



BRUTAL VOWS

I V Y D A V I S

Brutal Vows

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE SANTORO MAFIA
BOOK TWO

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CHAPTER 1

Adelina

I pull on my ballet shoes, tying the string into a cute little bow. I've had these slippers for years, and they show their wear. A hole is starting to form in the toe, and the sole won't hold out much longer. I really need to get a new pair, but these shoes are special to me. They were the first pair I got once my feet stopped growing, back when I was a teenager. When I got them, they signaled a new beginning. A new era where I would become the woman I always wanted to be.

A woman who dances freely.

I stand on my tippy-toes and begin to dance, letting the classical music wash over me and the grace within my body take form. I know all these moves by heart; they're second nature to my body.

My mother put me into my first dance class when I was two years old. She passed away, along with my father, when I was eight, leaving my twin sister, Serafina, and me in the care of our older brother, Dario, who was eighteen when our parents died and the new head of the Santoro mafia. Since my mother died, I've cherished dance as my only remaining tie to her.

I spin around faster and faster until I'm almost out of breath. I catch a glimpse of myself in the wall-length mirrors of my dance studio, noting the elegant lines of my body and my proper posture. My brown hair is tied into a tight bun that pulls my eyes back, giving me a natural facelift.

I move to the music, making every step perfect. Each movement feels right and at home. Once the song ends, my dance over, I stand tall before the

mirror, panting. It's always exhilarating to finish a dance. That feeling of accomplishment can never be beaten.

"Bravo," a voice so similar to mine says from the doorway. Surprised, I jump, but I would know my sister's voice anywhere.

"Thanks," I tell Serafina, wiping sweat from my brow. My dance studio is situated in our new home, in part because my brother is insanely protective and doesn't want us to leave often for safety reasons.

My twin approaches. We're identical. The only difference is the beauty mark Serafina has near her left eye. Otherwise, everything else is the same. Same brown hair. Same slightly tanned skin. Same dark eyes. Even the exact same height.

We've always been close. Which isn't surprising considering we share a face and have lived every second on this earth together. Even so, despite our closeness, we're still sisters, which means we bicker on occasion.

But ever since we were almost kidnapped last year and had our home broken into, Serafina and I rarely fight now. We realized that life is too short to be mad at the one person who knows you just as well as you know yourself.

"I'm always amazed at what you can do," Serafina comments. "I can't do any of that."

"That's because you never learned to dance. Your hobby has always been scrolling on your phone." I smile, letting her know I'm teasing.

Serafina rolls her eyes. "Hey, I love my hobby. Nothing better than being on social media and doing nothing else all day."

"You just like to post pictures of yourself. You like the attention men online give you."

"Yes," she says it so simply like it's obvious.

That's one more difference between us. Serafina has always been bolder and wilder, with her dark, tight clothing and need for adventure. I've always been drawn to pastels and quietude. I'm content to dance alone while my sister desires more. I know she chafes at Dario's demands to keep us in our home. We both know marriage is the only way we'll truly experience more of life. I know Serafina hates the idea of being tied down, whereas I ... I'm neutral about the idea. I don't hate the idea of marriage, but I don't love it either.

"What I don't understand," she continues, "is why don't you? We have the same face. And if men find me hot, then that means men will find you

hot. Why not post some pictures of yourself online? You could grow a large following. I have over a million followers.”

I sit down to take my ballet shoes off. “That’s because I don’t care about that. I just like to dance. I don’t need people to watch me.” And that’s true. I’ve never performed as a dancer. After our parents died, Dario made it his mission to keep Serafina and me as safe as possible from the outside world. I’ve never had the chance to perform, even if I wanted to.

Serafina shrugs. “Suit yourself.” She sits down next to me. “God, I just want more, you know? I get all these comments from men telling me how hot I am. I wish I could go out there and meet them. Date. Have sex. You know? We’re twenty now. When will we ever get the chance to experience life?”

I give her a pitying look. “I know you’re frustrated. But trust Dario. He’ll make good marriage matches for us, and then you’ll get to have all the sex you want with your husband.”

She snorts, crossing her arms. “That’s assuming he’s hot. What if he’s old? And ugly?”

“Then I’m sorry. That would suck. I guess you’d have to get your rocks off somewhere else.” I nudge her.

“Adelina! What have you done with my prim and proper sister?”

I chuckle. “I’m just joking. You know we’re supposed to take marriage seriously. I trust Dario will make a good match for both of us. And I doubt he’ll marry us to someone who’s old. And ugly. The men he works with tend to be around his age, so if he’s going to marry us to anyone of them, I don’t think you need to worry.” I place my shoes gently on the ground. It’s silly. I’m rough with them when I dance on them, but the minute they’re off my feet, I treat my shoes like they’re a newborn baby.

“Ooh.” She pats my arm, and her eyes light up. “What if Dario marries me to Matteo? I’d love to have sex with him.”

I shake my head. My sister’s crush on Matteo is well-known. Matteo Amato is the head of a local motorcycle club who Dario works with from time to time. In fact, when Serafina and I, along with Dario’s wife, Pia, were kidnapped, Matteo helped get us back before we were lost forever. It was then that Serafina started crushing on him.

As for me, well ... I’m not into the whole dirty and rough biker look he has going on. In fact, even though Matteo has been a big help to my family, he’s still only a biker at the end of the day. I seriously doubt Dario would marry either Serafina or me to Matteo. He’ll only choose the highest and

most powerful mafia men for a marriage deal.

While Matteo is a good enough man, I think bikers are lowly people. They don't have the prestige that mafia people do. They're the worker bees, never the heads of the business. I'm honestly amazed that Dario even works with them when he has his own men who work under him.

"Come on," Serafina says. "You can't tell me that Matteo is a fine specimen."

"Matteo is fine, sure. Nothing more. I would suggest you get over your crush on him because I seriously doubt Dario will marry you to Matteo. And if you go out and have sex with him, your reputation will be ruined, and no respectable mafia man will marry you."

Serafina is rolling her eyes before I even finish speaking. "Ok, Miss-Goody-Two-Shoes. Since you're so good, tell me, is there no one you've ever dreamed of having sex with?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Bullshit."

"It's true! Just like you, I've been sheltered inside our house. I haven't met any men I'd want to ... you know."

"Sex, Adelina. You can say sex."

"Fine. Sex. You happy?"

She lifts her chin. "Ecstatic."

"If you're so gung-ho about wanting to marry Matteo, why not tell Dario? Maybe he'd consider it."

"Maybe. That's a good idea. I'll go ask right now." She stands up quickly. My mouth drops open. I wasn't actually expecting her to do that.

"Serafina, wait." I follow her out of the studio into the hallway, where deep rich walls surround us and herringbone floorboards creak underneath us. Our new home is just as beautiful as our last one. We had to move when Pia's father wrecked our house by driving a car into the foyer. Dario had it fixed up but decided to move us for safety reasons. Now, Serafina, Dario, Pia, and I all live in this beautiful new home overlooking the ocean. In fact, it's not far from our old house; it's still in the same neighborhood. It's nice to be close to where we grew up, but it's also nice not to live in the same home where destruction rained down around us.

"What?" she asks over her shoulder. "That's a good idea. I've hinted at my desire to be with Matteo for a while now, but Dario hasn't been getting it. If I just point blank ask him to marry me to Matteo, how can he refuse?"

“Well, for one thing, you’ve only met Matteo on a few occasions. Have you ever had a real conversation with him?”

She waves a hand. “Who needs conversation when you’re hot? I want to have sex with him. Isn’t that a good enough reason to marry someone in our way of life?”

“No, it’s not.”

She chooses to ignore me.

We around the hallway and end up in the kitchen, where Dario and Pia are snuggling with each other by the stove as they make dinner. Pia uses her hands to sign words here and there, intermixed with her voice. She used to be mute for a long time but can now speak again. She still likes to use sign language, though, which I think is lovely.

They pull apart when they see Serafina and I come into the kitchen.

“By that look on your face,” Dario says to Serafina, “I think you have something to say to me. And that is never a good thing.” Pia hides her smile behind her hand.

Serafina huffs. “I haven’t even said anything yet!”

“Then, speak away. I’m listening.”

And then Serafina says the words I wish she never thought of. “I want you to marry me to Matteo.”

The room goes so quiet that the drip from the faucet feels loud.

Finally, Dario speaks. “That’s not happening.”

A cloud passes over her eyes. “Why not?”

“Because you two would not be a good match, trust me.”

“And what makes you think you know better than me?”

Dario sighs and pulls Pia into his side. They’re always touching and being lovey. I wonder if I’ll ever have that someday. “Because you’re wild, Serafina. You don’t like to play by the rules. Neither does Matteo. He’s a good man to work with in a pinch, but he’s constantly doing crazy things.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like things that could get him killed. Doing dangerous stunts with his motorcycle. Getting into shootouts. He’s a man who likes to put himself front and center in the line of danger. Serafina, that’s not a good man for you.”

“Why not?” she demands. “To me, it sounds like we’re a match made in heaven. We’re both wild. We’d get along great.”

“No, neither of you would know how to temper the other one. You’d light a fuse and watch the whole world burn. Trust me. You two are not a good

match.”

Serafina slumps into a seat at the table. “That sucks. Seriously? You’re not going to change your mind, are you?”

“I’m not.” Dario shifts as something passing over his eyes. “On that note, though, there was something I needed to discuss with you, Adelina.”

I stand up straighter. “Me?”

“Yes.” He clears his throat. “I’ve been thinking of who would be good for you. Someone who could help balance you out and you them. I know this is awkward, but ... I was actually thinking of marrying *you* to Matteo.”

My whole world tilts off its axis. I could fall over—I’m going to fall over.

Serafina whirls around on me. “What? You want to marry Adelina to Matteo?” Her head whips back and forth as she looks between Dario and me.

I stumble and catch myself on the counter.

Pia hurries over. “Are you all right?” She grabs my hand, helping to steady me. *Are you ok?* She signs.

I nod, then shake my head. No, I’m not ok. Dario can’t have meant what he just said. He can’t. There’s no way.

“Adelina would be a better match for Matteo,” Dario explains. “She’s more even-tempered. I think she’d do a good job of keeping him in line. I don’t want my ally to go crazy and ruin everything we’ve worked for. Adelina could help with that.”

I blow out a breath. “So, you want me to marry that biker just to keep him in line? Why is that my responsibility?”

Dario levels a look at me. “Because that’s your job. As members of this family, we all have jobs we have to do, even if we don’t like them. And your job is to make an alliance through marriage, helping my business, so I can make sure you two still live the lives you’re used to.”

“This is bullshit,” Serafina spits out. “I’m the one who wants to marry Matteo. Adelina wants nothing to do with him. She just called him ‘that biker.’ How can you do this, Dario? It’s not fair.”

He sighs and says to Serafina, “Do you even like Matteo has a person? You barely know him.”

“I don’t have to know him to know I want to marry him,” she grumbles.

Dario looks like he might have an aneurysm. “Enough of this. My decision is final. I think it’s a better match for Adelina to marry Matteo. And that’s what’s going to happen.”

I frown. “What does Matteo think of this? Have you even asked him?”

Not that I care what Matteo thinks. I don't concern myself with the opinions of bikers, but I am curious.

"I have. And he's agreed to this match. In fact, I invited him over for dinner tonight so you two can get to know one another better. He's on his way over right now."

As if on cue, there's a knock on the front door.

CHAPTER 2

Matteo

ONE DAY EARLIER ...

The building explodes in a blaze of fire.

I jump onto my motorcycle and hurry away, my men following.

We just blew up a competitor's meeting house, some assholes who thought they could work on my territory. Let this be the lesson for any of my enemies—never fuck with Matteo Amato. It helps that I have the boss of the Santoro mafia on my side. I know Dario won't be too happy with me exploding things, but he's not my boss. We're co-workers. Neither of us works for the other. He'll just have to deal. Anyway, I've cleaned up a lot of his messes in the past. He can do the same for me.

Carlo, my second in command, cheers as we drive away. His booming voice carries over the rev of our engines. He pumps his fist into the air over and over.

I smile and shake my head. Carlo is a little enthusiastic, to say the least. I've learned to appreciate it rather than be annoyed by it.

My men and I make our way back to our meeting house across the city. The building is fairly nondescript, with basic tan brick on the walls. No one who lives around here knows what happens behind these walls—the meetings we hold, the plans we come up with, the chaos that ensues.

After we drive into a small courtyard and park our bikes, my men give me fist bumps as they pass by, celebrating our success in taking out our competition.

“That was fun,” Carlo says, taking off his helmet. “When can we do that

again?”

I chuckle, throwing my leg over my bike. “When there’s another enemy, we need to take care of. We’re good for now. Let’s go relax and have some fun.”

“Hell yeah!” He hurries inside the building, knowing what awaits in there.

Women ready to offer their bodies up to us.

I’ve indulged in my fair share myself, so I’m not one to judge.

I walk inside the meeting house, which hosts a bar on one side and couches and chairs on the other. Down a hallway leads to several bedrooms that any of my men can use and where more women entertain us. I have my own house where I prefer to do my “entertaining,” but the meeting house is a good place to hang out after a day like today. My men need to see camaraderie is of the highest order. That way, we’ll always be loyal to each other.

“Good job today, boss,” Enrico shouts from across the room as he spanks the ass of a woman walking by.

A cluster of women wearing barely anything lounge around the room. It amazes me that these women do this. They don’t even get paid. They choose to do it for free, to have sex with a bunch of strange, rough men. Some women love danger, I guess. The thrill of it makes them wet.

I get hard just thinking about it.

I approach the bar to get a drink and nod to the bartender, Tom, a transplant from America. “A whiskey,” I tell him. He slides over a glass and pours the auburn-colored drink into it. I take a gulp, sighing as my body relaxes from the chaotic day. Planning this move took weeks and a lot of time and energy. Now, I can relax and have some fucking fun.

Antonio takes the seat next to me. He’s shorter than most of the men here, but what he lacks in height, he more than makes up in ferocity. “Good job.”

“Thanks.”

He shakes his head. “Now, what?”

“Now, we have fun.”

“That’s it? You don’t want to go out there and get more territory? There are other motorcycle clubs we could target. We can strike while we’re still on a winning streak.”

I pat his shoulder. “Antonio, just have some fun, all right? There’s no need to blow up other buildings just for the sake of it. Don’t get me wrong; I

love doing that. But we need to relax sometimes. How can we enjoy the spoils of war if we never take the time to enjoy them? I know you're eager. So am I. I'm always hungry for more. But I'm ready to take it easy today." A woman with red hair and pouty lips walks past me, eyeing me up. "In fact, I'm ready to take it easy with her. Now, go find a woman for yourself."

He scowls into his drink. "I think you're missing an opportunity here, Matteo."

"I appreciate your advice, but I'm boss here. So I'm giving you an order. Stop pouting and have some fun." I walk away before he can be any more of a fucking downer. I approach the redhead, who's leaning against the wall, and slide in next to her. "What's your name, gorgeous?"

"Emma," she says in a sultry voice.

"Ready to go for a ride, Emma?"

She traces her fingers down the front of my shirt. "Always."

