” Doc says.

“What?” Bobby croaks.

“January,” Doc repeats. “She’s late on her rag. She’s finding it hard to eat stuff. I think she’s pregnant.”

“Mother of God,” Adriano mutters. “My little Pryntsesa...”

I lower my gaze to the slate floor. So much for my noble silence. I think of January this morning—can it have only been this morning?—glowing in the sunshine. She looked tired but all the more perfect for being so, delicate and flushed. I shouldn’t be surprised that Doc noticed, the psychotic genius.

“I agree,” I tell my brothers. “I think she’s known for a little while.”

“Shit,” Bobby says.

A wave of misery rolls over me. Boy or girl, dangerous pregnancy or simple, it would be foolish to think that any of us are going to be there to help January. To see our baby.

“Pryntsesa,” Adriano whispers, and I think of him and January sitting in front of the fire. How he traced her cheek with such fierceness my heart ached for him. My eyes prickle and I bite down on my tongue until I taste blood. There is no shame in weeping for my love or my brothers, but we’re

obviously being monitored, and I would slit my throat before allowing Parker to think he'd made me cry.

“So...who’s the daddy?” Doc asks in a gameshow host voice. “I mean, obviously it’s me, but who do you losers think it is?”

The morbid atmosphere shatters in a glorious second and we all argue back and forth, each claiming our sperm is so potent it couldn’t not be us. But that’s just for show. The longer we talk, the more my heart tells me the baby isn’t my blood. I don’t care. Even if we were free, I wouldn’t care. January has shown me there’s more joy in sharing pleasure with my brothers than claiming glory. More sweetness in mutual respect than power. I wish I’d followed that instinct more in my life.

Closing my eyes, I indulge in a short fantasy. We’ve escaped and found January and we return to Velvet House and quit all of it: the construction contracts, the thousand Velluto family boards I sit on, and just raise my child. I could cook dinner and read storybooks and go for long walks on the grounds.

Then there are the projects I’ve deferred for years—ensuring future populations of endangered birds in Albany, building housing for families like the ones Doc and Adriano came from. Scholarships. Environmental think tanks. I spent so much time chasing gemstones and women and my own tail instead of correcting the evils of the world. The world my child will live in.

The world Parker lives in.

I remember the night I met him at a Brown College mixer. I was thinking about attending and God knows why he was there. Possibly to meet barely legal girls. He flagged me down and though I thought he was a tasteless social climber, his ties to Silicon Valley and his insights into Web3 and the future of AI interested me. As far as we knew, Doc had perfected Orchard and we were looking for investors to help us take the drug into the stratosphere, particularly tech investors.

I groan aloud. “This is all my fault,” I tell the others. “I told Parker about Orchard.”

“Who cares?” Adriano growls.

“Because I should have recognized him for the *mal carne* he is.”

“You’re not the one who fucked up,” Doc says shortly. “That would be me.”

“Upstaging me as always, Domenico?”

Doc doesn’t laugh. “Remember how I sold Parker Orchard? One dose for his Pam Anderson-looking girlfriend?”

“The model,” I say in a rush of memory. “God, she was stunning.”

“Yeah, Parker’s always punched above his weight,” Doc says dismissively. “But that dose didn’t matter. It was the second batch I sold him that fucked us.”

I frown, I remember Doc running the first sale past me—a good opportunity to get Parker more invested in the drug I thought—but not the second. “You sold to him again?”

Doc exhales long and hard and I have the sense he’s forcing himself to say this. Dredging it past eighteen years of internal walls. “Parker called me the next day, practically begging for more. Offered me fifty grand, cash, for as much Orchard as I had on me.”

“But that can’t be right because...” It clicks. “You didn’t tell me so you could keep the money.”

“Sure did,” Doc says grimly.

“So, he didn’t steal our stock!” I say outraged. “He bought it off you fair and square! He drugged January with what he bought from you years ago!”

Doc hangs his head. “Yup.”

“Fuck you!” I scream, my voice bouncing off the walls. *Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!*

“Fuck me,” Doc says in a hollow voice. “But don’t worry, Morelli, I paid for it. That deal cost me everything I had.”

“The fuck are you talking about?” Adriano says roughly. “If you hadn’t sold it to him, he still would have—”

“That’s not what I mean,” Doc interrupts. “The minute I saw his face when we made the second deal, I knew I’d fucked everything. His eyes were glowing like pinwheels, and when I gave him the vials, he kept me there another twenty minutes ranting about how good Orchard is. He kept saying, ‘*She wanted me. She really wanted me.*’”

My nose curls in disgust, but within it, I’m amazed to find a flicker of pity. Parker had more money than God, even then, but it took the most powerful aphrodisiac on earth to actually make him feel desired.

“I wanted to snatch it all back off him,” Doc says with a choking laugh. “Pour it down the drain and run, but I took the cash. I sold us all out.”

“It doesn’t matter that you gave him Orchard twice,” Adriano says sharply. “He’d already had it.”

“It does matter,” Doc says. “Second time was when he got obsessed. And I knew he would. First time’s an anomaly, your starfish girlfriend writhing and coming all over you, making you feel like a real man. Twice in two days...I knew he was gonna go apeshit. And I was right. The next day he called you Eli, remember? He asked to buy the formula outright. Got fucking furious when you tried to talk him down. I knew it was gonna happen. I saw the future and sold it out for fifty grand.”

“Doc...” I begin.

“Don’t you fuckin’ start,” Doc snarls and I hear the throb of impending tears in his voice even if he doesn’t. “Our whole lives, January, Alessia, us never getting to meet our kid. It’s all my fucking fault.”

I wonder how long this has weighed on him, how long he’s carried the burden. I remember the two of us on the hospital

floor almost two decades ago, holding each other as we cried for what we'd lost.

"It doesn't matter that you sold to him twice, Dom," Bobby says quietly. "You didn't know what Parker was going to do. And you can lie to yourself and say you did, but that's just because you want to take responsibility, because in your head that means you could have stopped it. But you're wrong."

"I'm not," Doc says, voice wavering. "I *could* have stopped him."

"You didn't kill my dad," Bobby says loudly. "Parker did. He killed your sister and January's Zia."

"And my Dolce," I say, thinking of the sweet puppy who laid at my side as I slept.

"And my mama," Adriano adds softly.

"All of them," Bobby says firmly. "And that sucks. It was fucking shit, but Doc, I don't need to stand here in the last hours of my life and listen to you act like you're the reason it happened, you self-aggrandizing fuckhead."

Silence. I shift awkwardly in my bonds, and I wonder if Doc's about to break down weeping or snap his arms trying to throttle Bobby. Then he laughs. A clear, loud laugh. "Fuck, Bobby. What a time to grow a pair, huh?"

"Shut the fuck up," Bobby says, but I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Shit," Adriano says. "The door."

We freeze and a series of beeps bounces around the cell.

"Here we go," Bobby mutters as the door shifts open.

I see the split of light and straighten my shoulders. "If this is goodbye, it's been an honor. *Voglio bene a tutti voi.*" *I love you all.*

"*Anch'io ti voglio bene,*" grumbles Adriano, annoyed as ever by feelings.

“I love you,” Bobby says. “Even you Doc, you dumb bastard.”

“Fuck you, Bassilotta you Ohio-bred pig fucker.” Doc makes a face like he’s trying not to puke. “I...love you...too. Even Morelli, you greasy, 2000s-era Eurodouche.”

I grin as the door stretches wide. A lone man steps into the room. Backlit by the fluorescent hallway lights it’s impossible to see his face. I ball my hands into fists, ready to fight, cajole, negotiate, do anything and everything I can to get us free.

“Mr. Morelli? You alive?”

My brain sags. I have no idea who’s talking to me, let alone so politely.

Bobby’s quicker on the uptake. “Baskerville?”

“Sure is, Mr. Bassilotta. Are all you boys in here?”

My knees go slack. I grip my wrist shackles and fight to stay standing. “What are you doing here?”

Baskerville—I don’t know which twin—walks to Bobby, the closest, and holds a blue light to his chains. They slide open. “Gettin’ you out.”

Bobby hits the floor as Doc lets out a shocked laugh. Adriano gives a bearlike growl of victory.

“Who’s with you?” I ask in a daze, thinking he must’ve collected Sal and Gretzky and everyone from Velvet House.

“Archie and January,” he says.

My knees turn to Jell-O again. “January’s here?”

“You brought her?” Doc hisses, pulling at his chains like a rabid dog. “You and your dumbass brother brought a nineteen-year-old girl to the house of our abductor?”

The twin—Bill by process of elimination—holds up the blue scanner. “We’re here *because* of her. She convinced us to come. Paid us actually.”

“Paid you?” I repeat.

“Yup.”

“You would have let us die?” Doc snarls. “The guys you’ve been working for all year.”

Bill shrugs. “Just tellin’ you how it is.”

“That’s fine,” I say, cutting across Doc’s furious response. If this event has shown anything, it’s that his lack of self-preservation and hatred for the Baskerville twins is without limits.

“Thank you for assisting, January,” I say. “I appreciate that you’re here and whatever January promised you, it will be tripled.”

Adriano collapses onto all fours when he’s released. He curls onto his side trying to stretch his back and wrists. Bill unlocks me next, and I manage to stay on my feet but barely. I lean against the wall, flexing my stiff fingers.

“Weapons,” Adriano calls from the floor. “Guns.”

“You got it.” Bill pulls off a rucksack and hands it to him before moving to Doc, the last person still chained to the wall. “We’re not gonna have a problem, are we?”

I watch powerful, contradictory emotions fight their way across Doc’s face, but sense wins out. “Not one. Just lemme get to January.”

Bill presses the metal bar to his chains, and they fall open.

“Thanks,” Doc mutters, rubbing his wrists. “What’s the gun situation, Adri?”

Adriano is rifling through the bag, teeth bared. “Too light.”

Sorry,” Bill says. “Lots of running around. I lost a few things, but there’s a storage bay nearby. We can stock—”

We all look to the ceiling. The sound of feet pounding on stairs, men shouting. A shudder goes through me.

“Move,” Bill says, heading for the door, and weak and still barely able to see, I fall in behind him.

“What’s happening?” Adriano shouts, fitting a clip into a Glock and tossing it to Bobby.

“They’re onto us,” Bill shouts. “I can hear them coming in on both sides. We gotta get more guns and fight our way to the underground car park if we want to get outta here.”

“What about January?” I call. “Where is she?”

“In the main house probably, hopefully heading to the car park with Archie,” Bill says.

We reach a grey door and Bill uses the metal scanner to unlock it.

“What is that thing?” Doc asks but inside is a cache of weapons we ignore him and fall on the guns like starving children on cake. I pull out a Beretta and shove cartridges into my pockets. “I’m going for January.”

“No,” Bill and Doc say at once.

“I’m fast,” I remind them. “I’m fast and I read the plans for this place when Parker was building it. Bill, is there a big swimming pool above us to the left of here?”

“I... I think so.”

“Then I’ve got some bearings. I should be able to get around.” I hold my hand to Bill. “Can you give me that... metal bar? Will it unlock the main house?”

Bill’s eyes narrow and he holds the metal clip close to his chest.

“Okay, what is that thing?” Bobby asks, fitting a handle into an AK-47.

“It’s a universal pass, isn’t it?” Doc says shrewdly. “A fail-safe in case Parker dies. I’d imagine it would open damn near everything Parker owns.”

I look at Bill who is still holding the metal clip like a childhood teddy bear. If Doc’s right and that tiny bar grants access to every safe, computer, and secure data source Parker has, it’s the key to his whole empire. No wonder Bill’s so

possessive. I hold out a hand. “Give it to me. Please,” I add because he did just rescue us.

“But...I might need it.”

“And you might need legs.” Doc points his Winchester at Bill’s thigh. “Fast hands, Baskerville.”

Bill looks from Doc to the rest of us, now all equally armed and passes it over. “Sorry.”

“You’re forgiven,” I say. I point to the nearby staircase. “That takes me up to the swimming pool, yes? The one shaped like an old Nokia phone?”

“Man, you really read those fuckin’ plans,” Bill says. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Then I’m going.” I clap a hand on Adriano’s shoulder. “Kill many. All.”

Adriano’s gold tooth gleams. “*Ma non c’era nemmeno bisogno di dirlo.*” *Like you even need to say anything.*

“Be fucking careful, Morelli,” Doc says. “That girl dies, I’m going right behind her.”

“Don’t,” Bobby says, but I can see the same unspoken pledge in his eyes.

I look my brothers squarely in the face, their eyes filled with wild love and certainty. “I’ll find our future wife and bring her back to us. I swear it.”

The compound is huge, huge, and difficult to move through. It’s hard to compare my mental floor plans with the rooms full of bourgeois clutter and gamer-boy bullshit. Some of the doors are unlocked but some aren’t. The metal bar opens them all. I listen for guards, but they all seem to have surged toward Bill and the others. The house—if you can call it that—is empty. Which doesn’t mean Parker can’t see me. But the compound has multiple panic rooms and I’ve no doubt January is with him in one of them. I need to choose a direction.

“Where would I go?” I ask, spinning like a compass needle. “If I was an evil motherfucker, where would I hide?”

A female scream rends the air and I turn, heading south toward the sound. It doesn’t sound like January, but maybe it’s the girlfriend or the new fiancée. Someone I can reason with or hold hostage.

A large, gold-plated door is hanging open, and the air and the scent rushing from it are tropical. I recall Parker’s plans for a huge indoor greenhouse and wonder how he keeps the foundations from sagging under the moisture. A more stupid billionaire there cannot be.

The woman screams again, and I plunge into the mock jungle.

I push through plants in a daze, my mouth dry. *Please. Please let her be there.*

I find a clearing, a giant purple waterfall tumbling from the roof into a pool, and I get my wish. And my worst nightmare. Zachery Parker is crouching by the water, holding January under. She’s naked and fighting him, her skin shiny-wet.

On the other side of the pool is the woman screaming. The redhead who threw up at the safe house and I can see Archie Baskerville slumped against a tree, hands pressed to his bloody stomach. I move toward the pool. Parker’s pushed January’s head and shoulders underwater and he’s holding her down. Her legs are kicking wildly, her hair churning the water to foam.

“Away!” I scream, raising my gun but Parker’s too close. I can’t try to kill him without risking her. “Get away you, *pezzo di merda!*”

But January’s movements slow, her thighs slackening against the purple pool tiles.

“Too late,” Parker says with a grin. He releases January’s shoulders, and she slides into the pool like a stone.

“No, no, no!”

I aim for Parker's head, but my hands are shaking; I fire into the trees and hear the redhead scream again. Parker scrambles, grabbing a hunting rifle from the ground. Hoisting it onto his shoulder he plunges into the foliage. I ignore him, rushing to the pool. January's lying on the bottom, a flesh-colored doll against the purple tiles. I toss aside my gun and dive. My body is aching, everything is aching, but I haul her up with all my strength, piling her sloppily onto the wet tile. I climb out, my saturated clothes weighing me down. I shove January's wet hair out of her face, open her mouth and press my lips to hers, forcing my breath into her lungs.

The air comes whooshing passively back out.

"No," I mutter. "No, *bella*. No."

I give her my breath again and press two fingers to her neck. I can't feel a pulse, but I must be shaking too hard because she can't be dead. She can't be.

I breathe into her again, pounding her chest the way Doc showed me all those years ago.

"This is useless," I told him. "When will I need to save anyone?"

What a fucking fool I am.

"Come on, *bella*," I say, pushing her chest. "Come on, *bella*, come back to us. I love you. I love you. I love you with all my heart. Until my dying day, I will love you. If I have to live in a shack forever, I will be grateful. Just breathe. *Breathe.*"

Somewhere I can hear Parker laughing but I can't spare a thought for him. Not revenge and not that he could easily snipe me from the forest. I'm with January. Always.

"Always," I tell her, then I press my lips to her cold ones. It's more of a kiss than CPR, and as I begin to press my breath into her, January shifts. I pause, paralyzed with hope as she turns her head and chokes, spitting out chlorinated water.

"Yes! Yes, my ruby."

I clasp her mouth and breathe for her again. This time she weakly pushes me away, sputtering harder. I have kissed her back to life. My princess. My perfect January Whitehall.

Her beautiful green eyes blink open, droplets clinging to each of her lashes. “Eli?”

I laugh in pure relief. “Yes, my love. I’m here.”

“You need to...” she says weakly. “...Emilia...”

A shot rings out, skimming the tile beside me. I swear, pulling January into my arms. I try to stand but my clothes are wet, my shoes soaked. I stumble, almost tipping both of us back into the pool. January collapses naked on the tiles and I look around for my gun. I can’t see it anywhere.