I take her hand, tugging her down the hallway, and pull her into one of the bedrooms, where I pick her up and toss her onto the bed. She giggles as she bounces on the mattress, and I can tell she's showing me what I want to see.

I slip off my leather jacket and shirt and toss them on the ground. Then I tug her legs roughly to me, so she slides down the bed. "Don't pretend with me. I don't like fake women. Show me how you really want it."

Her pout turns into a real grin. "Yes, sir." She reaches up and strokes her hand through my beard. "I find you sexy."

"Then let me show you a good time. Ready to be fucked?"

"Oh, yes."

And I do just that.

Later, we're in bed next to each other, her head on my chest, my arms around her.

"That was amazing," she compliments me.

"I'm glad you thought so. I always strive to please the women I fuck."

She huffs. "I'm just so used to all these men wanting me to be a certain way. I like that you're not like that. A woman like me could fall in love with a man like you."

I chuckle as I move my arm out from under her. "Listen, sweetheart. You're great. A great beauty. A great lay." She smiles at that. "But I'm not going to fall in love with you. I've never been in love. I don't have time for it."

Her smile turns into that cute but fake pout again. “Is there someone else?”

My mind flashes back to a beauty with long brown hair and the best legs I’ve ever seen. “No,” I say roughly. “There’s no one else.” Just a woman I’ve been dreaming about for the better part of a year. Adelina. I’ve only seen her a few times, and we’ve barely spoken, but damn, I might have a crush on her. Me. A fucking crush. But she’s just too fucking beautiful for me to stop thinking about.

“Then we can continue what we’re doing. Fucking. Having a good time. Nothing more.”

“Sounds good to me.” I capture her lips with mine and roll her onto her back. “Now, enough with this chit-chat. Ready for round two?”

“I was born ready.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, focusing instead on how good of a lay she is.

After we’re done with round two, she sits up to smoke a cigarette. “Matteo, you’re a fucking god, I swear.”

I grin. “You’re good for the ego, Emma.”

She traces her hand down my chest, her fingers brushing my chest hair. “I’m good for a lot of things.”

“I bet you are. I already know one of those things.”

She blows out smoke and wiggles her eyebrows. “Ready for round three?”

Before I can answer, my phone rings from somewhere on the floor. “Sorry, baby. It might be important.” I lean down and scramble through my clothes until I find my phone. Dario is calling. “What’s up?” I ask once I answer.

“I have a proposition for you.” Good ol’ Dario. Quick to the point. Never beating around the bush.

I eye Emma as I answer. “Name it.”

“How would you feel about marriage?”

I look away from Emma as I sit up. “What are you talking about?”

“I want you to marry my sister. Adelina. You two would be a good match. You would balance each other out.”

I blink, taking in his words. “You want me to marry Adelina?”

Emma whips her head to look at me, her eyes wide. I shake my head, turning away from her.

“Yes.” Dario’s calm voice is going to drive me fucking insane.

“How did you come to this conclusion?” My heart is beating faster. Fuck.

“I trust you, Matteo. You’re a great man to work with, but you can be reckless. Adelina is the opposite of you. She’s calm personified. I want to marry you to a woman who can help keep you in check. And I want to solidify our working relationship by rewarding you with my sister.”

“What does Adelina think of this?”

“I haven’t told her yet. I wanted to know what you thought first. Since I’m not your boss, you have the power to say no. But I think it would be in everyone’s best interest if you said yes.”

I think about his proposal for half a second. “All right. I’ll marry her.” Out of the corner of my eye, Emma jumps up from the bed and starts dressing.

“Great. I’ll give her the news. Come over for dinner tomorrow night. We can celebrate then.” And just like that, he hangs up.

I sit there, stunned, as Emma walks around the room, finding her clothes. Finally, I snap out of it. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“What does it look like? I’m getting dressed. And apparently, you’re getting married.”

I just agreed to that. Marriage to Adelina. Marriage to the woman I haven’t been able to stop thinking about. She was always off-limits. I’m not stupid, nor do I have a death wish. I never pursued anything with Dario’s sisters, knowing they were well off the table for me.

But now Adelina will be mine.

I don’t know anything about her other than she’s beautiful. I know her sister, Serafina, gives me googly eyes every time I’ve been around her in the past year, which hasn’t been much. But she’s shown me she’s interested.

The question is—does Adelina feel the same?

She’s more reserved than her sister and might hate me for all I know.

“When’s the wedding?” Emma asks in a biting tone.

“Are you mad at me?”

She huffs. “What do you think? We just fucked, and you just told me that you’ve never been in love. Now, you’re going to marry some girl. I’m disappointed. I had a fun time with you, and I wanted to do it again.”

I stand up, completely naked, and her eyes rake over me. “I never said we were anything more than a fling. You know this. I didn’t promise you anything more than a good time. And I delivered on that, didn’t I?”

She hesitates before finally nodding. “You did.”

“So you have no reason to be disappointed. There are a group of men in that other room who would love to fuck you. You’ll just have to spend time with them.”

She traces her fingers down my chest. “You’re saying we can never fuck again?”

“I’m going to get married. I have no desire to be with any other woman.” All I want is Adelina’s graceful body underneath me. Dario has mentioned before that she’s a dancer. God, just the thought of her dancing for me makes me fucking hard. I’ve wanted to fuck Adelina so bad, and now, I’ll get that chance.

Once we’re married, of course.

I know how those mafia types work when it comes to their women. No sex before marriage. Dario would probably chop my dick off if I touched Adelina before we were married.

My club is different. There’s no waiting for marriage in our world. Our women tend to sleep around from a young age.

I’ll have to be more delicate with Adelina. Just the thought makes me want to laugh. Me? Fucking delicate? I’m not sure how that’s going to work out. But I know that Dario is showing how much he trusts me by giving Adelina’s hand over in marriage. I can’t fuck this up. I could ruin our good working relationship if I did.

Emma laughs darkly. “Sure. We’ll see how long you last before you’re fucking me again. Whoever you’re marrying can’t seriously compare to me.”

“You don’t even know who it is.”

“I guess I’ll meet her after you’re married. You’ll bring her around, won’t you?”

I frown. “Emma, have a good night.” I gently nudge her out of the room and shut the door in her face before she says more. I rub a hand over my face. God, women. Why do they have to be so complicated?

Once I’m dressed, I head back into the main room, where I spot Emma on Antonio’s lap, whispering into his ear. She gives me a smug grin.

I just shake my head and head over to Carlo, who’s face deep in kissing a blonde woman. I tap his shoulder. He waves a hand. I tap his shoulder harder.

“What? Can’t you see that I’m—” He stops short once he sees it’s me. “Boss. Shit. Sorry, didn’t know it was you.” The blonde on his lap giggles, covering her lips.

“I have an announcement to make. I need you to get everyone’s attention.”

Carlo stands up, and the blonde falls out of his lap, landing hard on the ground with a huff. “Everyone! Stop sucking face with the woman in your lap and pay attention. Matteo has an announcement.”

All my men turn to me, promptly ignoring the women in their laps. Except for Antonio, who’s kissing Emma.

I clear my throat and wait for him to finish.

He finally does, taking his sweet fucking time, and shoots me a dark look. Antonio is just bitter that I denied his plan of attack. I’ll show him later that I don’t stand pussies like him.

“I thought,” I say, speaking loudly and clearly, “that you should all know I’ve made a deal with Dario. I’m going to marry his sister, Adelina.”

The room goes silent for a moment before cheers erupt. Everyone claps except Antonio and Emma.

Carlo pats me on the back. “Good going, boss. Scoring one of Dario’s sisters.” He whistles. “That’s impressive.”

“Thanks. The details haven’t been hashed out yet, but I wanted you to know. This won’t change anything for our business. In fact, it’ll only make things better with Dario. All right, then. Go back to having fun.”

Everyone begins to murmur and goes back to making out.

I leave the meeting house, ready to go home. I need to be rested.

I have a dinner to attend tomorrow night.

CHAPTER 3

Adelina

“He’s here?” I ask as another knock on the door sounds through the room. “Why didn’t you give me advance warning?”

“Because,” Dario says, “I didn’t want you to try and back out of it. Matteo is just coming over to have dinner with us. You can get to know him this way.”

I look at Serafina, who turns her face away from me. “What do you think?” I ask her.

“I think what I want doesn’t matter.”

Dario sighs. “Stop grumbling, you two. Matteo is waiting.” He walks out of the kitchen and into the foyer, and a moment later, I can hear him open the door and greet Matteo.

“Are you mad at me?” I ask Serafina.

“No. I’m mad that Dario decided to give you Matteo when I wanted him for myself.”

Dario and Matteo walk into the kitchen at that moment.

Serafina flushes, which is a look I’ve rarely ever seen on her.

Matteo smiles. “I wasn’t aware you two were fighting over me.”

“We’re not,” Serafina and I say at the same time.

I take in Matteo, really, for the first time. I’ve never given him much thought before. Now that he’s here, I look him over, taking in his dark hair and scruffy beard. His leather jacket has seen better days. His jeans are ripped. He’s like a stereotypical bad boy come to life. I’m not impressed. He

just looks dirty and messy. I prefer a man who's put together. Not ... what Matteo is.

There's an awkward silence before Dario clears his throat. "All right, then. Matteo, I explained to Adelina that I think you two would make a good marriage match. Unfortunately, I didn't get the chance to tell her sooner, so I just told her. So ... excuse her shock." He shoots me a look, reminding me to go along with this. I always knew what was expected of me—marriage. But now that I'm faced with it and my future groom, it's nothing at all like I thought. I never imagined Dario would want me to marry a biker.

Matteo chuckles. His voice is deep. Has it always been that deep? "That's all right. I was just given the news yesterday myself. It's still new to me, too." He approaches me. "I'm glad to get to know you more." He picks up my hand and tries to kiss it, but I rip my hand out of his grasp.

Serafina gasps at my action. I never act so rudely.

"Adelina," Dario scolds.

Matteo pauses before a dark grin spreads across his face. "It's all right. I guess I was coming on too strong." He stands up, giving me a look I can't make out. I clench my hands together, feeling the hand he touched zing with some kind of energy. I'm not sure I like it. "You'll have to excuse me, Adelina. I can be a bit of a brute at times."

I frown. "I can't tell if you're joking or not."

"Oh, I'm always serious." His words feel like a warning not to mess with him. A filthy biker, indeed.

"Let's eat, shall we?" Dario breaks the growing tension in the room. He grabs Pia's hand, and they head into the dining room.

Matteo holds out his hand to me, but I hesitate to grab it. I'm not about to debase myself by touching a biker. No, thank you.

Serafina walks between us and grabs Matteo's hand. "Since my sister won't, I guess I'll have to."

Matteo smiles tightly as I follow behind them into the dining room. Dario frowns once he sees Matteo hold Serafina's hand and not mine. Well, she wanted him. This might be her only chance to touch him. Once he becomes my husband, he'll be off-limits to her. Though I wouldn't have any issue with Matteo if he decides he wants to be with other women. If it means he'll keep his hands to himself, I'll take it.

"Your sister was being nice," Matteo explains to Dario.

"Mmm," Dario responds, steeping his fingers under his chin.

The dining table is covered in food—a whole feast for five people.

Matteo holds out a chair for Serafina to sit in. She smiles demurely, taking her place. I know what my sister is doing. She's trying to show Dario that she would make a better match for Matteo. I can't fault her for that.

Matteo turns to me and holds out a chair, but I stare at the empty seat. Normally, I like propriety. I always say thank you and you're welcome. I never cause a fuss. I'm not like Serafina, who likes to rebel against the rules.

For some reason, this decision to marry me to Matteo has me feeling like I want to break every rule in the rulebook.

"I can get my own chair, thanks." I walk away from the chair he pulled out for me and pull out my own, taking a seat and giving Dario a pointed look.

Matteo doesn't respond. He just sits in the empty seat himself. He's between Serafina and me.

Dario and Pia are across from us, exchanging little glances with each other, showing how in love they are. Why can't I have that? I'd assumed Dario would marry me to a respectable mafia man and I'd have what Dario and Pia have—a marriage built on love and respect. Instead, he intends to marry me to some biker who just admitted he can be a brute.

"You know, Adelina," Matteo says, "I do appreciate a woman who can do things for herself. It's nice to know I don't always have to pull a chair out for you. I guess I won't have to do chivalrous things for you in the future. Good to know."

My lips part with surprise. "I don't mind chivalrous things on occasion. In fact, I like it when a man respects me."

"I can respect you enough not to hold a chair out for you in the future. How does that sound?"

I look away from him. He's baiting. Matteo is telling me exactly how he feels about my refusal to accept his chivalrousness. "I like a man who's kind. Clearly, that's not you."

"Adelina," Dario scolds again. He's never scolded me this many times in my life. What has come over me?

Pia places a hand on Dario's arm and says, "I agree. A kind man is a great man. I understand why Adelina is searching for that in a marriage."

"I'm not," Serafina cuts in. "I'm all for a man who's a little ..." She trails a finger down Matteo's arm. "Wild."

Matteo gives her a curt nod before turning back to me. I wish he'd give

my sister attention. Maybe, then, Dario would agree to marry them, and I wouldn't have to partake in any of this. "I can be kind."

I huff. "I doubt that. Bikers aren't known for their compassion or good nature." I take a sip of my water.

"Maybe not. But my men are loyal," Matteo responds. "That's good enough for me."

"Not for me. Your men may be loyal to you, but what about me? They have no loyalty to me. You have no loyalty to me. Once we marry, you can treat me however you want, and I'd be powerless to stop it."

His expression darkens. "I have no desire to hurt innocent women. I have no desire to hurt you."

I huff again. "That's not what I've been told about your motorcycle club. You like to get into danger. How could that not hurt me?"

"Matteo will not hurt you," Dario says, "because if he does, I'll kill him myself. You know I would never marry you to a man who intended to do you harm."

I meet Dario's eyes across the table. I know he's right. I know he'd storm in and kill Matteo for even looking at me the wrong way. I still don't want to marry Matteo, though. I deserve more than some biker. I deserve a high-ranking mafia man.

I sigh and return to my food. Everyone is silent as we begin to eat. I glance out of the corner of my eye and see Matteo shoveling food into his mouth. It's disgusting. It's barbaric. How about a little bit of class? I take a dainty bite of my salad and chew thoughtfully. Matteo is eating like he hasn't eaten in weeks.

I clear my throat and eye him over.

"Problem?" he asks me once he's finished swallowing. At least he has the decency to do that.

"Nothing."

"No, you look like you have a problem with me. Explain." He chomps down on his steak.

I sigh. "It's just ... the way you eat."

"Adelina," Dario warns.

I ignore him. "It's ... so different from the way I eat. That's all." There. I didn't outright criticize him, but I made my feelings known.

"You eat like a fairy," he remarks. "All dainty. But I'm a man, Adelina, and I eat like it." He makes a point of taking a huge bite of his steak.

“I have no problem with how you eat,” Serafina butts in. “I think it’s sexy.”

Dario coughs. “Serafina, enough.”

“What?” She puts on her best innocent expression.

“You know what. Matteo is going to marry Adelina. Stop trying to flirt with him.”

She narrows her eyes. There goes her innocent expression. “I’m not flirting. I’m just telling the truth.”

I sit up straighter, dropping my fork, so it clatters against my plate. “I’m sorry. Is there something wrong with the way I eat?” I ask Matteo. The way he described me as a fairy feels ... insulting somehow. Condescending.

“No. Unless you have a problem with the way I eat?”

“No,” I rush to say, even though it’s a lie.

“Then there’s no problem.” He chomps down on his food.

“It’s just ...” I can’t seem to drop it. “You called me a fairy. What does that mean?”

He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand, and I grimace.

“Do you need a napkin?” I ask, holding mine out.

He blinks, then smirks. “Do I bother you?”

“No,” I emphasize. “It’s just you can use a napkin when wiping your mouth. You don’t need to use your hand.”

He makes a show of grabbing his napkin and dabbing at his mouth. “There? Is that better? More to your standards?”

“It’s not about my standards. It’s common etiquette. You use a napkin to wipe your mouth. Not your hand.”

He makes a face. “Ok, then. I wasn’t aware I was in the presence of royalty. Next time, I’ll use a damn napkin.”

I scowl. “You still didn’t answer my question. Why did you call me a fairy?”

“Because you flit around like one. There’s an elegance about you. Well, except for your judgy persona.”

I huff and look at everyone at the table except for him. “I am not judgy. I’m a very open-minded person. Ask anyone. Ask Pia.”

Pia startles when everyone looks at her. “Uh ... Adelina has always been kind to me. When I first got here and couldn’t speak, she was quick to learn sign language to converse with me. I would say that’s very open-minded.”

Dario places his hand on her back, smiling down at her lovingly. “Yes.

Adelina is normally very sweet. I'm not sure where all this animosity is coming from." He gives me another pointed look.

I duck my head, feeling shame rise over me. What is it about Matteo that, in such a short amount of time, he's managed to get under my skin in a way no one else has? Then again, I've never had to worry before about spending the rest of my life with one person. Is it such a crime that I want that person to be someone I actually like?

"Maybe that's just my presence," Matteo responds. "I have that effect on people."

I lift my head back up and force myself to smile in Matteo's direction. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be judgmental. I just ... I only learned about our engagement a few minutes before you arrived. I'm still processing it. It's a lot for me to take in."

He nods. "I understand. It's a lot for me, too. The difference between us is that I'm looking forward to our marriage. I get the sense you don't feel the same."

"You're a biker," I blurt out.

"And there's something wrong with that?"

I turn to Dario. "I assumed you'd marry me to a high-ranking mafia man. Not a biker. You can understand why I'm upset."

"Adelina, this is enough from you," Dario practically shouts. He's never been angry with me before, and I flinch. "If you don't trust me enough to make a good match for you, then you can leave this dinner table. I'm done with your attitude."

I push my chair back roughly and stand up. "And if you can't understand that you threw this on me at that last second because you didn't want to deal with me being upset, then that's on you, Dario. I know I'm the calm one in this family. I've always been, and I'm fine with that. But I'm right. I'm upset."

"I told you to leave, Adelina. Now go."

I stare at my brother in shock. How can he be so callous? Is he really choosing his working relationship with Matteo over his relationship with me?

"Adelina." Serafina tries to grab my hand as I storm out of the room, but I pull away from her.

"Give her time to adjust," Dario says as I walk out of the room.

The question is—will I ever adjust? I can't deny my feelings. My frustrations. My anger. None of this is fair.

I run to my dance studio and burst into the room. I don't bother putting on my ballet shoes. I just turn on the music and dance.

I choose the most chaotic classical music I can find and match its rhythm. I dance like a crazy person. I dance until I'm too tired to dance again. I tear at my hair. I tear at my clothes. I push my fists into the air, trying everything I can to get this chaotic emotion out of me. I hate it. I'm never like this.

Is this a sign of what marriage will be like with Matteo? Will I always feel like I'm crawling out of my skin with frustration?

Eventually, my legs are too tired to move anymore, and I slump to the ground, bracing myself with my hands. I sigh, pressing my face into my hands, feeling calmer by the second. At least I have dance. No one can take that from me. I'm almost back to feeling like my normal self.

That is, until I hear something and look up.

Matteo is standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER 4

Matteo

I watch Adelina storm from the dining room. I never knew she could be such a spitfire. I like it. Watching her toned legs hurry away in anger is a sight I never knew I needed until this moment.

“Sorry about her,” Dario apologizes. “I’m not sure what’s come over her. She’s never like this.”

“The concept of marriage is a lot for some people,” Pia says, her soft voice flitting through the air. “It was for me. Give her time. I’m sure she’ll come around.”

“Or maybe we should listen to what Adelina wants,” Serafina suggests. “If she doesn’t want to marry Matteo, don’t force her.”

Dario gives her a pointed look. “So, you can marry Matteo instead? I don’t think so.”

Serafina turns to me. It’s surreal how identical she is to Adelina, except for that small beauty mark near her left eye. “What do you think, Matteo? Don’t you think you should have a say in which sister you want to marry?”

“I’m flattered,” I tell her, “but if Dario thinks Adelina and I are the better match, I’m inclined to believe him. Now, excuse me. I’d like to have a word with my future wife in private if that’s all right?”

Dario nods. “I’m fine with anything at this point. Who knew trying to marry my sisters would be this difficult.” Pia pats his arm, not saying anything.

Serafina grabs my hand before I can leave. There’s no spark there.

Nothing like when I touched Adelina's hand earlier before she ripped it away. "Just think about it, ok?"

"Serafina, I'm flattered. Really. But I'm going to marry Adelina." I pat her hand, then extract my hand from hers as she pouts. I don't have time to worry about both sisters. Adelina is my main focus, and she just stormed off. I need to talk with her and let her know what I expect from her. "Do you know where Adelina went to?"

"Probably her dance studio," Pia says. "It's down the hallway," she points, "That way."

"Thanks." I stroll through their house, taking my sweet time finding Adelina. I'll reach her eventually. I love a good chase, and Adelina is proving to be just that. As I near the end of the hallway, I hear music coming through one of the doors.

Then suddenly, it stops. I open the door to find Adelina on the floor, breathing hard. Damn. I missed her dancing. I would have loved to have seen it. When we're married, I'll ask her to do it for me even though she'll probably object. I like that she stands up for herself even though she seems completely repulsed by the idea of marrying a "biker," as she repeatedly calls me.

I tap on the doorframe. Adelina jerks her head up, her eyes widening when she spots me.

"How long have you been there?" she asks, her voice just as elegant as her movements.

"Not long." I cross my arms. I want her to see me as the picture of casualness. For some reason, I feel like it's just going to annoy her even more.

"Did you see me dance?"

"Maybe."

She huffs and pushes herself to stand. "You know, it's rude to barge in on someone during a private moment."

"I didn't understand that it was a private moment. My bad."

"Yes, you are bad." She places her hands on her hips. "I can't believe Dario thinks we would make a good match. You are ..." She shakes her head.

"I'm what?"

She doesn't answer.

"I'm what, Adelina?"

"Insufferable," she snaps. "I find you insufferable. All right? And I don't

think that makes me a bad person.”

“No one ever said you were.”

She’s breathing so hard that her chest rises and falls fast, giving me a good view of her breasts. I wonder if she’ll let me touch her once we’re married. In time, I have no doubt. I’ll get her to like me. I’ve been told I can be charming when it comes to women, and Adelina should be no different.

“God,” she snaps again. “I just ...” Her hands clench and unclench.

I shift from my spot and take a step into the studio. “Why do I make you so angry? I’ve done nothing to you.”

“I know you haven’t. It’s not you, personally.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Well, fine. It’s not completely just you,” she admits. “I never expected to marry a biker.”

“And you think you’re too good for me, is that it?” I take another step in her direction.

Adelina takes a step back. “No.”

I give her a look.

She huffs. “Fine. Maybe. But it’s not that I think you’re a bad person. It’s that ...”

“You just don’t think I’m worthy of your hand in marriage, is that it?”

“I never said anything about you not being worthy.”

“You didn’t have to.” Another step forward for me. And another step back for her. “It’s clear in your tone. You think I’m not worthy of you. You don’t like the way I eat.”

“Well, because it’s barbaric.”

“And you clearly don’t like my profession.”

“Because you ride motorcycles for a job.”

“And I’m guessing you don’t like the way I dress.” As I speak, I continue to take more steps toward her. Adelina keeps backing up until her back hits the mirror. I close the gap between us until we’re toe-to-toe.

“I never said anything about the way you dress.” Her voice comes out breathless. I’m not sure if it’s from dancing or the proximity to me. I hope the latter.

“Yeah, but you don’t like it, do you?” I place my hands on either side of her head, locking her in.

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s written all over your face. Would you prefer I

was in a suit and tie like your brother?”

“I do think a suit is a classy look, yes.” Her gaze flits between my eyes and my chest. “I’m not a fan of ... leather jackets.” She gulps.

“See? I told you I was right.”

“I’m sure there are times you’re wrong. You don’t know everything about me, Matteo.”

“Maybe not, but I do know some things.”

“Like what?”

“Like ... you’re a dancer.”

She huffs, slightly rolling her eyes. “You deduced that one, did you?”

“I know you’re a dancer, and not just because we’re in your dance studio right now. I can tell you’re a dancer from the way you move.” As I trail my fingertips over her arm, goosebumps rise on her flesh. She doesn’t pull away. “You have a gracefulness about you. It’s beautiful to see. And,” I lower my voice, “I also know you’re a dancer from how toned your legs are. And trust me, Adelina, I’ve noticed your legs. In fact, I can’t stop thinking about them.”

“My legs?”

“How long they are. How strong. How good they’ll look wrapped around my waist as we—”

“Ok. I get it.”

I smile. “Do you? Do you know what it’s like to be fucked by someone?”

She gasps as she swats at my chest. “This is inappropriate.”

“But we’re going to be married. Might as well talk about it.”

“Well, we’re not married yet. So it would do you some good if you stopped talking about it.”

“Yeah?” I smirk. “What will you do to me if I don’t?”

“I’m going to ...”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to ...”

“Come on, Adelina. I don’t have all day.”

A smug expression crosses her face. “I’m going to do this.” She slaps me across the face. It’s pretty gentle and tame, but she gets her point across.

“Doesn’t even sting. You’re going to have to do better than that.”

She pushes on my chest. “You’re a disgusting man, Matteo. This is exactly why I didn’t want to marry you.”

“I think I can change your mind.”

“How?”

“By telling you what else I know about you.”

She huffs. “And what’s that?”

“I also know you’re so fucking beautiful it almost hurts.”

She blinks, clearly not expecting that response. Her lips part as if to speak, but she remains quiet.

“I know you have the sexiest body I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s not going to make me feel special,” she says, even though her voice is breathless again. “My sister and I have the same face and body. If you find me so irresistible, why don’t you marry her? She’s dying for you to give her attention. She’d gladly marry you.”

I lean in closer until there’s only the smallest of spaces between our lips. “Because I don’t want to marry Serafina. I want to marry you, Adelina.”

She sucks in a breath. “Why? Why me? What makes me more interesting than her? Serafina is bolder, wilder. All I like to do is dance and stay inside. You’ll get bored of me in a matter of weeks.”

“Don’t tell me what I’ll do.”

“Then don’t do the same to me.”

She has a point. “I’m fascinated by you, Adelina. Since the moment I saw you, I’ve been fascinated. I’m not sure why, if I’m being honest. It’s clearly not because you’re into me. But I feel it.”

“That’s the best you can do?”

“I’m being honest. I figured you’d appreciate it.”

She shrugs. “Maybe you only like me because I’m hard to get. I’m not fawning over you like Serafina. You like the chase, don’t you? A man like you, drawn to the edge, drawn to danger. Why wouldn’t you like that? And see? You’re only proving my point. Once you have me, you’ll get bored of me.”

“Is that what you’re worried about? Is that why you don’t want to marry me?” I trail my fingers up and down her arm again. “You don’t want to get your heart broken.”

“You know nothing of my heart, Matteo. Don’t pretend you do. I don’t want to marry you, not because I’m worried that you’ll hurt me, but because I think you’re not worthy of my hand. There. I admitted it. I’m not scared to get heartbroken. I just don’t want to be married to a man I think is a brute.” Her words are impassioned. With every word she spits at me, our lips get closer.

“I am a brute, all right.”

She makes a pointed look at my arms beside her head. “Obviously. You have me trapped here. Are you going to throw me on the ground and have your way with me?”

“Don’t tempt me, Adelina.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to hurt me.”

“I’m not. If I threw you on this floor right now and fucked you, it would be because you were begging me to. You’d desperately want me to touch you.”

Her nose scrunches up. “I seriously doubt that will ever happen. I can’t even stomach the thought of a man like you touching me,”

“A biker, you mean?”

“Yes, a filthy biker. Even your clothes are dirty. You stuff food into your mouth without chewing. And you smell like stale cigarettes and ...” She leans towards my neck and sniffs. “Is that perfume? Something you need to tell me, Matteo?”

I shrug. “Just residual from the last woman I fucked.”

She flinches.

“Hey, you wanted to know.”

“Do you make that a habit? Having sex with random women?”

“I never said she was random.”

Adelina frowns, shaking her head. “So, once we’re married, you’re just going to sleep around, is that it?”

“I had no desire to, but if you want me, I won’t deny any woman a chance to sleep with me. I consider it an honor to be fucked by me.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“You said that already.”

“Well, I’m saying it again. And for the record, I’d never let a gross biker like you touch me in a million years.”

“So, you’re saying you want me to sleep with other women? Is that it?”

She pauses, lifts her chin, and says, “Yes. I do. If it means keeping your hands away from me, then use them on any other woman but me.”

“You know, I told the last woman I fucked that I plan on being faithful to you once we’re married. Would you really have me go back on my word?”

“We’re not married yet, so you haven’t broken any vows to me. And I’m giving you permission to have sex with other women. So, there. You haven’t gone back on your word.”

I scoff. “How gracious of you.” I eye her over. “You’d really be fine with me sleeping around just because you can’t stand the idea of me touching you?”

“Yes.”

“Then how come you’re not bothered by my hand on you right now.” I nod toward my hand on her arm.

Adelina blinks, then makes a big show of pulling her arm away from me. “I didn’t notice. Your touch doesn’t even feel like anything. That’s how little I want you touching me. It doesn’t affect me at all.”

My lips curve up into a smile. “Sure, it doesn’t. I saw the goosebumps on your skin. You can lie to me all you want, Adelina, but my touch *had* an effect on you.”

“It was just biology,” she mutters. “It happens. It didn’t mean anything to me.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Then does this mean anything to you?”

She frowns, but before she can answer, I capture her lips with mine. Inhaling deeply, she spreads her hands against my chest. I kiss her with all my might before she comes to her senses and tries pushing me away.

I pull away and give her chin a tap. “There. Did that make you feel anything?”

Adelina breathes heavily for a moment, staring at me with an expression I can’t make out. Then, anger fills her eyes. “How dare you!” She wipes her lips with the back of her hand.