Parker emerges from the forest, hunting rifle raised. “I just can’t seem to *fucking kill you.*”

“You can’t,” I agree.

He looks me right in the eyes. “No more running, I’m gonna blow your fucking—”

The shot blows through his right thigh, punching through his suit pants like a nail. Parker screams.

I look around, expecting, Doc, Adriano, or Bobby. Bill or Archie. Even one of Parker’s bodyguards. It’s none of them, it’s not even a man. It’s the little redheaded girl. Parker’s girlfriend. She’s holding a gun. My gun. Pointing it right at Parker.

“*Gesù Cristo,*” I whisper.

“You cunt!” Parker screeches, gripping his ruined thigh.

“Emilia,” January croaks. “*Emilia!*”

The redhead turns to us. She looks like a drowned rat, her red hair limp around her shoulders, her eyes as large as the children in a Margaret Keene painting. She blinks and I see no sanity in her. This is a woman who could and would do anything. Act without a single conscious thought.

“Good girl,” I tell her. “Give me the gun and I’ll kill him. I’ll end him for you right now.”

The redhead ignores me. She tosses the Beretta into the pool.

“What the fuck?” I scream. “Are you fucking insane?”

A cold hand touches my thigh. “Eli...”

I drop to my knees beside January. “*Bella*, are you okay? Can you breathe?”

“Yes.” She touches my chest. “You need to let Emilia...”

But I can’t hear the rest.

“What?” I put my ear to her lips. “What?”

“You dumb fucking whore,” Parker yells at the redhead. “I’m going to tear you apart.”

The girl—Emilia—pulls a short hunting knife from her dress. “No. You’re not.”

Her voice is whispery, the kind that usually reminds me of Marilyn Monroe. I draw myself to my feet. I’ll take the knife from the girl and slit Parker’s throat, finally end the man who ruined my life, my brothers’ lives, January’s life—

“Eli, no,” January holds my shirt as tight as her loose fingers will allow.

Looking at her I can see what she’s trying to tell me: This is Emilia’s time. Emilia’s revenge.

“No,” I gently try to shake her off. “I need to end this.”

“But I need you with me,” she whispers. “I need you. You said you’d stay? Will you stay?”

The choice is a bridge, a clear line forward. What will it be? My revenge or January. I wrap both arms around her naked body. “Of course.”

The redhead advances on Parker, kicking the hunting rifle further away.

“You stole my life,” she tells Parker and despite the knife in her hand, he laughs.

“You came on your own, bitch. You wanted drugs and handbags and dick.”

She shakes her head, red ropes of hair flying. “You stole me. You...tied me to you. You wouldn’t let me leave.”

“For fuck’s sake, who cares?” Parker says, spraying spit everywhere. “Go get a medic you dumb bitch!”

Emilia doesn’t move. “I’m going to kill you for what you did to me.”

“You don’t have the fucking balls. Literally, you don’t have any.”

Emilia turns and her gaze finds January. “We were nothing to you. Just pets. Dogs you could keep in your kennel.”

Parker laughs. “Dogs are more obedient than you’ll ever be you useless cun—”

She plunges the knife into his neck. January turns her face into my shoulder, but I watch the bright spray of blood. The redhead got him right in the artery. A professional couldn’t have cut him better.

Parker slumps backward, but Emilia isn’t done. She grabs him by the foot and drags him, choking and gurgling across the tiles. She pushes him into the pool, the water around him billowing pink with blood. Then she takes off her shoes and climbs in, delicate as a dancer. She wades toward his gurgling, still-live body and lifts the knife.

“Die,” she hisses. “Die, asshole.”

She plunges it into his stomach, and he lets out a gasp like a punctured balloon. I watch him flounder, arms and legs waving feebly. Emilia raises the knife high, darker blood dripping from the tip. Her face is glowing now, electrified from within. She looks beautiful. Terrifying. When she brings the knife down again, Parker makes no sound at all.

No one is coming to rescue him. Not a single soul.

We watch him die, Emilia, January, and I. He slips under the water, his motions growing slower and smaller until there are none at all. He sinks beneath his own hideous pool, gone forever.

January shifts in my arms, moving away from me.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

She looks at Emilia, still standing, knife-raised in the pool, staring at Parker’s corpse. “I need to go to her.”

“Be careful,” I say, but she ignores me. She slides back into the pool, naked and perfect and wades toward Emilia. When she reaches her, she wraps her arms around the redhead.

“It’s over,” she says over the rush of the waterfall. “You did it.”

Emilia’s face works furiously and she’s no longer the angel of death—just a scared girl who doesn’t know how to take care of herself. “He might come back...”

“No,” January says. “You did it. You killed him. You saved us.”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t do it before...”

“It’s okay.” Slowly, January takes the blade from Emilia and throws it away. It clatters with a clang onto the tiled floor. Such a small thing to end a monster. But then, he was just a man. A human being, killed by a woman he abused.

Emilia begins to sob, and January does too and as they hold each other and wail, I feel like I’m bearing witness to something necessary. A wound bleeding freely before it runs clean.

I cross myself. Not for him, but for Dolce, Alessia, Mrs. Rossi, Mr. Bassilotta, Zia Teresa. All of them. Everyone who ever suffered. A moan draws my attention to Archie, and I go to his side. He’s alive, barely. I drop to my knees and assess his wounds. I’m trying to dress his gunshot with strips off my

sweater when Bobby arrives, shoving his way through the plants.

I call out to him, but he's already caught sight of January and Emilia in the pool. Parker's dead body floating beside them. He stares, his eyes growing wider and wider, and it seems to me he's becoming younger, the years falling from his face.

"He's gone," he whispers.

"He is."

Bobby drops to the ground, staring at January. "Did she...?"

"No. The redhead. Emilia."

"Fuck."

Bobby begins to sob, and I crawl to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. I want to ask about the others, but I know they're fine. If they weren't, Bobby wouldn't be here. As I hold my brother close, all at once, it seems to me that the world has gone slack. That there were so many things to do and now there are none. Everything is okay and if it isn't, we have all the time in the world to make it so.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bobby Bassilotta

WE WOULD HAVE died if Bianchi hadn't showed up. Doc, Adriano, Bill, and I were holed up in one of the underground conference rooms. We had the doors barricaded and about fifty guys were trying to smash their way in. I looked at Adriano and I saw it in his eyes—we were fucked. We were armed, but Parker's boys had a hell of a lot more firepower. They were gonna break through the barricade and swarm us. I gripped my gun and prayed Eli found January, and somehow, impossibly, they managed to escape while we took as many of Parker's guys into hell with us.

Then everything changed. Voices started yelling about the gates, we could hear people running away from us, trying to call Parker to work out what was going on.

“Trap?” Adriano offered, but I wasn't so sure. They already had us cooked, they didn't need a trap. Eventually, there was no one trying to breach the door. Everything seemed to grind to a halt.

“What the hell's happening out there, boys?” I called.

“Go fuck yourself, greaseball,” was the only answer.

Doc was the first to leave the room. He guessed someone else was at the compound, or that somehow Archie or Eli had killed Parker. Either way, he was done waiting. He unlocked the door and found *two guys* standing guard. He killed them quick and was sprinting away before anyone could stop him. Cursing his existence, I followed, gun drawn, sure more chaos

was just around the corner. What we found when we surfaced to the ground level was a bloodbath. An organized one.

Parker's guys lay piled in neat heaps, as men in head-to-toe black military gear wiped up blood and spoke into walkie-talkies. I thought of Stormtroopers and wondered if sleep deprivation and pain had sent me around the bend. Then Doc nudged me. "Check out the tank."

I thought he was exaggerating, but parked on the lawn next to a bunch of vans was a black Merkava V. "Who the fuck are these guys?" I asked. "The feds?"

"Nope." Adriano had pulled up behind us, shotgun tucked under his arm. "See the vests?"

I squinted at the dude putting one of Parker's guys on the corpse pile and read the gold JB embossed on his chest. My stomach hit the floor. "Bianchi's private militia."

"They must have smashed in the gates," Doc said. "Smashed in the gates and brought fucking hell. No wonder Parker's guys ditched us."

I studied the hundred or so dudes wandering across the lawn and noticed they were picking up statues and pulling rose bushes up at the roots and carrying them back to the vans. "Are they...gonna try and kill us...?"

"No, Bobby boy," Doc said with a laugh. "I think they're here for what Parker owes Bianchi. We're a sideshow."

The thought sent a rush of blood to my head so hot I almost keeled over. *Therapy*, I thought. *We all need therapy. Every day. Therapy and a vacation.*

Adriano wrapped an arm around me. "Let's go find January and Eli."

"Okay," I said softly. "Where's Bill?"

"Probably gone to his brother, he said—"

"Good evening, gentlemen."

We turned to see the last person I expected to find on Parker's fucked-up lawn. Bianchi himself, flanked by two suited bodyguards.

My mouth dried over. "Mr. Bianchi."

"Evening, Roberto," Mr. Bianchi said, scanning the surroundings with calculated calm. "Glad to see you and your friends are alive."

"I... Thank you." I struggled to find the right words and since neither Doc nor Adriano seemed inclined to say anything it seemed up to me. "What... What is going on?"

Bianchi shrugged like a weekly meeting had run overlong. "Earlier this evening I became aware Mr. Parker had taken Velvet House hostage. Seeing as we already had an outstanding...*issue* with Mr. Parker, I decided the time for subtlety was over."

"That's a pretty wild way to talk about a near-military invasion," Doc said.

Bianchi smiled fondly. "Yes, it was quite an entrance."

He focused his attention back on me. Bianchi is old school and without Eli around, I'm the one with the background most worthy of speaking to him.

"You'll be pleased to hear we've contained Parker's security," Bianchi told me. "Now we're looking for the man himself. Unfortunately, this abomination of a property is absurdly large. Do you have any ideas where he might be?"

"No," I said quickly. "Have you found Eli or January?"

Bianchi raised a white brow. "Your young beauty is here?"

"Yes," I said desperately. "Can I... Can we look for her?"

"You may," Bianchi said. "Although, Mr. Valente, I'm told you have medical knowledge?"

"Yes," Doc said through gritted teeth.

“Excellent, one of my men was injured and I was hoping you could come with me to take a look at him. And Mr. Rossi?”

Adriano stood to attention.

“My head of security wants to confer with you, would you also come with me?”

I could feel Adriano and Doc bristling at the disrespect of taking orders from this man. I mentally willed them to remember Bianchi’s Stormtroopers and just how many of them surrounded us.

“Sure,” Doc said through a clenched jaw.

Adriano stepped forward. “Lead the way, Mr. Bianchi.”

That’s how I wound up hunting through Parker’s house alone, looking for Eli and January, glad to be alive and terrified to find them injured or worse. Stumbling on them in that jungle glasshouse, Eli sopping wet and tending to Archie, January naked in the pool with Emilia, Parker floating dead beside them. It was like a hallucination.

Eli and I did what we could for Archie, told him Bill was close then sat staring at January and Emilia. As relieved as I was to see her, I didn’t want to interrupt what was happening. It looked too profound to cheapen by calling out to her, demanding her attention. Besides, it was enough to know she was there, and Parker was dead.

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EVENTUALLY, DOC ARRIVES, wild-eyed and manic. I try to stop him as he rushes toward the pool, but Emilia sees him and hisses like a cat. “I’ll kill him,” she screams. “I’ll kill him!”

Doc comes to a stop, confused as shit and I grab him around the shoulders. “Leave it, man. She needs space.”

“But...” Doc spots Parker’s body. “She did it, huh?”

“She did.” January pulls Emilia closer, turning their bodies to smile at me and Doc. “Em needs me right now, but I love

you and I'll be with you soon."

Doc lands on his knees on the side of the pool. "Tits, baby, I love you so much. I love you more than anything."

"I know," January says. "It's all going to be okay."

A few minutes later, there are more footsteps. Bianchi arrives with Bill, Adriano, and a battalion of Stormtroopers. At that, even Emilia seems to realize she and January need to get out of the pool. I hate Bianchi's eyes on January's naked body as she climbs out of the water, but she holds herself like a queen, not avoiding anyone's gaze as she accepts Doc's T-shirt.

"Emilia needs a lot of support," she tells Bianchi.

"Of course," he says, still checking out her nipples. "My medical officers have arrived; I'll have her looked over."

A dazed Emilia is led away by a Stormtrooper, and January is finally free to come over to us. Wrapping my arms around her is what I imagine winning a Superbowl is like.

"I love you," I whisper in her ear. "You're it for me."

"I love you too," she whispers back. "I want to go home so badly, but I guess we can't."

"No, baby. Not by a long shot."

It's strange to think there's a protocol between criminals, after all, we're not the police or emergency services, but in some ways that makes things even stricter. First, Archie is strapped up and taken by Bill to the hospital. "He's in a bad way but he'll live," is Doc's prognosis. Next, Parker's body is removed from the pool. I watch as they drag him out like a sack of potatoes, before loading him onto a gurney and wheeling him away—maybe to be sliced up and fed to the pigs, if Bianchi is still doing things that way.

"Cathartic, isn't it?" Doc says in a dreamy voice. "Watching him go."

I couldn't agree. It's too surreal to process. More cathartic is watching January talking to Bianchi, her shoulders held back and her head high. My warrior queen. The mother of my child.

"What are they talking about?" I ask Doc.

"Dunno. Did you notice Bianchi's guys are stripping this place bare?"

I shrug. I don't give a fuck what they take. "I couldn't care less about any of Parker's cursed bullshit."

Now as the sun starts to rise, Doc puts my shoulder in a sling. If I had it my way, we'd be stealing Parker's helicopter and be halfway back to Velvet House, but Bianchi still wants us here and I don't need Eli to tell me that maintaining that relationship is important going forward.

Soon the five of us are being ordered into a huge conference room. January, Eli, Doc, Adriano, and I sit at the table in our filthy clothes as Stormtroopers serve us coffee.

"Wonderful," Bianchi says, taking a seat at the head of the table. "Now, we must discuss next steps."

Eli, looking as tired as I feel, downs a latte in one. "Whatever you'd like, sir."

"Well, first I must issue an apology for what happened at my wedding and afterward. I played no part in the disruption, but I guaranteed you a safe haven, and Yelizaveta and I regret what happened with all our hearts."

We mumble our acceptance, and I can't help feeling like a better apology would be letting us sleep.

Bianchi temples his fingers. "Now, about Emilia Galloway..."

At first, I have no idea who he's talking about, but then I remember the redhead. Parker's girlfriend. His killer.

"What about Emilia?" January asks and I'm impressed with how calm she sounds, especially since she's still wearing

nothing but Doc's T-shirt.

She's so beautiful, I think dumbly. I wanna put my head in her lap and sleep forever.

"The girl was Parker's paramour for a long time, yes?" Bianchi asks.

January's green eyes narrow. "Yes. But she was the one who saved Eli and me when no one else could."

"Of course," Bianchi agrees. "Although as far as I'm aware she was faithful to Parker for years."

"She was his victim," January says coldly. "He started abusing her when she was underage. He controlled her."

"Yes, yes," Bianchi says absently, turning to Eli. "Surely you understand my dilemma, Morelli?"

Eli blinks. "What dilemma?"

"The girl, she's currently in a state of psychosis. She knows a great deal and has many ties to Parker's estate. Perhaps an act of mercy would—"

"You are *not* killing her." January pushes her chair back.

"*Bella*," Eli mutters, reaching for her hand. January shakes him off, looks straight at Bianchi. "You have no right. Emilia saved us, she killed Parker."

I brace, ready to defend January against Bianchi's rage. But the old man doesn't look angry, in fact, he's smiling. "I appreciate your passion, Miss Whitehall, but one act doesn't erase years of loyalty."

"It does when you kill the person you're loyal to," January shoots back. "If Emilia was one of Mr. Parker's men and she killed him, you'd be patting her on the back and giving her a bottle of scotch."

Eli grabs January's wrist, tighter this time. "You mustn't —"

"Elliot," Mr. Bianchi says lazily. "Let the girl continue."

Eli lets go of January, looking dumbstruck. January on the other hand keeps right on trucking.

“Let’s not forget,” she tells Bianchi. “We were attacked because *you* asked us to put the terms of our contract aside and come to the wedding knowing my stepmother and Mr. Parker would be there. You gave them both the opportunity to attack us.”

Everybody in the room draws in a breath. I’m too scared to even reproach her and I can tell by Eli’s look of frozen horror, he feels exactly the same way.

“Little girl you have no idea what you’re talking about,” Bianchi drawls.