“Ah-ah. Didn’t you tell me never to wipe my mouth with the back of my hand?”

She scowls. “That was about food. When it comes to a kiss, it’s more than appropriate.”

I chuckle and push myself away from her, creating distance between us. “Sure. Tell yourself that. All I know is I’ll be thinking about your soft lips when I go to bed tonight.” I wink.

Adelina ducks her head. “You’re disgusting.”

“Already said that,” I say in a sing-song as I stroll out of the room.

I smile all the way back into the dining room, where I wish Dario goodnight before heading home. Adelina may push me away as much as she likes, but there’s chemistry between us, and I’m going to make her see it one

way or another.

Oh, this will be fun.

CHAPTER 5

Adelina

Curse Matteo and curse his soft lips. He had no right to kiss me, yet he did so anyway.

And I hate to admit it, but ... it was thrilling.

And it wasn't *that* bad.

Ok, fine. The kiss was actually pretty nice. But I hate that he ripped my first kiss away from me like that. As a good mafia girl, I was taught that my first kiss was supposed to happen on my wedding day, but now, that's not going to happen.

God, Matteo is good at getting under my skin. No one else has ever bothered me the way he does with his casual, carefree energy and his ripped jeans and scruffy beard and ...

Just all of him. I can't stand any part of him.

After he leaves, I run up to my room and take a shower. I need to get the feeling of him off me, from how he skimmed his fingers down my arm to how he kissed me. I scrub my skin until it becomes red. Who does Matteo think he is, touching me like that? Kissing me like that? It just goes to show how wrong we are as a match. A good mafia man would never have done that to me.

But a biker like Matteo doesn't have a care in the world. He seemed to get off on teasing me and making me uncomfortable. He's sick, is what he is. No one in their right mind would enjoy doing that to another person.

Once I'm scrubbed red, I get out of the shower and lean against the

counter, taking a moment to calm down. I need to get a hold of myself because this anger is not healthy. I'm normally the calm, cool, and collected one in my family. I don't like feeling so unhinged. It honestly scares me a little.

After I get dressed, I head into my room and fall back onto my bed. I only have a moment of peace before Serafina knocks on my door. "Adelina, we need to talk."

"Come in."

She bursts into the room and quickly joins me on my bed. "What was up with you today? It was like I was looking at my sister but not. You were a stranger. Does Matteo really bother you that much?"

"Yes! He's insufferable. He's disgusting. He doesn't have any table manners. He doesn't respect any personal boundaries. How am I supposed to marry a man who drives me insane?"

She holds up a hand. "Woah. What do you mean he doesn't respect personal boundaries?"

I pause, clamping my lips shut.

"Uh-uh." She pokes my arm. "Speak. Tell me."

"Fine. When Matteo followed after me, he sort of cornered me against a wall."

Her eyes widen almost comically. "He did what? Damn, I wish that was me."

I swat her arm. "No, you don't. Trust me. Matteo is a pig who has no respect for me. If he did, he never would have kissed me."

Serafina almost falls off the bed. "He kissed you?!"

"Yeah," I mutter.

"No. I need details. Tell me now."

I shrug. "What's there to tell? He kissed me. It lasted a few seconds, and then it was over. Honestly, I wasn't really impressed."

"You're lying."

"I am not."

"Yes, you are." She pokes my arm. "There has to be more. Besides, you and I both know you've never kissed anyone before. I seriously doubt it was bad. Matteo doesn't seem like he'd be a bad kisser."

I roll onto my side and prop my head up with my hand. "Only because you've been fantasizing about kissing him for the better half of a year. Trust me, Serafina. You would have been disappointed, too."

She frowns. "Are you just saying that? Or do you actually mean it?"

"Why wouldn't I mean it?"

"Because, for reasons I can't understand, you've made it your mission to hate Matteo, so you're telling me he was a bad kisser only because you actually liked it but don't want to admit it."

"I didn't like the kiss." Though, I know deep down it wasn't so bad. In fact, it was pretty nice. But there's no way I can admit that. If I did, then ... I'm not sure what I'd feel, and I'm determined to dislike Matteo for reasons even I can't understand.

Serafina rolls her eyes. "Sure. For the record, I don't believe you."

"Believe whatever you want, but I'm telling the truth."

She lies down next to me, our legs tangling together. We used to lay like all this time when we were kids. "I can't believe you get to marry Matteo. Why is Dario punishing me like this?"

"Hey, I'd gladly give you to him if I had the chance; trust me. You know what I told him? I said he could continue to see other women after we're married."

"You did what? Seriously? Adelina, you're going to regret that."

"Why?"

"So, you're telling me that you're seriously all right with seeing your husband flirt and get it on with other women in front of your eyes?"

"He's not my husband," I grumble. "And why would I be watching him have sex with other women?"

"You're not. That's the point. But you'll know what he's up to. Won't that hurt?"

"Why would it hurt? I don't care for Matteo."

She sighs. "All I know is, if Matteo were my husband, I wouldn't let him out of my sights for anything. He'd mine and only mine."

"Maybe you could be with him," I offer.

She looks at me like I'm crazy. "I know you didn't just say that. You know Dario will keep me locked up here until he finds someone for me to marry. Besides, it already hurts thinking of him with you. I don't also want to think of him with other women."

I grab her hand in mine, squeezing it. "I'm sorry this hurts. I know how much you've been crushing on Matteo. If I had any say in this, you'd know I wouldn't choose him."

"I know. And that's why you shouldn't let him sleep around on you. If

the man I like is going to be with anyone other than me, I'd prefer it to be you. I really think you're going to regret giving him permission to sleep around."

"So you say, but I'm confident in my decision. I want Matteo far away from me."

"Why do you look down on bikers so much anyway? I think they're fascinating. Driving for long periods of time, being free to go wherever and whenever they'd like. I want that. I want freedom. Adelina, you're being offered that. Don't waste it. Be grateful for it."

I turn away from her. "Don't tell me to be grateful for something I never asked for."

"Hey, I'm not going to apologize because you have a stick up your ass and view bikers as unworthy of you." Her words remind me of what Matteo accused me of. He said that I thought he wasn't worthy of me. I denied it even though I knew it was truly how I felt in my heart.

"Can you just leave me alone? I'm tired."

Serafina snorts but gets off the bed. "Fine. I'm just saying you're wasting a good opportunity here."

"No one asked you," I snap.

"Whatever." In true Serafina fashion, she rolls her eyes dramatically and storms out of the room.

And just like that, my sister and I are back to bickering again. I guess some things never change.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS?" The saleslady holds up a flowy white wedding gown. It's wedding dress shopping today—not that I wanted to go.

Things have been tense between Serafina and me over the past few days since we got into our argument. She still thinks I'm being ungrateful, but I think she's being unfair.

Now, we're with Pia in a bridal store, looking for dresses for my wedding day.

The thought still hasn't fully sunk in yet.

I'm going to be married. To Matteo. In less than a month.

Things happen fast in the mafia. When weddings are announced, they're

usually planned in less than a month. I have no idea why, but my guess is to entrap women into marriages as soon as possible.

“It’s beautiful,” I tell the saleslady, whose name is Morgan, based on her name tag. “But I’m not sure it’s really me.”

“Ok. We’ll keep looking.”

“Thanks.”

She hurries away to find me another dress.

Pia grabs a mermaid-style dress from the rack. “What about this one?”

“It’s nice, too ... but still, not my style.”

“What is your style?” Serafina asks, waltzing past. “Boring and unoriginal?”

I flinch. I know she’s speaking about my dislike for Matteo and not my dislike for the wedding dresses.

Pia catches my gaze and leans in to whisper, “I remember when Serafina used to be mean to me. I tried not to take it too personally.”

“I know.” I watch as Serafina struts around the store, looking at dresses. “It’s just ... it would be nice to be in solidarity with my sister at a moment like this. Not bickering like we used to.”

Are you ok? Pia signs. She likes to flit back and forth between sign and verbal language.

“No,” I admit, putting a poofy dress back onto the rack. “I’m not.”

Her eyes soften, and she opens her mouth to speak when Morgan returns with another selection of dresses.

“I think you should try these on,” she tells me.

I suck in a breath, compose myself, and nod. “All right.”

I follow her into the changing room and try on the first dress, which has long sleeves covered in lace with a bodice that shows off my clavicle and a long, lacy skirt that reveals just a hint of my skin underneath. It’s both beautiful and slightly sexy, but not in an inappropriate way.

If I were ever going to choose a dress, this would be it.

I stare at myself for a moment, taking it in.

“What do you think?” Morgan asks, clamping her hands together. “It looks absolutely beautiful on you.”

I agree. It’s stunning.

And yet, why do I feel like crying?

All of a sudden, panic sweeps over me, and I double over, clutching at my chest and stomach.

Morgan flutters to my side. “Are you all right?”

“No,” I whisper, curling tighter into myself. My chest feels tight, and breathing is almost unbearable.

“Should I get someone?”

“Pia,” I manage to say. I wish I could say Serafina, but I’m not sure she’d be the most supportive right now.

Morgan rushes away and returns a moment later with Pia in tow.

Pia comes to my side, placing her hands on my back. “Just breathe,” she tells me in her soft, calming voice. “Just breathe.”

I slump to the ground, and Pia crouches down next to me. Morgan gives us some space. “I’m not sure how I’m going to do this,” I admit.

Pia clutches my hand. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I don’t know.” My breathing is getting easier. “All I know is that I’m afraid. How did you handle this when you married Dario?”

“I didn’t get much of a chance to think about it. It all happened so fast. But I do remember having panic attacks. Everything was so new to me. It was scary. I understand how that feels.”

“I’ve never had a panic attack before.”

Her lips twitch. “First time for everything, I guess.”

Her words make me chuckle slightly. “Yeah, I guess so.” I drop my head back against the wall. “Pia, I’m not sure how I’m going to do this.”

“Is it the thought of marriage that scares you or Matteo? Because if Matteo scares you, I’m sure Dario would reconsider.”

“You seem to have forgotten. Once Dario makes up his mind, he refuses to change it.”

“Trust me, I know. That’s how we got married. He wanted me, so he got me.” She touches my cheek. *Tell me*, she signs.

“I’m not sure what it is about Matteo that makes me feel this way. There are already a million things I don’t like about him, but this feels deeper.” I pause, sucking in a breath. “I’m also scared to leave home.” There it is. The underlying fear I’ve felt since the second Dario told me I would marry Matteo. “It’s all I’ve ever known. And now I’m supposed to give that up and live with a man who’s the opposite of me, and I’m not prepared for that. I have no idea what to expect. And yes, all of that terrifies me.”

I understand, she signs. “You know I was locked away my entire life. When I married Dario and came to live with all of you, it was like walking through a dream. I wasn’t sure what was real or not. But then Dario showed

me how much he cared for me, and I knew I didn't have to be so afraid any longer. I could trust him. So I chose to. And I haven't regretted that since. I've only become happier. Maybe you need to give Matteo a chance like I gave Dario. He might surprise you. And you'll see that you don't have to be so scared."

I rest my head on her shoulder. "Thanks. That's good advice. I just don't know if Matteo will be as kind as Dario was to you. I've never really been around bikers before. What if I get hurt?"

"Then you know Dario will be right there to save you. As will I." She pauses. "As will Serafina."

"God, Serafina. I don't want to fight with her. It's just that she thinks I should be grateful to marry Matteo. I don't appreciate being told how to feel."

"The nice thing about having a sister is that it's never too late to make amends."

I smile. "How do you know? You don't have a sister."

"You're wrong. I have two."

"You mean Serafina and me?"

"Of course. Even though we're not blood, you two are my sisters. I suggest you talk with her. Otherwise, things might fester between you two."

"I think you're right." I inhale deeply. "Help me up?"

Pia pulls me up, and I straighten out my wedding dress.

"I love the dress," she tells me.

"I do, too. I think this is the one." I walk out of the changing room and find Serafina sitting on a couch. Before she can say anything, I walk up to her and pull her into a hug.

"What's this for?" she asks, her voice muffled against my shoulder.

"I love you," I tell her. "I'm going to make the most of this situation I'm in. Just never tell me what I should feel again, deal?"

She pulls back, eyeing me over. "Ok. Deal. Sorry if I acted like a bitch."

"I'm used to it."

Her eyes widen before she laughs. "True. You are." She nods at my dress. "I love it. It's so you."

I turn to look at myself in the full-length mirror across from the couch. "Yeah, it is."

"Does this mean you're ready to marry Matteo?"

Not at all, but I don't say that. Instead, I give Serafina a tight smile.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I finally say.

CHAPTER 6

Matteo

I adjust my tie. It feels like a noose around my neck. I'm not a suit-and-tie kind of guy.

But it's my wedding day, and I'm going to put in the effort. Otherwise, Adelina might faint at the altar.

I smooth down my black suit jacket. No flashy colors for me. Adelina should be happy I'm wearing a suit. I never promised more than that.

In fact, we haven't spoken since the day I kissed her in her dance studio when she looked fucking hot in her tights and shirt and a little sweaty from dancing. I'd love to make her sweat when I claim her as mine. If she'll let me. Something tells me I'll have to work at that. Adelina won't give up that easily.

A commotion sounds in the main room of the meeting house. I'm in one of the backrooms, getting ready. The church is closer to here than my home, and I wanted my men's opinions about my suit.

I enter the main room and find Antonio sprawled on the floor, clearly drunk. Carlo and a few of the other guys are laughing their asses off. My eyes catch Emma in the far corner, looking annoyed to see me. Still hasn't forgiven me for turning her away.

Even though Adelina gave me permission to sleep with other women, I haven't done that since our marriage deal. I don't want anyone else but her.

"What's going on here?" I ask the group. Antonio shakes his head as he pushes himself up to sit.

Carlo whistles. "Looking good, boss. You should wear suits more often."

I tug at my cufflinks. "Thanks. Can someone explain why Antonio is lying on the floor?"

"Because he fell over!" Carlo laughs at his own joke.

I extend my hand to Antonio, but he slaps it away and pushes himself up. "All right. Don't take my help."

"I don't need it," he slurs, stumbling once he's upright.

"Clearly. Antonio, you know the rule here. It's ok to drink when we have a day off. Since it's my wedding day, I expect all of you to have some fun." Cheers sound off. "But the rule is never to get blind drunk. You never know when we might need to focus. So, sober up and lay off the ..." I sniff. "Is that rum?"

"So what if it's rum?" He stumbles right up to Emma and plants a sloppy kiss on her lips. She pulls away and pats his cheek.

I sigh, shaking my head. "Ok, then. Do whatever you want. It's my wedding day." I nod at Carlo and a few others. "Let's go." Carlo will be my best man, and the rest are there for support.

"Why wasn't I invited?" Antonio asks.

"Because you're wasted," I tell him. I nod again at Carlo and head for the door.

"Whatever," Antonio grumbles behind me. We'll have a few choice words once my wedding is over. No one disrespects me, especially not on my wedding day.

I sling my leg over my motorcycle and drive toward the church, my men following behind. I love the roar of a group of bikes driving together. It always calms me.

It only takes a few minutes to arrive, and as we pull up on our bikes, a few guests give us strange looks. I ignore them. I'm used to getting strange looks. Been getting them most of my life.

I stroll into the church and find Dario standing in the entranceway. "Dario." I shake his hand.

"Glad you showed up."

"Why wouldn't I?"

He clears his throat. "I wasn't sure if I would get Adelina here today."

"She is here, isn't she?"

"Yes. But, Matteo, I need to warn you ... She's not exactly in the best of moods."

I grunt. “She wasn’t before. I’m used to it. No need to worry, Dario. I can handle her. I like a little bit of a challenge. Now, I have a wedding to attend.” I give him a clap on the shoulder, then enter the main room, walking down the aisle towards the dais. Guests are getting situated in their seats. Carlo stands beside me, routinely grabbing my shoulders and shaking me from excitement. I laugh and pat his hands. “All right there, buddy.”

Serafina enters the room and walks down the aisle, taking her place as maid of honor on the dais. She gives me a tight smile. I know she had a crush on me, and it’s a little awkward I’m marrying her sister, but she’s being a good sport about it. I give her a nod in return.

It isn’t until the crowd hushes and the music swells that I feel truly excited.

The doors open, and there she is.

Adelina, in a wedding dress that showcases her beauty. Dario’s arm is linked through hers as they walk down the aisle. She keeps her eyes glued to the floor.

I stand perfectly still, even though all I want to do is run down that aisle, throw her over my shoulder caveman-style, take her back to my house, and have my way with her.

Adelina still doesn’t look at me as Dario places her hand in mine.

The priest begins the ceremony. “We are gathered here today ...”

I squeeze her hand, feeling the warmth and smallness of it. The last time I tried to take her hand, she ripped it away. I guess she didn’t want to do that in front of all of our guests.

The priest turns to me for me to recite my vows. I do so smoothly and confidently. My men whoop and holler from the pews, cheering me on. This is what makes Adelina finally look up.

Her eyes widen when she sees me. I smirk. Yeah, I know I look good in my suit. I want her to be impressed. Show her that I’m more than just the gross biker she thinks I am.

Then her gaze lands on my men cheering in the audience, and a frown crosses her face. I guess there’s no pleasing her.

The priest turns to her to recite her vows. At first, she doesn’t open her mouth. After a long, awkward pause, Adelina finally repeats after him, binding herself to me in holy matrimony.

“Do you, Matteo Amato, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do.” And I mean it.

“And do you, Adelina Santoro, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

She frowns and meets my gaze. Then, letting out a long sigh, she says, “I do.”

My men let out a raucous cheer and stomp their feet, making the whole room rumble.

“I, now, pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

I grab Adelina’s face and press my lips to hers. She keeps her lips taut and hard, essentially forcing the kiss to be short. When I pull back and wink, she just looks away.

As I lead Adelina down the aisle, my men reach out and pat me on the back. Carlo runs after and grabs Adelina in a hug. She squeaks, tensing.

“Congratulations,” he tells her.

She smiles faintly, pulling away from him. “Thanks.”

I tug her down the aisle and outside to where my motorcycle is waiting to take us to the reception hall. She stops short once she realizes she’ll have to get on it.

“No,” is all she says.

I hand her a helmet. “It’s time we ride off into the sunset. Hop on.”

“No. I’m not riding a motorcycle. Especially in my wedding dress.”

I shrug. “Then take it off.” I waggle my eyebrows. “I won’t mind.”

She scrunches up her nose. “You’re disgusting.”

“And we’re married, which means I’ll eventually see you naked. We could start now.”

Our guests spill out of the church and continue to clap and cheer for us.

Adelina looks between them and my bike. “I really have to ride that thing?”

“Yes. It’s the only way you’re getting to the reception.”

“I’ll walk, then.” She takes a step in the opposite direction, and I grab her hand, halting her.

“Come on. It’s not bad, I promise. Riding a bike can be a lot of fun. Trust me.”

“That’s the problem,” she says, lowering her voice so our guests won’t hear. “I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t want to cause a fuss in front of everyone else, do you?”

She pauses, then finally sighs. “Fine. But if I die on this death

contraption, just know that my brother will kill you.”

“Duly noted.”

“Now, which way does this go?” She holds up the helmet.

I slip it on her head, letting my fingers graze her face. She sucks in a breath. “Just like that. Do you need help getting on?”

“I got it.” She tries to lift her leg over but gets caught in the fabric of her dress. She stumbles, grabbing onto the bike to steady herself. A few chuckles sound off behind us from my men. Her cheeks go red.

“Here. Let me help you.” I grab her waist, and she swats at my hands.

“I got it.”

“No, you don’t. Let me help you over. The sooner you get on it, the sooner you’ll be able to get off it. How does that sound?”

She huffs. “Fine.”

I grab her waist again and help her onto the bike, my hands lingering a second longer than need be. Then I fix the ends of her dress, so it doesn’t touch the ground as we drive. “There. Simple.”

She gives me a tight smile as I get on the bike.

“Wrap your hands around my waist,” I tell her, revving the engine.

She jumps. “Why do I have to do that?”

“Because you don’t want to fall off.”

She grabs my waist.

“See? Easy.” Then I take off. Adelina squeaks and holds my waist tighter, burying her head into my back. I let out a loud holler as we drive. I love the wind on my face.

“You’re crazy,” she shouts over the engine’s roar.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I shout back.

We arrive at the reception hall in a matter of minutes. Adelina is clinging to me as if her life depends on it. Can’t say I mind. In fact, I wish she’d touch me like this with more ease.

I park the bike. “There. You survived.” I turn around to look at her. “Wasn’t so bad, was it?”

She quickly lets me go. “It was terrifying, for your information. I never want to do that again. And you can’t make me.” She tries lifting her leg over the bike but gets caught and stumbles to the ground instead. She lets out a little shriek.

“Woah. Careful.” I slip off the bike with ease and help her up. “Are you hurt?”

She glances down at her body. “No. Just my pride.”

I chuckle. “You’ll be fine. I’ll let you in on a little secret. Every single one of my guys has fallen off their bikes at least once. It’s a right of initiation at this point.”

The smallest of smiles grazes her face. “I’ll remember that.”

“Is that a smile I see?”

She frowns. “No.”

“You can admit it. You don’t always hate me.”

She’s already walking to the venue. “Let’s get this party over with.” I laugh as I follow her inside.

Our guests cheer us as we step into the ballroom. While Adelina blushes and turns her head away, I soak up the cheers, feeling like a god.

“Shall we dance?” I ask.

“Now?”

“When else are we going to have our first dance? And besides, you love to dance. This should be a cakewalk for you.” I take her hand and pull her onto the ballroom floor. More cheers erupt.

Adelina places her hands gingerly on my shoulders. I place mine on her waist. Then we begin to sway in an awkward attempt at a first dance.

“This is the best you can do?” I ask.

She huffs. “I just assumed you had no dancing bone in your body. I was trying to keep it easy for you.”

“I have some moves.” I make a suggestive face.

“Ugh. You’re gross.”

“It’s not like I haven’t heard that from you before.”

There it is again. The smallest of smiles on her face. I don’t point it out this time. Instead, I just look at her, taking in her beauty.

“Well, if you can dance, then show me what you can do,” she eventually says.

“Challenge accepted.” I grip her hands, spin her out, and draw her back into my arms. She lets out a gasp. “Impressed yet?”

“Not even close.”

“Then how about this.” I dip her and bring my lips close to her ear. “Now, are you impressed?”

“You’re going to have to do more than that.”

“Ok, then.” I kiss her hard. Adelina gasps into my mouth, but she doesn’t pull away. I let my lips soften as I kiss her deeper. When I pull back, her eyes

are closed, and her lips are parted. She looks at ease. “How was that?”

Her eyes snap open, and she stands upright. “Unexpected. And inappropriate.” Her voice is breathless.

“How is it inappropriate? We’re married. There’s nothing wrong with me kissing you.”

“We’re here to dance, not kiss. Besides, you still need to impress me with your dance skills.”

“All right.” I pull her back into my arms and guide her into a waltz. Each step we take is graceful and smooth. We move together as one.

When the dance ends, Adelina looks at me with awe. “How do you know how to waltz?”

“I have some secrets, you know. I’m not always the gross biker you think I am.” An embarrassed expression crosses her face, and I wink at her. “Maybe you’ll share more secrets of your own with me.”

“I don’t have any secrets.”

“No? Well, there are things I want to uncover about you.” People join us on the dance floor, so I lean in close to whisper. “Like what noises you make when I kiss every inch of your body. Or how you feel when you’re close to orgasming. You know. Things like that.”

She gasps and swats at my chest. “Matteo, that is completely inappropriate.”

I step back. “I think you’re the only one who believes that. Whereas I can’t wait for this reception to be over.”

“Why?”

“Because then it’ll be our wedding night.” I give her another wink and leave her alone on the dance floor. Let her think about that for a bit.

I walk away, a smug grin on my face.

CHAPTER 7

Adelina

I try to ignore Matteo for the rest of the night, but it's proving tough. After our dance, all I can think about is his comment about our upcoming wedding night. Will he try to kiss me again? Will he try to do more?

And do I want him to do more?

God, no. I don't want his hands anywhere near me.

I can still feel his lips on mine from when he kissed me during our dance. I wish I could stop thinking about it, but it keeps replaying over and over again in my mind. His lips are surprisingly soft. I found myself melting into the kiss, and when he pulled back, I felt doused with cold water.

Now, I'm torn between wanting him to kiss me again and wanting him to stay far away from me.

He's still just a biker. I need to remember that. He even made me ride on his god-forsaken motorcycle. He tries to humiliate me in front of our guests.

Matteo is a sick man. And yet, I'm strangely drawn to him.

God, I hate this.

I watch Matteo dance with his friends as the music gets louder. Everyone is having a party on the dance floor, and even Serafina is spinning around, laughing, having a fun time. I'm glad. I hate seeing her upset.

I'm sitting at my table, observing the crowd around me. One of Matteo's friends, the man who pulled me into a hug earlier at the church, lifts a bottle of champagne and guzzles it back, then pours it into the mouths of a few women dancing nearby. It's chaos. Matteo laughs at the scene. I shake my

head, displeased by the inappropriate display. It's my wedding day, not a frat party.

"You don't look like you approve," Dario says, sitting next to me.

"That's because I don't. Why did you give me to a man like that?" Matteo is now drinking from the champagne bottle as he dances with another woman, pressing his body into hers. The sight of him dancing with a woman makes me uncomfortable, though I'm not sure why. I told him that he could see other women. This is what I wanted.

"Because I believe you two can balance each other," Dario explains. "Because this match will ensure Matteo's loyalty. And because you've always been a good mafia girl. You'll do your part. I just wasn't expecting you to complain about it this much."

I huff. "Am I not allowed to have feelings? Why am I always seen as the quiet, good one in the family?"

"Because that's how you've always been. This new attitude is a surprise."

I cross my arms. "I guess Matteo just brings it out in me," I grumble.

"I want you to help keep him in line. Let me know if he has any plans to attack any of our enemies."

"You want me to spy on him? I thought you two were close? Shouldn't he be the one to tell you if he has any plans?"

"Yes, but it won't hurt to have you there, keeping an eye on things. That's all. I don't want Matteo rushing off into danger and getting killed. That would ruin all the work I've put into growing our working relationship. Make sure he stays smart about things. That's all."

"Why is it my responsibility to keep him in line?"

Dario gives me a pitying look. "Because you're his wife now. And that's what wives do in the mafia. They are the rocks to their husbands."

"Is Pia that way for you?"

"She is." His voice softens when he talks about her. It's sweet, actually. "She helps keep me centered and grounded. I want you to be that way for Matteo. Am I asking for too much?"

I sigh, keeping my eyes on Matteo's dancing form. "No, it's not. I'll make sure Matteo doesn't rush into danger."

"So, we're good, now?"

I smile tightly. "Dario, you're my brother. I'll always love you. But right now, you're not my favorite person."

He nods and stands up, squeezing my shoulder. "I understand. I hope

you'll see in time that this was for the best." He walks away, grabs Pia's hand, and pulls her onto the dance floor.

I turn my eyes back to Matteo. He's now nuzzling his face into the neck of another woman. Great. He's flirting with a woman who isn't me on our wedding day. I know I told him to seek attention elsewhere, but on our wedding day? Really?

I stand up with a huff and walk past Matteo and his new lady friend, heading into the hallway where it's a little quieter. I feel like I can breathe for the first time since this morning.

I lean against the wall, taking deep breaths. The door next to me squeaks as it opens, and Matteo sticks his head out, his eyes landing on me.

I look away but can feel him approach me.

"You stormed out of there like the devil was on your heels." He settles next to me. "What's up?"

"It doesn't matter. I just needed some air."

"It *is* getting crowded in there."

"You would know," I mutter.

I can sense his eyes on me, but I refuse to look away from the wall across me. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asks.

"It's nothing."

"I think it is something, given how annoyed you look right now."

"It's *nothing*."

"Fine." He lets out a sigh. "Your bad mood has nothing to do with me dancing with another woman, does it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"No, I think you do. You know, you told me to enjoy other women. You didn't want me near you."

I turn to face him. "And that's true. So there's no problem here."

His eyes search my face—for what, I don't know. All I do know is that it makes me uncomfortable. "All right. If you say there's no problem, then there's no problem."

"Thank you." I plant my gaze back on the wall.

"Though, if there was a problem, I doubt you'd tell me."

This man. He's going to drive me insane. "I already said there wasn't."

"Yeah, I know. But honestly, I don't believe you. I think you like to keep a lot of things close to your chest, and you don't want me seeing what you have hidden."

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“I don’t think you are. I just think you refuse to tell me what’s on your mind. But if you really don’t have a problem with me dancing with another woman, then I’m going to join her back on the dance floor. I’d like to spend the rest of my wedding day having fun.”

“You go do that.”

He takes a moment to see if I’ll say more, and when I don’t, he turns and walks back into the party.

I remain in the hallway, reflecting on what just happened. Why didn’t I tell Matteo that seeing him dance with someone other than me made me feel ... What? Upset? Uncomfortable? I’m not sure even how I feel.

All I know is that Matteo knows how to get under my skin, and I can’t let him.

I go back into the party and pause in the doorway. Matteo is slow dancing with the same woman. She looks a little older than me with ice-blond hair. She’s smiling up at him, and he’s returning it.

I clutch at my chest, feeling hot all of a sudden. I could go over there and make Matteo dance with me again. I was impressed with his dance skills earlier. But something stops me. I don’t want to be seen as petty. I told Matteo one thing, and I’m going to stick to it. I can’t go back on my word now.

Matteo catches my eye over the top of her blonde head. He lifts an eyebrow in a silent question. He’s giving me a chance to take back what I said. I know he wants to be with me.

Why can’t I feel the same way?

My eyes land on Matteo’s friend from earlier—the one who hugged me and guzzled the champagne. I walk over to him and hold out my hand. “Do you want to dance?”

“With the bride? Of course!” He takes my hand and spins me around.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Carlo. And you’re the beautiful Adelina who my Matteo just married. Congratulations on the wedding. You make a stunning bride.”