January doesn’t flinch. “I’m not a little girl and I do know what I’m talking about. By the contract we signed in your conference room, Velvet House is entitled to half the assets your men are taking out of this property, and anything else Mr. Parker owned.”

Eli coughs. Doc’s eyeballs go so wide they almost fall out of his head. I just stare at January, wondering if she’s been possessed by the spirit of Joan of Arc or something.

“You owe us half of his estate,” January says, pointing a finger across the table like a zealous prosecutor. “More actually.”

“Oh, yes?” Bianchi says. “Why is that, my young beauty?”

“Because without me remembering Mr. Parker had a tree safe, climbing up there, figuring out the code, and getting the universal pass, your men wouldn’t be able to open any of his safes,” January says.

“What!?” I blurt. “Parker had a tree safe? And you went up there?”

Everyone ignores me.

“I have many lockmasters and safe crackers at my disposal,” Mr. Bianchi responds.

“That doesn’t matter. That pass was the only fail-safe for when Mr. Parker died. Everything was impossible to open without it. So again, you have me to thank for anything you’re getting from Mr. Parker’s estate.”

A short silence rings around the room.

“And what...” Bianchi asks slowly. “Is the cost that you owe me for rescuing you and your men from certain death, my young beauty?”

“Nothing,” January says sharply. “You’re the reason we’re in this situation in the first place.”

Eli goes white and Doc mutters, “fuck me,” under his breath.

Adriano actually stands, no doubt to put his body between January and Bianchi but the man just chuckles. Actually, laughs good-naturedly at what’s surely the most disrespect he’s been shown in decades.

“What a woman you’ve grown into, Miss Whitehall,” he says with a wide smile.

“Fortunately, I’ve already married, or I would be considering stealing you from your fine Velvet House lovers and keeping you as my bride.”

January doesn’t smile, but Bianchi seems tickled even by that. “What are your terms, Miss Whitehall?”

“I want Emilia to go to a mental health hospital,” she says at once. “She needs support and to be looked after. I’ll pay for it out of my own pocket if I have to.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Bianchi says lazily. “I’ll make arrangements to take her to our nearest psychiatric clinic.”

“I want your word.”

The room seems to inhale again.

Bianchi presses a gnarled hand into his chest. “You have it on the honor of my life, the lives of my sons, and the souls of

all I love who've gone before me. The girl will go to a clinic, and you will be updated on her progress, daily if you wish."

January nods. "Thank you, Mr. Bianchi. I appreciate that."

He laughs again, pale blue eyes gleaming. "What next?"

"I want half of whatever you claim from Mr. Parker to go to Velvet House as agreed," January says promptly.

Bianchi looks to the still-dumbstruck Eli. "It shall be done."

January shakes back her hair. "One more thing."

"Name it, beautiful girl."

"I want La Vita è Bella."

Bianchi frowns. "What?"

"La Vita è Bella. The hotel where you had your wedding," January clarifies. "I know you own it, and I'd like Velvet House to have it."

There is a moment's silence before Bianchi speaks again. "Why?"

"I know it would mean a lot to Eli, and I..." For the first time, January seems nervous. "I...have an interest in restaurants."

"Do you now?" Mr. Bianchi asks.

"Yes," January says, her voice gaining in strength. "And it would be my pleasure to restore La Vita è Bella and make it a place where the Italian community could visit regularly again. Also, you're going to get billions from Mr. Parker so it shouldn't matter to you. And you owe me."

A new crease appears on Bianchi's already wrinkled brow and my heart starts going double time. I know how much the old hotel means to Eli, how it's a cornerstone of the old New York Italian community, but Bianchi's been crowing about owning the place for years. He'll never give it to January; he might even get pissed and—

“Fine.” Mr. Bianchi says airily. “You want the place, it’s yours.”

Eli’s jaw hits the table.

“Really?” January asks suspiciously. “You’ll put it in writing?”

“As soon as I get back to my office,” Bianchi says, hand to his heart again. “Is there anything else, my young beauty?”

“Ummm?” January’s gaze flicks to the four of us. We stare back at her, totally useless. Eli might be having a brain hemorrhage.

“No. That’s all,” January says. “Um, thank you?”

“Of course.” Bianchi claps his hands together and stands, his bodyguards pulling in closer. Automatically, we get to our feet too.

“You’re going?” Eli asks, in a daze.

“I see no reason to stay. My men will continue removing everything owed to me—and Velvet House,” he adds with a small nod to January. “We’ll meet in two days’ time at my tower?”

“Okay,” January says. “But I want updates about Emilia today.”

Again, I freeze, waiting for repercussions. She can’t talk to the head of a major crime family like this, he’ll—

“Of course,” Bianchi says with a wide smile. “Would you like us to arrange a car for you?”

January looks to Eli who shakes his head. “We’ve called our team.”

“On that note, I’ll leave you young people to it. Remember, we’ve seized this property but believe us when we say I don’t care about a thing that’s left here.” He holds out a hand to January who puts her small white one in his.

“Thank you,” she says, gracing him with a small smile as he seems genuinely delighted. He shuffles out of the room, just a little old man with two bodyguards who could snap his neck without blinking.

Doc gives a long, low whistle. “Tesorina, you bad bitch.”

January doesn’t smile. She’s still watching the door as though Bianchi’s going to pop back in and say, *Just kidding, Emilia dies!* “I don’t trust him.”

“Then trust me.” Doc takes her chin and turns her face to him. “I’ve never seen anything hotter than you bossing around that old prick. I think I have a new kink. I want you to sit me down and demand I give you an old fuckin’ hotel.”

January looks away. “This isn’t the time for jokes.”

“How do you feel about leather and like...some kind of dog collar with spikes on it? Not for you, for me?”

“Domenico,” Eli warns, rubbing a shaky hand over his face. “Leave our wife alone.”

“No.” Doc takes a step back, shoving both fists under his chin and blinking at January like a bashful cat. “Come on, sexy mama. I’ve been a bad mafioso and I need to be put in my place. Tell me how much your low-life boyfriends are entitled to. Make me bleed.”

January’s furious expression melts and she smiles a wide beautiful smile. “You’re impossible.”

Doc beams back at her. “Just improbable.”

He wraps his arms around her, and I watch them make out with a mix of exasperation and growing horniness. The adrenaline that’s flooded my body a billion times wants somewhere to go and that place appears to be my dick.

“Where’s Gretzky and the chopper?” Adriano asks.

Eli walks behind the counter of the corner bar and starts pulling open drawers. “Around. I’ll call him to get us soon, but I want about five minutes to process not being dead, January

not being dead, Parker actually being dead and...La Vita è Bella.” His face contracts and he hangs his head, shoulders shaking.

January rushes forward and pulls him into a huge hug. “Eli, everything’s okay.”

“That’s the fucking problem,” he says into her shoulder. “That’s the whole problem.”

As she comforts him, Doc and I look at each other.

“Drink?” I suggest.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

We grab bottles of Johnnie Walker Black Label and Dom Perignon. Adriano finds a box of fancy Turkish cigars and we all take one, forcing one into a still-weeping Eli’s hands, and sit on the conference table and drink and smoke. When our bottles are significantly lighter, Doc gets to his feet and presses his cigar end into a nearby painting of a cow skull. “Okay, let’s go.”

“And do what?” January asks.

“I have some ideas. Hang on a sec.” Doc sprints away, returning a few minutes later with a bag of golf clubs.

“You want to play golf?” I ask incredulously.

“Are you fucking high? No.” He tosses the bag on the floor and pulls out a nine iron and brings it down on the bar, smashing the wood into splinters.

We all wince.

“Stop it you, degenerate crackhead,” Eli snaps, sounding like himself for the first time since Bianchi left.

Doc turns, a manic smile on his face. “Why? Bianchi’s men have taken all the good shit. Bianchi himself said we can do whatever we want. Why not fuck it all up?”

He brings the club down on a row of bottles sending glass and brown liquor everywhere and despite my aching shoulder

I kind of want to join him.

“It seems pointless,” January says but I can hear that she’s into the idea too.

Doc points his club at her. “Exactly. Come on guys, Parker’s dead, and none of us got to kill him. Let’s fuck up his house.”

The sun, now high in the sky behind him, adds a poignancy to his speech that Doc doesn’t deserve. I heft myself onto my feet and grab a club. “Let’s do this.”