I blush a little at his compliments. “So, you work for Matteo?”

“I’m his second in command.”

“Is Matteo a good boss?”

“The best.” He spins me out and back in. I can’t believe I’m letting a biker touch me, but something about Carlo feels effortless and easy. Unlike

Matteo, who drives me crazy.

My eyes flit to Matteo and the blonde woman. He's looking at me, a frown on his face. I turn back to Carlo. "Does Matteo normally flirt with other women?"

Carlo tips his head back and laughs. "Matteo has been with many women. They tend to flock to him."

That's ... not reassuring.

Carlo seems to realize what he's said because his eyes widen. "Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't be saying that to his new bride. Matteo is also very loyal. If he's made a promise to you, he'll stick to it."

"That's good to know. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He takes my hand and kisses it before I can pull away.

I extract myself from his arms. "Well. I'm going to take a break." I turn and come face-to-face with Matteo, who's frowning.

"What was that?" he asks, nodding toward Carlo, who's grabbed another bottle of champagne to chug.

"What was what?"

"You and Carlo. Flirting with each other. You find my touch repulsive, yet you gladly dance with him?"

It's because Carlo isn't my husband. He's harmless. Whereas Matteo has the power to break me.

"Am I not allowed to dance with other people?" I ask.

He sighs deeply. "Yes, of course, but ..."

"But what, Matteo? You can dance with another woman. Why can't I dance with another man? It's all harmless, isn't it?"

"Is it harmless?"

"Do you think I'm into Carlo?"

"Are you?"

It dawns on me. Matteo is jealous. Why does that thought make me feel giddy?

"Maybe I am," I say instead of assuaging his fears. It's my turn to get under Matteo's skin.

"You're my wife, Adelina. Remember that."

"How could I forget?" I walk around him and head back to my seat at the table. He follows me.

"Do you make it a habit of flirting with other men? Is there something I

should know?”

“No.”

He leans in closer to me. “Are you lying to me right now?”

“No.” I huff. “Listen, Matteo. I was just having fun, all right. I may disapprove of bikers, but Carlo is easy to talk to. We danced. That’s all.”

“I’m not easy to talk to?”

You make me feel unhinged, I want to say. Instead, I say, “I don’t know how to talk to you. You’re my husband, yet we still feel like strangers in so many ways.”

His gaze darkens. “We can rectify that. Let’s get out of here.”

“And go where?”

“To our wedding night suite. We can really get to know each other there.”

I scrunch up my nose. “I’m not having sex with you, Matteo.”

“Because I disgust you?”

“Yes. In fact, that’s exactly it.”

He growls deep in his throat. “Why are you making things so difficult?”

“I thought you liked a challenge?”

“I do,” he says indignantly.

“Then what’s the problem?” I love turning his own words against him.

He frowns. “There is no problem.”

“Good.” I look away from him. “So that means we can enjoy the rest of our wedding reception.”

Matteo doesn’t say anything except get up, grab the blonde woman, and dance with her again. I watch, feeling the urge to cry.

Serafina sits beside me, out of breath from dancing. “You look like you’re going to kill him. I told you.”

“Told me what?”

“That you’d regret telling Matteo to see other women. It’s written all over your face.”

“It’s not.”

She snorts. “Yeah, it is. You do know you can go out there and take his hand, don’t you? You could be the one dancing with him if you wanted.”

“Well, I don’t want to. Matteo disgusts me. Nothing more needs to be said.”

Serafina stares at me for a moment before she stands up. “Whatever you say. Enjoy being alone, Adelina.” She walks away.

A *ding-ding* sound makes me jump, and I turn to see Dario clanging his

glass together. Once he has everyone's attention, he begins to speak. "I hope you all are enjoying this evening. I wanted to congratulate my sister on her marriage. Matteo, you're a lucky man. Adelina is a wonderful person." He shoots me a look, and I duck my head, shame taking over me. "I wish you luck in your marriage."

Matteo nods and turns to address the crowd. "I appreciate that, Dario. I couldn't have said it better myself. Adelina," I lift my head, "I feel honored to be your husband." His friends whoop and holler. "Now, I say we take this night further and retire to our room for the evening. What do you say?" The crowd gets raucous, and everyone starts whistling and cheering us.

Damn him. He put me on the spot, so I can't find a way out of this.

I stand up tall and say, "I'd love to."

Matteo smiles darkly while the guests whistle louder. He approaches and takes my hand, guiding me away from the table. I can't rip my hand away. People need to see us as a happy couple, lest rumors spread that there's conflict between us.

I follow Matteo as we leave the reception hall and head outside. "Where are we going?"

"Like I said. To our bridal suite. It's our wedding night, after all." He slips a leg over his bike. "Now, get on. I, for one, am excited to go where no man has gone before."

I groan. "You're disgusting."

"I'm getting used to hearing that by now." He pats the seat behind him. "Get on. We're married now, Adelina. There's no getting out of this."

And I know he's right. All I want to do is run away, but instead, I force myself to get on his bike and wrap my hands around his waist.

Matteo starts the engine and drives, taking us to our bridal suite.

CHAPTER 8

Matteo

Originally, I had a room booked at one of the most expensive hotels in the city for our wedding night, but now, I feel like putting Adelina in her place. I hated seeing her dance with Carlo tonight. Even though he's harmless, I still hated it. Adelina is mine, and I want her to know that.

So instead of taking her to the hotel suite, I decide to take her to the club's meeting house. She'll hate me for this, but she already hates me, so it can't get much worse than it already is. She needs to learn that she's a part of my world now. I won't sugarcoat things for her.

If she wants to play with fire, then I'm going to hand her the damn matches.

Adelina grips my waist tighter as we drive through the city to the meeting house. Most of my guys are still back at the party, so there shouldn't be much commotion there.

I pull into the courtyard and turn the bike off. "We're here," I say, taking off my helmet.

Adelina tenses behind me. "Where are we?" She looks around, her nose scrunched in displeasure. "This doesn't look like a hotel."

"Because it's not." I slide off the bike and extend my hand to her. "It's a special place to me."

She takes her helmet off and ignores my outstretched hand as she pushes herself off the bike. "You didn't answer my question. Where are we?"

"At my club's meeting house."

She pauses. Then, “What?!”

“What?”

“Why did you take me here? I thought we were going to a nice hotel for the night.”

“We were. Then I changed my mind.”

She frowns. “Why?”

“Because I wanted to teach you a lesson.” I lean close to her and murmur, “If you want to mess with me, Adelina, you’re going to learn there are consequences.”

“Real mature, Matteo. Is this because I danced with Carlo?”

“So you admit it. You liked dancing with him?”

“I never said that. I just think you’re a jealous man who can’t stand the sight of me in the arms of someone else.”

“You’re mine now, Adelina. Remember that. Now come on. Let me show you around.”

I guide her around the courtyard, pointing out the bikes and giving her an extensive history of each of them. She looks more bored by the minute. Good. Let her see what happens when you try to mess with me.

Then I take her inside the meeting house, where only Antonio and a few women are lounging around on the couches. Adelina grimaces when she steps on a piece of trash. “Do you even keep it clean here?”

I laugh. “Sometimes.”

Adelina stops when she sees the half-naked women. “Why are they here?”

“Because we always have women around. They keep my men happy.”

“Are they prostitutes?” she whispers.

“No. Well, not technically. They don’t get paid. They offer their bodies up in exchange for other perks.”

Her eyes widen. “Like what?”

“They like to live on the edge. They get a chance to mean something here. They get to choose who they sleep with. They have a warm place to sleep at night instead of on the streets. We provide them with safety. Perks like that.”

“That’s terrible. Matteo, you’re running a prostitution ring. You’re a pimp!”

I chuckle. “I’m not. Trust me. I’m not forcing these women to do anything they don’t want to do. If any of my men try to get violent with them,

I make sure they're safe. I have no desire to see any woman here hurt."

"You act like you're doing them a service. I just can't get behind this."

"You don't have to. This is my place of business. Not yours."

She flinches. "Fine. I'll try to remember that."

A couple of the women huddle together and start whispering, looking at Adelina and me. We're definitely a sight in my tux and her wedding dress.

"They're talking about us," Adelina whispers. "Why?"

"Because they love to gossip, and you're the juiciest gossip to ever walk through the front door." I nod at them. "Ladies."

"Hey, Matteo," they say in unison.

"They sound like they know you," Adelina responds.

I wink. "Of course, they know me."

She frowns, turning her head away.

I see a flash of red near the hallway entrance. Emma is there, wearing nothing but a skimpy bikini top that barely covers her nipples and short shorts that barely cover her ass. She stops short when she sees Adelina and me. Then a wicked smile crosses her face and she heads in our direction.

"Hi, Matteo," she purrs, reaching out and touching my chest. "Who's this?" She smiles tightly at Adelina.

Adelina shifts closer to me.

"This is my wife, Adelina. Adelina, this is ... Emma."

"For a moment, I thought you forgot my name there," Emma retorts.

My lips quirk. "I don't think I could ever forget your name."

Adelina tugs at the sleeves of her dress. "How do you know Matteo?"

"Oh." She throws her head back and laughs. "We've fucked so many times; I can barely keep track."

Adelina turns a deep red, and I can't say I'm not enjoying it.

"What Emma means is we've fucked two times," I clarify.

"Oh," Adelina responds, her face tight.

"In the same night," Emma adds.

"Gotcha." Adelina sucks in a quick breath. "So, it's safe to say you two know each other." I can hear the tightness in her voice. She's seething, which makes me smile.

"We do," Emma purrs. "He's a wild one in bed. Hope you can keep up." She rakes her gaze up and down Adelina's body. "You look so prim and proper."

Adelina stands up straighter. "I am. I was raised to be that way."

“Oh.” Emma makes an exaggerated expression. “We have a good girl on our hands, don’t we? Matteo, I hope you’re not too disappointed. A girl like her won’t let you fuck her, trust me. It’s only boring sex from now on.”

Adelina ducks her head.

I’d felt vindicated, but now, I’m feeling a little bad for Adelina. She brought this on herself, but Emma is a strong personality, and I don’t blame Adelina for feeling embarrassed.

“Emma, that’s enough,” I tell her. “Why don’t you run along and spend time with Antonio? He’s looking a little lonely over there.” Antonio is passed out on the couch, still drunk. A beer bottle is in his hand, spilling all over the hardwood.

Emma pouts. “But I’m having so much more fun over here. With you.” She rakes her hand down my chest again. I don’t remove it.

“He asked you to leave,” Adelina snaps.

A smile tugs at my lips. Who knew Adelina had it in her? Emma turns to her, hands on her hips. “What did you say to me?”

“Matteo asked you to leave. It’s our wedding night. We’d like to spend it together.”

Emma huffs. “Fine, then.” She looks at me. “I’ll be waiting for you later tonight when *this* one disappoints you in the bedroom. Just in case you need a real woman to fuck.” She waves and walks to Antonio, picking up his tipped-over beer bottle.

“I can’t believe this,” Adelina mutters, spinning on her heels.

“Woah.” I catch her arm, stopping her from leaving. “Where are you going.”

“You don’t think I see what you’re doing? You don’t get to humiliate me, Matteo. Ever. Especially on our wedding night. You want to prove my judgments about you are wrong, then prove it. Don’t be a jerk. That won’t ever get me to fall in love with you.”

“This was just payback,” I explain.

“What?”

“You danced with Carlo tonight because you wanted to make me angry. Admit it.”

“I did no such thing!”

“Your little innocent act isn’t always going to work on me, Adelina. For some reason, you’re dead set on hating me. I thought I’d return the favor.”

She rips her arm from my grasp. “I’m calling Dario to pick me up. I’m

not spending another minute here. With *her!*” She points at Emma, who’s lounging on the couch with a smirk on her face as she watches our fight.

I block her path. “We are having our wedding night, whether you like it or not. And you belong to me now. Not your brother. You’re not going to call him. You’re going to march your ass down that hallway, and we’re going to have a wedding night.”

“Are you going to take me against my will?”

“Don’t tempt me,” I growl, even though I would never force her. I want Adelina in my bed, willing, begging me to fuck her. But I also want her to take me seriously, and if this is the way to do it, then so be it.

She searches my eyes before huffing and turning around. “Once tonight is over, I’m telling Dario that you kept me here against my will.”

“Duly noted.” I march behind her until we reach the biggest bedroom in the meeting house. I open the door and walk in first. “I know you said you don’t care for chivalry, so I saw no point in holding the door open for you.”

She huffs. “You’re such a jerk.”

“That I am.” I shut the door behind her. “Now, get on the bed.”

Adelina freezes. “You can’t be serious. I’m not getting on that thing. The sheets look dirty.”

“The sheets are clean, trust me. I’m the only one who uses this room. My men never step foot in here.”

“That’s so reassuring. But I’m not getting on the same bed where you’ve had sex with others. I’m just not. It’s gross. And I’m not having sex with you, Matteo. Not tonight. Not ever. So if you want to run off to ... what was her name again? Then feel free. She clearly wants you. I’m going to stand right here until you take me home. Or at least someplace that doesn’t reek of stale beer and cigarettes.”

“I take it your bedroom smells like unicorns and rainbows.”

“It does, actually. My perfume smells delicious. You have a problem with that?”

I stalk up to her, making her back up until her back hits the wall. “I do. You think you’re so perfect. But I’m here to say you’re not, Adelina. You’re a real piece of work, is what you are.”

“And you’re not? You’re the biggest piece of work I’ve ever met.”

“Keep talking to me like that. It makes me hard.”

She grimaces. “You’re the epitome of disgusting. You want me to think bikers are these great people? Then stop acting like this. Because all you’re

doing is showing me just how right I am.”

I place my hands on either side of her head against the wall. “And you’re a spoiled princess.”

“Why are you trying to hurt me? What have I ever done to you?”

“You mean, other than judge me right from the start?”

“Well, you’ve shown me how right I was in my judgments. Why bring me here? Just to humiliate me? It’s cruel, Matteo.”

“Just trying to put you in your place.” Before she can respond, I grip her chin and press my lips into hers. Adelina tries to say something, but I smother it with my kiss. Our lips battle together. She tries to pull away. I don’t let her.

Finally, I let her go and step back.

She wipes her lips with the back of her hand. “You’re a pig.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t like it. Now get on the bed. I’m ready to consummate this marriage.”

She scoffs, walking as far away as she can get from me. “You’re delusional. That’s not happening. You can lie down. I’m going to stand here all night. And there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I can do this.” I stalk over to her and hoist her over my shoulder. Adelina shrieks until I drop her onto the bed. Her body bounces as she scrambles to a sitting position.

“How dare you!”

I lean over her. “I can do whatever I want with you, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Fear courses through her eyes. “Please, Matteo. Please. Don’t hurt me.”

I pause. She’s scared of me. Before it was all fun and games. Each of us messing with the other one.

Now. Adelina is truly scared I’m going to hurt her.

I stumble back.

She breathes out roughly.

“I ...” I don’t know what to say.

“Just go,” she spits out. “If you’re so intent on keeping me here, then do that. But I don’t want to look at you a moment longer.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” I finally say.

She pauses, looking at me intently. “I don’t know if I can trust your word.”

I nod, then stumble out of the room, shutting the door behind me and leaving Adelina alone.

I rub a hand over my face, cursing myself. I've never gotten carried away like that. I truly didn't mean her harm. I just wanted her to know that I'm the boss—and you don't mess with the boss.

Now, my own wife is terrified of me and hates my fucking guts.

I walk back into the main meeting room to see Antonio now awake. "I heard I missed your wife," he says, slurring his words.

"You did. She's down there. *Don't* mess with her," I warn when I see the glee enter Antonio's eyes. "I'll fucking kill you if you do."

He holds up his hands. "I won't." He stands up and stretches. "I'm off to bed now. Where's Emma?" He looks around the room.

"She went in there," one of the ladies tells him, pointing down the hallway.

"Well, I'm off to get sucked." He stumbles.

I stop him from walking farther. "You know, I'm going to see Emma tonight. You just need to sleep now."

He frowns. "But—"

"I'm the boss here, remember. What I say goes." Someone needs to remember that because it seems everyone is forgetting that fact. "Now, go." I push him in the opposite direction before walking down the hallway to find Emma.

When I open the door, she smiles like the cat that ate the canary. "You already got bored?" She's lying on the bed with her legs spread open. I get a peek of her pussy through her panties.

I hate to admit it, but I get hard. I only wanted Adelina once I learned I was marrying her, but she's repeatedly pushed me away. She's even told me that she wants me to seek out physical pleasure elsewhere. And now she's scared of me. All because I took things a little too far.

So, yeah, I feel turned on when I see Emma's body, open and willing for me. I'm just giving Adelina what she wants—me far away from her.

Shutting the door behind me, I join Emma in the bed.

CHAPTER 9

Adelina

I stay awake, standing, unable to lie back on that bed. I don't know what overcame Matteo. For a moment, I really thought he would take me against my will.

But he stopped. He pulled back. And he looked incredibly guilty.

I don't care that he felt bad. He threw me onto the bed with a crazed look in his eye. I don't think I can ever forgive or forget that. Just another way Matteo proves himself unworthy of me. A true, filthy biker.

My legs begin to tremble from standing so long, the tightness beginning to hurt.

I jump when I hear a commotion down the hall. Matteo's men must have returned from the party. From the sound of laughter and cheers, at least some people had fun at my wedding. Because it sure wasn't me.

I wish I were back home in my dance studio without a care in the world. Ever since Matteo stepped into my life, everything has changed.

Knowing I can't just stand here all night, I start to dance. I need something to distract myself. At first, I sway gently from side to side, loosening my body up. Then I take a step forward and really start to dance. I move with ease, dancing on my tiptoes, extending my legs and arms out. I move like I'm calling out a prayer, yearning for an answer to help better the situation I've found myself in.

I gasp and stop when I hear a knock on the door.

"I hope you two are having fun in there!" a male voice says on the other

side. It sounds like Carlo. "I'm jealous."

I don't say anything.

Another knock. "Matteo? Why aren't you answering?"

My eyes land on the doorknob. It's not locked.

I run to the door as it opens, coming face to face with Carlo.

"Adelina?" He frowns, looking around the room. "Where's Matteo?"

I shrug. "I have no idea. He left."

"On your wedding night?"

"Uh ..." I wring my hands together. "We got into a fight, and he left."

"That sucks. I'm sorry. Do you want me to find him for you?"

I shake my head. "No thanks. I'm just going to stay in here. If you could shut the door ..."

"Sure." He looks me over. "You look beautiful, by the way. Matteo is an idiot for leaving you in here all alone."

"Thanks."

Carlo nods as he shuts the door behind him. I run over to it and lock it, only feeling safe when I hear the lock click in its place. I press my ear to the door and listen as Carlo walks down the hallway. He knocks on another door, checking for Matteo. I barely hear a muffled response from someone else, then Carlo walking away again. I have no clue what that's about or where Matteo is, but I want even less to do with him.

I pace around the room, wondering what to do all night. I'm too wired to sleep. I'm too exhausted to try leaving. I don't even have a cell phone on me. I'd have to go out there and confront Matteo's men if I wanted to leave, and the thought terrifies me. I'm all alone in a biker's den. This is my worst nightmare.

I walk to the door again when I hear female voices chattering. Maybe I could ask one of them for help.

I crack the door open an inch and peek out. The women I saw earlier are standing in the hallway, talking to each other. Their eyes flit to me when I open the door wider.

"Can you help me?" I ask.

The three women are all in various stages of undress, from bikini tops to just a strip of cloth used as a skirt. They exchange a look before turning to me.

"What do you need?" one of them asks, a blonde with a large bust and pretty blue eyes.

“Do you have a phone I could borrow?”

“Why do you need a phone?”

I huff. “Because I need to call someone for help.”

The women look at each other and chuckle. “Sweetie,” the blonde says to me, “why would you want to leave? You’re married to Matteo. You don’t know how lucky you have it. Any one of us would have loved to marry him. Be grateful. You’re safe here.”

Be grateful. That sounds a lot like what Serafina told me. So, I should just be grateful that my husband almost raped me earlier tonight? I never asked for this life. Why should I be grateful for something I never asked for?

“So, you’re not going to help me?”

The women laugh again, and it’s starting to feel like they’re making fun of me.

“If you want to use a phone,” the blonde says, “there’s a landline in the main room. None of us have cell phones.”

“Why not?”

Another woman speaks up—this one with deep green eyes and a permanent smirk on her face. “Because we belong to these men. They take care of us. We live here. We don’t need to worry about cell phones.”

“Besides,” the blonde adds, “we could never pay for one. We’re not paid anything here. We give these men the time of their lives, and they return the service by taking care of us.”

“You’ve never strived for anything more?” I ask.

Green Eyes shrugs. “Why would we? It’s either this or living on the streets. This is better; trust me.”

“But you don’t need to worry about that,” adds the last woman—she’s so skinny her ribs show through her skin. “You’re married to Matteo. You’re protected here.”

“What are your names?”

Blonde points to herself. “Jules. That’s Raven.” She nods at Green Eyes. “And that’s Isabelle.” She points at the skinny one.

“I’m Adelina,” I offer.

“Nice to meet you, Adelina. Why don’t you join us out here? We were just going to go party with the guys. You might have some fun.”

“Um ...”

“Come on,” Raven urges. “You look like you’re all alone in there.”

She’s right. I am. And maybe their company will make this whole ordeal

less scary.

“All right, then.” I force my body out of the room and shut the door behind me, following them into the main room, now crowded with the rest of Matteo’s men. I recognize some of them from my wedding, but I don’t see Matteo anywhere. The thought both comforts me and leaves me more confused.

“Everyone, this is Adelina,” Jules says, grabbing my arm and lifting it. I feel a little silly in my wedding dress when all the women are scantily clad and all the men are wearing leather and jeans.

A handful of the men rake their eyes over me, and a few give me what I can only describe as sultry looks. It reminds me of the look Matteo gave me when he threw me onto the bed.

“You can sit by me,” Jules says, plopping down onto a couch. I sit down gingerly next to her, careful not to get any stains on my dress.

“You’re the boss lady,” a man says, leaning over to talk to me. “How does it feel?”

I gulp. “I don’t feel any different. I don’t feel like the boss lady.”

“Well, you look good, that’s for sure.” He licks his lips.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

“I’d be careful flirting with her, Enrico,” Carlo says. “Matteo might beat your ass if he finds out.” He has his arm slung over Raven’s shoulders.

“Matteo isn’t here right now,” Enrico adds. “I don’t see what the problem is.” He turns back to me. “We all thought you and Matteo would be at it like rabbits all night. How come you’re out here with us instead?”

I flush at his insinuation. “I’m not a rabbit,” I say hotly.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch.” He smirks. “In fact, I’d love to see your panties.”

I turn away from Enrico. “You’re all disgusting.”

“Come on, baby,” Enrico says. “You’re now a biker’s wife. You might as well share with the rest of us. All the women here do.”

I don’t respond. All I can feel is the hot tears stinging the corners of my eyes.

“Enrico, stop,” Jules says. “You’re upsetting her.”

“Then come sit in my lap and distract me.”

Jules gets up and does exactly that, wrapping her entire body around him. They immediately begin making out, sloppy and wet. I grimace.

“Don’t let these bozos get you down,” Carlo says while Raven nuzzles his

neck. All these displays of affection are making me uncomfortable. I've never seen so much of it in such a short amount of time.

I offer Carlo a tight smile. "Thanks." I look around the room, searching for the landline. My eyes land on a phone near the bar. I could get up and call Dario to take me home. I seriously doubt he'd appreciate my being here.

I stand up and take one step in that direction when Enrico pulls away from Jules and shouts, "Hey, we heard you're a dancer!"

I stop short, keeping my back to him.

"Dance for us," he urges. "Come on."

"How do you know I'm a dancer?" I ask.

"Matteo told us."

Of course, he did.

I spin around to face the group. "I'm not going to dance for any of you."

Enrico waggles his eyebrows. "Only dance for Matteo, then? Lucky guy."

"I don't dance for Matteo either. I only dance for myself. I resent the notion that I'm some sort of dancing monkey."

One of the guys makes a monkey howl. The other men join in, except Carlo, and they all begin chanting for me to dance for them.

"No," I growl, then turn toward the bar.

A hand grabs my arm and spins me around. Enrico. "Dance for us." I try to tug my arm away, but he's holding on too tight. "Come on, baby. Dance for us."

"Come on, let her go," Jules says.

"Dance for us," Enrico repeats.

"I will if you let me go," I snap at him.

He holds up his hands, stepping back. "Ok, then. Dance."

"You need to back up. I need space."

Enrico, fortunately, sits back down next to Jules and pulls her into his lap. I look away when he cups one of her breasts in his hand.

My heart beats so fast it hurts. How am I supposed to do this? Why did Matteo bring me here? Just to teach me a lesson? Did he really think this would win him any favors with me?

I sway from side to side.

Enrico and a few of the other men boo. "Come on. You can do better than that."

"Yeah!" shouts another man.

"Give is a strip tease," someone else shouts. "Take that wedding dress

off.”

“We want to see what Matteo gets to see,” Enrico says, sitting back and spreading his legs open wide.

I feel like I might faint. Maybe I can make a run for the front door. There’s no way they’d actually try and stop me. Right?

I turn around and run. I hear footsteps behind me a moment before someone catches me around the waist. It’s Enrico, of course. He places me back down in front of the group.

“We said give us a strip tease,” he growls, tearing at one of the sleeves of my dress and ripping it off. I gasp, trying to pull away from him.

“Strip tease, strip tease,” the men chant.

“Stop it!” I scream.

Enrico grabs the end of my dress and rips it away, exposing my legs. They all laugh and cheer. The only one who isn’t is Carlo, but he’s not doing anything to stop the rest of them.

I stumble back, trying to get away.

Enrico laughs as he grips my legs. “Look at these fine legs, gents!” He brings his hand up higher to touch me between my legs, but I kick his chin, which shocks him just enough to back up. “Feisty, are we? You should learn a lesson, Adelina. You’re a biker’s wife now. Which means you belong to all of us. We have a right to touch what Matteo has touched.”

“He hasn’t touched me!” I scream again. “You’re all barbarians. Stop this!”

The men just laugh at me, and I feel like I’m in some twisted nightmare.

“Matteo hasn’t touched you yet?” Enrico smiles darkly. “Then I’ll gladly be the one to do what he couldn’t” He tries touching me between my legs again, but I keep stepping just out of reach. “Stop being like that, baby. Let me touch you.”

“Stop being a tease,” another man says. “Give us what we want.”

“If I dance for you, will you stop trying to touch me?” I ask Enrico.

He backs up. “Sure. Dance. Now.”

I gulp. I have no other choice. I dance a dance I know well. It’s ballet, with long extended arms and legs. But I only dance a few steps before the men boo me again.

“We want a strip tease,” one of them says. “Not whatever gay shit you’re doing right now.”

“It’s ballet,” Jules says.

Enrico snorts. “I don’t give a fuck about ballet. We demand a strip tease!” The men cheer. “So, strip.”

I stand there, feeling utterly humiliated. If Matteo was trying to put me in my place, then he sure has succeeded. I’ll be nice to him if he only lets me go back home. But Matteo still isn’t here. And I’m all alone.

“You’re taking too long,” Enrico growls and reaches forward, tearing the rest of my dress off as I scream. I’m left in my white bra and underwear set when he steps back. I cover my body with my hands. “There. Much better.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Matteo’s voice booms through the room.

Everyone freezes and turns to look at him.

He’s standing in the doorway, seething. I notice he’s shirtless. He has red welts on his chest. Are those scratch marks? Red lipstick covers his lips and neck.

I can’t stand any longer. I crumble to the floor and begin to cry.

CHAPTER 10

Matteo

After Emma and I finish having sex, I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. She stretches and rakes her dark red nails across my chest, leaving behind red marks.

“That was great,” she murmurs. “I knew you couldn’t resist me.”

At least one of us is happy.

I feel like shit.

When I found out I was getting the chance to be with Adelina, I knew I didn’t want to be with anyone else. But she consistently pushed me away, making it known she wanted nothing to do with me. And then tonight happened. I got carried away and threw her onto the bed, ready to claim her as mine. I convinced myself that if she just got that stick out of her ass, she’d want to be with me.

But then she tensed up and looked at me with so much fear.

I knew right then that I’d messed up. I was playing a game with Adelina in my mind, but she wasn’t doing the same.

She made it clear she wanted nothing to do with me. She didn’t want me to touch her.

So, instead of staying in there to fight, I sought solace from Emma. At the moment, it felt good. To be wanted and desired. To not be looked at like you’re the fucking villain.

Now, I regret that choice. I should have stayed and apologized to Adelina. I should have made things right. I should have brought her to our original

bridal suite and made amends to her all night. Instead, I fucked another woman.

“What’s on your mind?” Emma asks, making it impossible for me to forget what I’ve done, not with her naked body stretched alongside mine. “You look like you’re somewhere else. I’m naked, Matteo. Maybe you should be paying attention to that.”

My eyes flit to her body, her great breasts and toned stomach. She’s beautiful to look at. But all I can think about is Adelina and the fear in her eyes when she looked at me.

“That’s more like it,” she purrs, stretching again. “Just focus on me. Forget that little shrew of a wife you have.”

A commotion comes from the main room. My men have returned from the party. By the sounds of their laughter, I can tell they’re happy. I wish I were happy there with them.

“Adelina isn’t a shrew,” I snap, feeling the sudden need to defend her.

“Then what is she? Boring?”

“Emma, stop. Adelina is none of those things. She’s been sheltered her entire life. This is all new for her.”

She snorts. “So, she’s a boring virgin, then.”

I sigh and sit up. “Can you just stop talking? Your voice is grating on my nerves.”

“Sorry,” she grumbles.

I lean my head in my hands, pondering what to do next. Should I try to talk to Adelina? Will she even let me talk to her?

Just then, I hear a scream from the main room and the raised voices of my men. It sounds like chaos out there, but I know my men. They’re probably just having fun, and the ladies love to scream and give them what they want.