“Yay!” Doc squeals in a valley girl imitation. “Tits, you in?”

Smiling, January bends down and grabs a golf club. “Where do we start?”

“Anywhere we fucking want.”

It’s so much more fun than it should be, sprinting from room to room, sometimes seriously fucking things up, sometimes bashing a single lamp or ugly painting before running away laughing. The house is already messed up by Bianchi’s men, but there’s plenty to destroy. We break ping-pong tables and game consoles, tear ridiculous portraits of Parker off the walls, and break the frames. Adriano and I wait for January to leave the room then piss on them, laughing like five-year-olds. I thought Doc was cracked for suggesting this, but I feel a thousand times lighter. I’m alive and everyone I love is alive too. The only person who seems to be suffering is Eli. He’s too old money to appreciate the catharsis of what we’re doing.

“That’s Corinthian leather,” he moans, as Doc, who’s found a machete from somewhere, runs the blade through a couch and pulls out the stuffing.

“That’s an original Lovisa,” he tells Adriano, who’s set his sights on a statue of a naked woman.

“Fuck Lovisa,” Adriano says, swinging his driver into the porcelain. “Fuck all of it.”

We find a room with a giant wooden soda dispenser. January, and I lie under it, drinking from the taps as Doc and Adriano turn others on, soaking us to the skin with pomegranate kombucha and Inca Kola. When we're done Doc dices the whole thing up like firewood.

"I'm gonna set it on fire. I want to burn this whole place down." Doc dumps a full bottle of Hennessy over the wood, wild joy on his face. "Who's got a light?"

"Wait," Eli steps forward and I'm convinced he's going to pull rank and stop us. Then he produces a box of matches. "Go on, Domenico."

Doc turns and kisses him right on the mouth. "I fucking love you, Eli."

"Goddamn you," Eli spits, wiping his face.

"Oh my God," January whispers. "Doc called him *Eli*. He actually *said it*."

I kiss her cheek. "It's a day of miracles."

When we find Parker's bedroom, even Eli joins in the Lord of the Flies shit. We pile his hideous silk shirts and ties onto the bed and start an even bigger fire. Toxic smoke billows upward, scorching the walls and blackening the ceiling which is a mirror.

"Because of course, it is," January says, tossing a bottle of botanical gin into it and shattering the whole thing.

I watch her with a little concern. We're all having fun, but it's been over a day since she's slept, and her well-being should be our priority. She hasn't said anything about being pregnant and neither have we, but she's not drinking and now that Eli and Doc have pointed it out, she does look different. Softer and more beautiful.

As we watch Parker's bed burn, the mood changes. Becomes less chaotic and more thoughtful.

Doc takes me aside and points his machete at January's back. "Enough mayhem. I need to fuck that girl senseless."

“Agreed,” I say. “Where?”

“Not here,” he says shortly. “I wouldn’t fuck January here if it was the last place on earth.”

“On that, we’re in agreement.” I turn to Eli. “Should we call Gretzky, get the chopper?”

“*You* should do that,” he says and throws me a cell phone he found abandoned on a coffee table.

I quickly crack the device and call Gretzky, who answers on the second ring. “Heard there’s been some trouble at the Parker compound?”

“He’s dead as shit, Gretz.”

“Ding dong,” Gretzky says, which is as close to a *congratulations, the war is over, I love you boys* as you’re gonna get from him. We arrange to meet on the lawn in ten minutes and the five of us head to Parker’s backyard.

“Fuck this place is ugly,” Doc says conversationally, throwing a lit match into a hedge.

“He had too much money,” Eli says, settling onto the grass with a new bottle of Wild Turkey. “Too much money and no idea what to do with it.”

“He couldn’t stop,” January says quietly. “No matter what he had it wasn’t enough, he had to keep growing. He was like cancer.”

“He was,” I agree and smile, settling in next to Eli. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to talk about Parker in the past tense.”

“Well, we all know who we have to thank for that,” Eli says with pride. “Our beautiful, precious girl.”

“And Emilia,” January reminds him.

“Of course.”

Eli holds up the whiskey. “To Emilia.”

“To Emilia,” we all say and take a drink. January takes the bottle last, holding it up and smiling softly. “I can’t.”

“Why, Pryntsesa?” Adriano says roughly.

January toes the ground with her bare feet and it strikes me how beautiful she is, with her hair like ebony, her lips as red as any of the roses on the nearby bushes, and her skin pale as purest snow.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispers, and I close my eyes. Gold sparks behind them and I feel myself grinning from ear to ear. The girl I love is having a baby. I’m going to be a father.

“Guys,” January urges. “Say something. I’m *pregnant*.”

“We know,” all four of us say at once.

“What?!”

She’s so surprised she’s almost angry and we all start laughing which only makes her madder. Adriano stands and lifts her off the ground, giving her a big hug. “Congratulations, my dumpling. I love you so much.”

“*Thank you*,” January says hotly. “Why isn’t anyone else congratulating me?”

I shrug. “I don’t think I have any words that could make this moment better.”

“Me neither,” Eli says.

I look over at Doc, he’s got an arm behind his head, staring into space. I don’t know if it’s real to him. If I had to guess, it might not be until the kid is out in the world.

Adriano silently slides a hand over January’s stomach, and I have the weirdest urge to cry. Sometimes I wondered if he had enough left in him to love, now it’s undeniable. He was still whole underneath all the scars and crazy shit. A hibernating grizzly just waiting for the right time to venture back out.

And it hits me, Zachery Parker, the cloud that’s covered us for eighteen years has been blown apart, scattered into

insignificant particles. I have a family and a woman I love more than anything and a baby on the way. It's taken thirty-four years, but I'm here now. I can do anything. *We* can do anything.

I struggle to my feet and take January's hand.

"I love you," I tell her, "Everything's going to be good from here."

We share a small, painfully sweet smile in the morning sunshine.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

January Whitehall

THE CONTRACTIONS RIPPLE through me and I breathe through them, letting the pain spike me to my bones. Not resisting.

The midwife, Sienna, pats my forehead with a cool towel. “That’s it. You’re doing so well, January.”

“Thank you,” I manage. I’m scared of what’s coming but I’m ready. I can’t wait to meet the baby. And to not be pregnant anymore. The past two weeks I’ve been struggling to walk, and as nice as the guys have been about helping me, I want to climb the stairs without them acting like I’m a grenade that might go off. Another contraction comes and I breathe in more of the gas offered to me. My head swims pleasantly and I ride out the rest of the pain.

“How are you?” Sienna asks.

“It hurts,” I say but quietly. I can hear my boyfriends pacing outside the birthing suite like wolves and I know if I so much as gesture at the door they’ll burst in, guns drawn to do whatever impossible thing they think will help me give birth. But this is my pregnancy plan, and they can’t come in. Zia Teresa and I often talked about having kids. She was a traditionalist. She thought that men belonged in the waiting room, because no matter how supportive they promised to be, “they wail and panic and get confused by everything and you end up worrying about them instead of focusing on the bambina.”

As soon as I started to get big, I realized she was right. As supportive as the guys were, they also started treating me like I was made of bone china. My sex drive was crazy high but whenever they were inside me, they were stopping every two seconds to ask if I was fine and offering to bring me jasmine tea and masturbate instead.

And not just Bobby or Adriano, men I expected to become all cozy and overprotective. This was Doc and Eli, men who once promised to kill me rather than not get what they wanted from my body. How things change. How people can change.

Eventually, I trained all of them to make love to me the way they had before, but I could still see the terror behind their eyes.

“Don’t worry,” I said a million times a day, I’m strong enough for me and the baby. On this, they seemed to believe me. Maybe because I believed in myself. If I felt like attending yoga and eating green salad, I did. If I felt like ordering six cartons of dumplings and watching trashy TLC shows, I did.

I also met with Mr. Bianchi regularly to discuss breaking up Mr. Parker’s empire and developing He still flirts with me all creepily, but I can tell he respects me too. When I’ve recovered from the birth, I’m going to throw a gala at the hotel.

Another contraction snaps me into the present. I wail loudly as the surges roll through my body like thunder.

“January!” I hear a dull thump and guess Doc’s kicked the door. “You want us in there?”

His request seems to unlock the others.

“*Pryntsesa!*”

“JJ? Are you sure you’re fine?”

“*Bella*, just say the word.”

“She’s fine,” barks Sienna. She’s sixty-seven and she’s supervised over three thousand births. I requested her on more of Zia Teresa’s advice. “You want the oldest midwife possible.

The one who has seen everything. Twice. They will keep you calm and focused.”

Behind the door, the boys fall silent again.

“Idiots,” Sienna grumbles.

“They’re lovely too,” I pant, as my body continues to twist with pain. Sienna moves down me and checks my dilation. I spread my thighs obligingly. Over the past six months, I’ve grown totally used to strangers looking at my flower in a way that would have shocked past me.

“Six centimeters,” she informs me. “You’re close, darling.”

“Good.”

“It’s a shame your mother can’t be here,” she says, matter of factly. “It can be a wonderful moment for both of you.”

“I’m sure,” I say, thinking of Zia. It would be good to have her here with me. As for my other mother figures, one I never met and the other I barely knew.

I didn’t attend Corinne’s funeral. It was a small affair. A non-religious service. The FBI was there alongsidethe Whitehall fam. The feds are investigating Corinne because of a bunch of tax havens she set up in the Cayman Islands. It seems that Mr. Parker was using his payments to her to launder money he’d defrauded from his smaller tech companies. All of my stepmother’s assets have been tied up in legal fees, but at least one thing was made very clear, our old house belonged to Margot.

She went against my uncles’ wishes and sold it, splitting the money between my brothers and me, using her cut to buy herself an East Side apartment and to go back to college. We’re closer these days, meeting up for coffee and walks in Central Park and I hope that when the baby comes she might visit Velvet House for the first time. My brothers and I aren’t on speaking terms, but since it’s come out that they were heavily involved in helping Corinne whitewash Mr. Parker’s money, I don’t care so much.

“Seven centimeters,” Sienna informs me. “I’m calling for the other midwives. It might be time to get into the pool.”

I nod, trying not to grit my teeth. Outside I can hear someone cursing their ass off in Italian. Doc, it sounds like. His main response to my impending pregnancy has been anger. He’s been regularly going to an MMA gym and beating the shit out of anyone who will let him. I don’t know how to feel about that, but it’s better than criminal activity, I guess.

The rest of the time he’s been working on Orchard. There’s been a major breakthrough, something to do with an enzyme that slows down the rate of the aphrodisiac and helps the stomach dissolve the chemical that reacts to preservatives. I don’t understand it very well, but Doc and the scientists Mr. Parker originally pooled together are running trials on lab rats. Apparently, everything looks promising.

“In five years, millions of women’ll be banging on *Alessia*,” Doc told me when we took a romantic garden walk last week.

“I still don’t know if you should rename Orchard after your sister,” I said, stroking my stomach. “Isn’t that weird?”

“Fuck no, Tits. Nothing would make my gay sister happier than turning on every woman in the world. It’s the best tribute I could ever give her.”

I couldn’t argue with that. Besides, good taste has never been in Doc’s nature. I’m sure we’re going to need to talk about him calling me *Tits* in front of the baby.

Another contraction comes and this feels different. I sit upright, arching my back and screaming. Three extra midwives burst into the room as I grip Sienna’s hand. “What’s happening to me? Make it *stoppppppppp!*”

“To the pool,” Sienna urges. “Right now, January. You’re going to have your baby.”

◇ ◇ ◇

I STARE INTO my son's sleeping face. I don't think I've ever seen anything so beautiful. I was sure I was having a daughter; everyone was. But we were wrong. It's a son. A sweet, gentle, perfect son. He shifts in his swaddling, his rosebud mouth twitching into a little snarl and I laugh out loud.

I thought my baby would look like me, that we'd need a DNA test to know which of the guys fathered him. But there's no denying who this little boy belongs to and part of me feels like I always should have known. The rest is just grateful that he's here.

"He's gorgeous," Sienna says. "Are you ready for the stampede? You can take a little longer if you need to."

I glance up to say *I'm fine, let them in*, and I swear I see her: Just over Sienna's shoulder, Zia Teresa stands in her old housecoat. She smiles at me, her brown eyes crinkling, and my overflowing heart somehow fills some more.

Zia presses her fingers to her mouth and kisses them and then she's gone, back to being here and not here. As she always will be. My heart splits wide, breaks completely and I lift my son and kiss his beautiful cheeks over and over and cry tears of misery and complete and utter joy.

"Send them in," I sob. "We're ready."

They thunder into the room like a herd of disturbed rhinos, knocking over the bedside cabinet and sending a lamp crashing to the floor. None of them notice as they crowd around my bed. They seem very male after eight hours with only women. Very male and very handsome. I beam at them, turning the baby a little so they can't see his face. "Hi, guys."

Adriano moved behind me, smoothing his rough, tattooed fingers over my shoulders and head as though checking for injuries.

"I'm fine," I say with a laugh. "I promise."

"You fucking bitch torturer," Doc says, fists deep in his hair. "I had thirty different heart attacks in that waiting room."

Bobby punches him in the side. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

“She nearly killed me.”

“She just gave birth!”

I laugh because I’m so glad there are enough men in my life to keep one another in line. A family where everyone has a place to feel safe and loved. Eli pushes his brothers out of the way, there’s a delicate platinum and pink diamond necklace between his fingers. So pretty it almost takes my breath away.

“This is for you, beautiful mother of my child,” he says. “Can I put it on?”

“Of course. Although would you like to see your son first?”

The guys go still, their faces frozen in almost comical fear and anticipation.

“Here,” I say, turning the baby toward them.

There’s a stunned pause as my men take in his perfection. And realize what I realized as soon as I saw him. Exactly who his father is.

“Jesus H Christ,” Bobby says, tears in his eyes. “Who’d have fucking thought?”

“He’s perfection,” Adriano says, stroking his cheek. “A little prince.”

“A miracle.” Eli agrees, grinning from ear to ear. “Flawless work, my ruby.”

Doc says nothing, just stares like he’s been hit by lightning.

“Are you happy?” I ask.

Silence. Doc stares at me, his ice blue eyes perfectly mirrored in our child’s face and then he turns, pressing a tattooed fist into his mouth and biting hard enough to draw blood.

Adriano pulls him into a bear hug. “Congratulations, *padre*.”

“No,” Doc whispers, suddenly sheet white.

Bobby laughs. “Haven’t you been bragging about this being your baby since day one? Didn’t you keep saying your sperm is like...nuclear waste or something?”

Doc glances over his shoulder at the baby’s small face. His thatch of thick white-blond hair. “*No*.”

“Here,” Eli says, swinging the necklace over my head and fastening it around my throat. “For you, my ruby.”

“Thank you,” I say, kissing his cheek. “Would you like to hold him?”

“Of course.” Eli takes our son and smiles into his face, one of his perfect wide-cheeked smiles. “*Ciao, bambino*.”

The baby stirs slightly in his arms and Eli beams back at him.

Behind him, Doc appears to be hyperventilating in Adriano’s arms.

“Is he okay?” I ask Bobby.

“Who cares.” Bobby brushes a hand through my hair. “I’m so glad you’re okay, JJ.”

“Me too,” I say. “I really want bubble tea, though.”

“I’ll call, Sal,” Eli says, rocking the baby up and down. “You know, *bella*. This multiple fathers thing is very fun. You get two surprises in one.”

I smile, pleased and very content.

“Have you thought of a name?” Bobby asks.

We all decided the baby’s last name will be Morelli. That way all our children, regardless of their paternity, will have the same last name, our family name, but I’m going to choose the first and middle name.

“Well...I thought maybe Luciano,” I say. “That was Zia Teresa’s dad’s name and it’s Italian and we could call him Luci for short. What do you think?”

“I love it,” Bobby whispers.

“Wonderful,” Eli says, lifting the baby to his face. “Hello, little Luciano Morelli.”

“Luciano *Alessio* Morelli,” I correct.

Doc makes a strange yelping noise and despite Adriano’s best efforts, collapses onto the linoleum floor like a sack of bricks.

“Fucking Valente,” Eli says, nuzzling his nose to the baby’s.

Adriano lifts Doc’s unconscious body onto a nearby couch with a sigh. “Don’t worry, *Pryntsesa*. He’s just overwhelmed.”

“I know,” I say. “I love all of you. I couldn’t be happier.”



EPILOGUE

Domenico Valente

“**L**UCI, OVER HERE.” I take my son’s small, chubby hand and steer him away from the mud puddle that he seems genetically programmed to find in any park, garden, crack in the sidewalk, just about anywhere. “You don’t want to get dirt on your nice clothes, do you?”

Luci gives me a doubtful look. I decide to prevent the risk, bending and swinging him into my arms. “Okay, sweetheart, that’s enough fresh air. We’re gonna go find Mama now, okay?”

Luci’s face breaks into a smile. “Mama?” he asks hopefully. “I find Mama?”

I laugh and kiss the side of his sweet-smelling head. “Exactly.”

We walk together up the winding path that leads to La Vita è Bella where the music is pumping loud enough to shake the foundations. It’s January’s twenty-first birthday and we’re throwing the blowout to end all blowouts. Millions of dollars, months in the making. Everyone we’ve ever crossed paths with and liked is here, drinking champagne and celebrating the most beautiful woman in the world.

Except for me. I’m celebrating but I’m also on Luci duty. We could have left him with a babysitter all night, but January wanted him at the party, and I *wanted* to look after him.

As we enter the hotel hallway, I lean against the wall and take a second to check if Luci’s suit is on right and he hasn’t

got ice cream or dirt anywhere on it.

He giggles as I correct his collar and I laugh too.

It's fucking crazy but my kid isn't an asshole at all. He's sweet and funny and so fucking smart. Every day I see Alessia in him and I see my mom and January and me. And then there are the non-genetic traits. He throws his head back when laughs like Bobby. He stands with his hands on his waist like Morelli. He mutters to himself when he's playing with his blocks like Adriano cleaning a gun.

We literally merged ourselves together to create one tiny person. It's crazy and I don't want to miss a single second.

"There you are!" It's January, flawless in a long lace dress. It's deep green and perfectly matches her eyes. Her hair is loose, and her cheeks are flushed like she's been dancing.

"God, you're a MILF," I tell her. "Hottest MILF here."

"Nico, calling me that is not any better than T-I-T-S," January chides, but she's smiling.

"You go back to the party and keep having fun," I tell her. "Luci and I have got this."

"I know, but I want a kiss."

Luci gleefully holds out his arms.

"Hello, my sweet baby," she says, taking him. "I love you so, so much."

I look at both of them. My kid's so handsome, whenever we go out it's hard to tell who gets more side-eye, January from desperate dudes or Luci from ovarian-thirsty women.

January's gaze finds mine over Luci's head. "Have I told you how handsome you look tonight?"

"Nope," I say, shoving my hands in my pockets. "But you'll be telling me in the presidential suite later. Actually, you'll be telling me and Luci's other daddies a whole lot of things, Tesorina."

January's cheeks go even redder, and she ducks her head, fussing with Luci's shoelaces.

The party's not the only thing that's been elaborately planned. As soon as the kid's in bed and the rest of the guests have been chucked out, me and the guys are taking January upstairs, feeding her Alessia, and fucking her until the sun comes up. The drug's still a few years away from commercial release—watered down and a whole lot less likely to kill you, but that's the beauty of being your own chemist. You can do whatever the fuck you want.

“Are you having a good night, you sexy little MILF?” I ask January.

“Of course,” she says happily. “The hotel looks amazing.”

“Because of you,” I remind her. January's been putting in twelve hours days restoring the place to its original, Italian-inspired roots. In the next few months, it'll be ready to run as a five-star hotel full time.

Two drunk girls push past me, giggling loudly.

“Hey January!” one squeals. “Coming to dance?”

“Soon,” she says, rocking Luci. “I'm gonna go put the little man down, then I'll be back.”

“That's a promise,” the other girl says, swatting my wife's ass and running away laughing. I stare after them. “Who are they?”

“Pilates friends,” January explains. “You're so jealous.”

“And you're too hot and your friends are a bad influence, but you don't see me bitching about it.”

“What's happening here?” Morelli asks. He and Bobby appear in the doorway, cocktails in hand.

“Having a family moment,” I say. “Luci, how pretty does Mama look?”

“Pretty,” Luci coos, playing with January's diamond necklace.

“Too pretty,” Morelli says darkly, looking her up and down. “When are the guests leaving? In twenty minutes?”

January rolls her eyes. “Where’s Adriano?”

“Skulking the perimeter like an attack dog,” Bobby says. “What did you expect?”

“I was hoping he’d have fun,” January says, exasperated.

“He is. In his own way. And Archie and Bill are with him.”

I narrow my eyes. The twins work for us now, but I don’t have to like it. Especially since they’re still single.

“Are they dating anyone?” January asks, as though reading my mind.

“No,” Eli says, sipping his negroni. “They’re still visiting Emilia a lot. Sending her things too.”

“Like Morelli’s family heirlooms?” I ask.

January swats me. “They gave the necklace back.”

“Yeah, but they took it as payment in the first place those grifting, straw-haired—”

“Anyway,” Bobby says loudly. “So, they’re into Emilia?”

“Seems that way,” Eli says.

Fuck that, I think to myself. The girl’s still living at a mega-expensive Vermont treatment center. She’s doing better but January visits every month and says the girl’s still having a hard time. Considering how long she was Parker’s side piece I’m not surprised.

“Hmm,” January says, kissing Luci’s head. “I hope Bill and Archie aren’t...I don’t know...leading her on or anything.”

“I doubt it,” Bobby says. “She’s a beautiful girl. They might just like her?”

“Especially now she’s not on enough coke to kill a mule,” I add. “Anyway, that Emilia thing’s bullshit. Archie got wasted at Dreams a month ago and told Betty he and his moron

brother are still in love with some girl they met in New Orleans nine years ago.”

“Really?” January asks, intrigued. “Who?”

“Some broad.”

January gives me the evil eye and I shake my head. “We’re not getting involved, Tits. Dumb and Dumber have to work out their own shit.”

“True,” January admits. “My arms are super sore; can someone grab Luci?”

Eli gives Bobby his cocktail and takes Luci into his arms. He stares into our boy’s face, and I can tell what he’s thinking. *More, more, more.*

You’d think having an heir would have chilled him out, but now that he’s semi-retired Morelli’s become obsessed with fatherhood. He wants supplementary kids. Enough to fill a baseball team. January’s told him she’ll consider having another next year, but I think she’s coming around to the idea sooner. Especially since the soft opening for the Hotel is going so well.

“Is there a problem?” Adriano fills the entire doorway, shaking raindrops from his beard.

Luci’s face lights up. “Daddy!”

Adriano softens in a way that I once wouldn’t have believed possible. “*Pryvit, malyy.*” *Hello, little one.*

Luci beams for a second, then his face works furiously.

“Uh-oh,” Bobby says, and a moment later Luci bursts into tears.

“He’s tired,” I say over his offended wailing. “Give him here, Morelli. I’ll take him to his room. Call the sitter in.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course.” I take my still-sobbing kid and head for the stairs. When I’m almost there I turn back to look at them.

Adriano, tall and scarred. Bobby, his tie loose around his neck. Morelli, finishing his cocktail in his stupid velvet smoking jacket and January Joy Whitehall, waving to us, utterly perfect in her lace dress.

She's as tall and pretty as she was when I first kidnapped her, but she's grown. Older. Hotter. I drooled over her when she was Parker's fiancée, but if I saw this chick on the street today, I'd hit the pavement and beg her to take a chance on my ass. January mouths at us. "Goodnight. Sleep tight, baby."

Luci sniffles against me. "Night-night?"

"Night-night," I agree. "Wave goodbye to everyone now."

Luci waves at his family. They wave and blow kisses back and my son laughs. He doesn't see anything weird about having multiple fathers. As far as he's concerned the more people who love and care about him the better. It's a reality I'll fight tooth and nail to keep going for him.

My brothers and January give him one last wave and then head up the hallway to the ballroom, Eli's arm around January's waist, Bobby's hand on her shoulder and I smile as I head up the stairs. I don't know what the future holds but that doesn't matter. I have my brothers, my woman, my son. I have everything I could ever need and more.

And it's all because of the snow-white beauty I kidnapped.

Funny the way life is sometimes, huh?



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ABOUT EVE DANGERFIELD

Eve Dangerfield has loved romance novels ever since she first swiped her grandmother's paperbacks. Now she writes her own stories about complicated women and gorgeous-but-slightly-tortured men. Her work has been described as 'genre-defying,' 'insanely hot' and 'the defibrillator contemporary romance needs right now'...and not just by herself or those who might need bone marrow...OTHER PEOPLE! She lives in Melbourne with her boy and a bunch of semi-dead plants. She can generally be found making a mess.

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