“Do you want me to give you a back massage?” Emma asks, skimming her fingers over my skin. “I can make you feel better.”

I swat her hand away. “You’re not making me feel better right now.”

Another female scream. It’s the same one from before. I sit up straighter. At first, I thought the scream was one of pleasure, as the women have been known to do before, but now, it sounds like fear.

My men can get rowdy sometimes. I’ll give them that. But if they’re hurting someone, I can’t stand for that.

I slip my pants on and rush into the main room, where I see something that makes my blood fucking boil.

Adelina is standing before my men in nothing but her lingerie. My men are laughing at her, demanding she dance for them. Enrico keeps reaching out to touch her, and she keeps jumping back.

“What is the meaning of this?” I ask, my voice carrying over the room. Everyone freezes and looks at me.

Adelina’s eyes are full of fear as she covers her body with her hands. Then she crumbles to the floor.

I run to her side and shield her body from my men. “What happened?”

She’s crying so hard she doesn’t respond.

I look over at my men. “What have you done?”

Enrico shrugs. “We were just having fun with her, boss. Since she’s yours now, we figured we’d all get a taste.” His complete casualness about the situation pisses me off even more.

I look at Carlo. “Tell me what happened.”

“The men wanted a strip tease from Adelina. Enrico tore her dress off.”

Enrico’s eyes widen as I stand up and grab his shirt, pulling him close to me. “Hey, boss. It was all good fun. I promise.”

“Adelina is my wife. *My* wife. You got that? She’s not a plaything for you to amuse yourselves with. I am your boss, and you will treat my wife with respect. You understand me?”

He nods quickly, and the other men in the room shift in their seats like they desperately want to leave. They know I’m going to turn my anger on them once I’m done dealing with Enrico.

“A nod isn’t good enough.”

“I’m sorry, Matteo. We really were just having fun.”

“You think Adelina was having fun?” I point to her body on the floor. The sobs coming from her tear me right to the core. “She’s on the floor crying, you fucking bastard.” I push him away so hard he stumbles back. “Stay there. I’m coming back for you.”

I bend down to Adelina and scoop her up into my arms. She doesn’t fight me for once. Instead, she seems to melt further into me. I carry her back to the bedroom and lay her down, locking the door for privacy.

“Adelina? You’re all right now.”

She curls deeper into a ball, her tears coming out strong.

Fuck, I messed up. I should never have brought her here. I know my men can get rowdy, but I never thought they’d get like this, especially with my wife. I guess the temptation she presented was too much for them. Fucking

bastards.

“I’m going to leave and deal with my men, but I’ll be right back.” I turn away, but Adelina grabs my hand, stopping me. I look down in shock. She actually reached out to me for once.

“Don’t go,” she whispers through her tears. “They’re going to hurt me.”

“I won’t let them.”

“But you tried to hurt me.”

I flinch. I know she means when I took things too far. “I never meant to hurt you. I got carried away but stopped. It will never happen again. Now, I’ll be back, all right?” I peel her hand away from mine. Adelina wraps her arms around her body and cries harder.

I storm into the main room, looking for Enrico, but I don’t see him. “Where is he?”

Carlo points toward the front door. “He just left.”

“No, I’m not going to let him.” I run outside in no shoes or shirt, not giving a damn. Enrico is getting onto his bike. The bastard is trying to run away because he knows what’s in store for him.

His eyes widen as I run up to him, and he tries to start his bike to no avail. I grab his shoulders, rip him off it, and toss him to the ground. He groans. I step onto his chest, digging my heel into his sternum.

“Can’t. Breathe,” he gasps out.

“I don’t fucking care right now. You assaulted my wife. You ruined her wedding dress. You thought you could touch what doesn’t belong to you.”

“But—”

I cut him off. “Not fucking butts, Enrico. You messed up.” I lift my foot from his chest, and he sucks in a deep breath as I lift him up. Before he can react, I punch him square in the face. He falls back into his bike, knocking it over and falling to the ground again. I lean over him and land punch after punch to his face. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the rest of my men huddle in the courtyard, watching this play out. Even some of the women are watching.

I only stop once I feel like Enrico has been properly punished. His face is a bloody pulp, but he’s breathing. He’ll live.

I wipe my bloody hand on my pant leg as I stand up. “Get him fixed up. I don’t want his wounds to kill him.” Carlo nods and rushes over to Enrico’s side. I stare at the rest of my men. “Why did you all take part in that? I thought you men were better than that?”

“Sorry, boss,” they grumble together.

I scoff. “Sorry doesn’t fucking cut it. I’m going to punish each and every one of you. I have to think of what that is, so until then, get out of my fucking sight.” The men scramble away. I turn to the women. “None of you thought to step in and help my wife?”

Jules, the busty blonde, shrugs. “I know how these men are. You don’t step out of line unless you want them to hurt you. I went along with it because better her than me.” The rest of the women nod their assent.

“If this ever happens again, come get me. I’ll handle it. You got me?”

They nod.

“Now, go do whatever the fuck it is you normally do.”

They hurry away, and I turn back to Carlo, who’s helping Enrico stand. “Why didn’t you help her?” I ask Carlo.

He frowns. “I warned them that you would be pissed if this happened.”

“And you were right. But you didn’t answer my question. You’re my second in command, Carlo, and you didn’t stop this. You should have come and got me. I’m so fucking disappointed in you right now.”

He bows his head. “I’m sorry, boss. It won’t happen again.”

“It fucking better not. Now, get Enrico fixed up. I’m tired of looking at his ugly-ass face.” I storm back inside and run into Antonio.

“Hey, boss,” he says, sobered up from before.

“What?”

He holds up his hands placatingly. “I just wanted to say that I had no part in what went down tonight. I was sleeping in my room.”

I stare at him for a moment, and he squirms under my gaze. “What? And you thought you could score some brownie points from me?”

“Well ... yeah.”

I sigh. “Antonio, just ... fuck, man. I don’t know. Just leave me alone right now.”

He scowls as I walk away, but he’s an annoying suck-up anyway.

I return to the bedroom where I left Adelina. While her tears have stopped, she’s still curled into a ball.

She jerks up when I enter the room. “Stay away from me.” She wraps the blanket around her body. I hate that she still fears me, but I can’t blame her.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” I raise my hands.

She flinches, and I glance down. My hands are covered in blood from beating up Enrico.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I repeat.

“You’re covered in blood,” she whispers.

“That’s because I beat the shit out of Enrico for what he did to you.”

She pauses, eyeing me out of the corner of her eye. “Why did you do that?”

“Why wouldn’t I? You’re my wife. He was assaulting you.”

“Like you tried to assault me.”

It’s my turn to flinch. “And I’m so sorry for that, Adelina. You have to believe me.”

“How can I? You’re still a stranger to me. You left me all alone, and look what happened!”

“I thought you didn’t want to see me.”

“I didn’t! But I also didn’t want to be assaulted by your men. You should never have brought me here. This is not how this night was supposed to go.”

“I know,” I say quietly. “May I?” I nod toward the bed.

“No.”

I sigh. “Ok. Adelina, I never meant for this to happen. But the problem is dealt with now. My men will never bother you again. Once morning comes, I’ll take you home, all right? You won’t have to be here.”

“I’ll get to go home?”

“Well ... to my home, which is now you’re home.”

She deflates.

“It’s a lot nicer than this place, trust me.”

“I don’t trust you,” she snaps, which I deserve.

“Adelina, how did this happen? When I left you in here, I assumed you would stay in here all night.”

“Some women showed up, and I asked for their help. They said I could hang with them out there, so I did. Then your men did *that* to me.” Her voice chokes up. “He ruined my wedding dress. Just tore it apart. He tried to ...” She inhales deeply. “He kept trying to put his hand between my legs.”

Fuck. This is bad. Adelina is distraught, and I don’t know how to help her.

“He won’t ever be allowed to be around you again, all right? I promise.”

She shakes her head. “I just don’t know how to believe you.”

“Time. Time will show that I’ll do right by you.”

She eyes me over. “Why do you look like that? Disheveled? Messy?”

“You mean more than usual?”

Her lips twitch the tiniest amount at my joke.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” I say.

“You have lipstick on your lips and your neck. You were with another woman, weren’t you?”

No point in lying. “Yes, I was.”

“Who was it?”

“Adelina—”

“*Who* was it?”

“Emma. You met her. The redhead.”

Adelina nods, not meeting my eyes. “She clearly has a thing for you.”

“Yeah, she does. Listen, Adelina, you told me to see other women.”

“I did tell you that.” Her voice has become eerily calm.

“So, you’re not mad at me for that, are you?”

She sucks in a breath. “I don’t really know what I feel right now. I think I just want to go to sleep. I’m so tired.”

“Yeah, ok.”

Adelina lays down and covers herself with the blanket. I stand there, unsure of what to do.

Finally, I walk out of the room and shut the door behind me. I lean against it, intent on keeping guard all night.

CHAPTER 11

Adelina

I eventually cry myself to sleep, and the next morning, I wake with a pounding headache. I'm still in the torn shards of my wedding dress and lingerie. I still can't believe that last night happened. I got married, was brought to a biker clubhouse, assaulted by my husband's men, and finally comforted by the man I hate.

I reached out to Matteo in my moment of need. He protected me from his men. But he's also the reason I was in that position in the first place. And on top of that, seeing his face covered in another woman's lipstick makes me feel defeated. I told him to seek comfort elsewhere, but now, I'm not so sure if I like that idea. I needed him last night, and while I was being assaulted, he was having sex with another woman—Emma, to be exact.

Once I wake up, I have no clue what to do. Matteo left me alone last night. There's no way I'm going out into that clubhouse alone after what happened. And it happened on my wedding day, rubbing salt into the wound even more.

I can't sit here all day, though. I stand up, my body stiff, and wrap the sheet around myself. No one is going to see my half-naked body again. I was humiliated last night.

I unlock the door and peek out. No one is in the hallway. But when I try to push the door open, it gets stuck. I look down and what I see fills me with complicated emotions.

Matteo is lying on the ground, asleep, right against the door. Was he there

all night, guarding me? The thought warms my heart, even though I'm still pissed at him for putting me in this position in the first place.

I bend down and tap his shoulder. He jerks awake, throwing his fists up like he's about to fight somebody. "It's just me," I say.

He turns around to face me. "Adelina."

"Were you here all night?"

He nods. "I wanted to make sure no one else bothered you."

"So, you slept there, on the ground, to protect me?"

"Of course." His eyes burn with an emotion I don't understand. "I made a mistake in bringing you here. I never thought anything like that would happen. My men are normally more controlled than that."

"Really? Because what I see is a culture that likes to use women for their bodies. I'm not surprised they'd treat me like trash. I'm more surprised that you're not right now. Not after how you've treated me." I stand up and walk into the room, Matteo following.

"And how have I treated you?"

"Like a monster. You almost raped me last night."

"I did not."

I give him a pointed look.

He has the decency to look at least a little sheepish. "All right. I got carried away, but I never intended to take you against your will. Please believe that."

"I don't know how."

"What can I do to start making you trust me?"

I inhale and exhale slowly. "Guarding my door last night was a good first step, I'll admit. It shows you're not a complete monster."

He takes a step toward me, and I take one back. He doesn't advance. "I'll do more of that. Protecting you."

I shift the blanket higher around my shoulders. "Matteo, why did you bring me here in the first place? To embarrass me?"

"It was a mistake. That's all you need to know."

"No." The fierceness in my voice surprises me. "I need to know why you brought me here instead of to a hotel or even your home." I want him to admit it. I'm not the only one who was getting judgmental.

He sighs. "Fine. I brought you here because ... I wanted to put you in your place."

"So you admit it."

“You were just acting so high and mighty like you were better than me. And then I saw you dancing with Carlo, and it made me jealous. I want you all to myself. So, yeah, I brought you here because I wanted you to feel what I felt.”

“Which was?”

“Frustration. Frustration that your partner wants nothing to do with you. I’ll admit it was immature of me.”

That’s a start, at least.

I slump onto the bed. “And I can admit I was judgmental when we first met, and maybe that wasn’t right of me. But you proved my judgments right when you took me here.”

He bows his head. “I know. And I’ll regret that for the rest of my life.”

“Do you truly feel bad for what happened to me last night?”

When he looks at me, his eyes blaze with fury. “Of course, I do. Adelina, I never wanted you to get hurt. Believe that.”

“I’m trying to.”

“I’ll get you out of here. I’ll take you to the hotel suite we were supposed to stay in for our wedding night. Maybe we could start over. Give each other another chance.”

“I don’t know how to start over. You really hurt me, Matteo.”

“I know.” He kneels by my legs. “So let me make it up to you.”

I meet his gaze head-on. Sincerity radiates off of him. I can tell he’s speaking the truth. “It will take me a while to trust you, you know.”

“I do. But we have to start somewhere. Why don’t we make a deal to give each other a chance? A blank slate. It’s the only way our marriage will be successful.”

I tilt my head. “You really want it to work, don’t you?”

“I do. I didn’t lie when I made my vows.”

“I just never expected a man like you to take marriage seriously.”

He points at me. “That right there. That’s what we need to work on. A blank slate, remember?”

I flush. He has me there. “I want ...” I inhale deeply. “I want to make this marriage work, too. I don’t want to be angry and frustrated with you all the time.”

“Then let’s do it. Let me get you out of here, and let’s start our honeymoon off right.”

God, I want that to be true. Despite my complicated feelings for Matteo,

I'm drawn to him. If he shaped up, proved that he could be a good husband, I'd be much happier. I wouldn't be stuck in a miserable marriage.

"Ok," I finally say. "Let's do it."

The grin that spreads across his face makes me smile in return. "Great." He stands up and holds out his hand. I stare at it for a moment, knowing that if I take his hand, it'll set a new precedent. I could slap his hand away as I've done before. Show him that I want nothing to do with him. But look at how that turned out. He was sleeping with another woman while I was getting assaulted. I know what his men did to me is not my fault. But what is my fault is pushing Matteo away and making him think that I'm all right with him sleeping around on me. I realize now that I'm not fine with it at all. This is my moment to bridge the gap between us.

I finally move.

I place my hand in his.

Matteo's strong hand wraps around mine as he pulls me up. "Let me get you some clothes." Still holding my hand, he walks over to the dresser and grabs a long t-shirt. "Think of it like a temporary dress."

I resist the urge to wrinkle my nose. There's no way I want to wear a gross t-shirt like that, but I have no other clothes to wear. And Matteo is making an effort.

I grab it and slip it over my tattered wedding dress and lingerie. The shirt falls to my knees. "How do I look?"

"You look good," he says, his voice husky.

My eyes catch his. He likes the way I look in his shirt. The realization makes me feel both nervous and strangely excited.

Matteo grabs my hand again, and we leave the room and enter the club's main room. His men are scattered around, chatting and drinking from the bar. I can see a handful of them outside, working on their bikes. The room goes silent as we enter. Enrico is lounging on the couch with Jules pressed up against his side. His face is a bruised mess. Matteo's work. That makes me happy.

He scowls when he sees me.

I pull away from Matteo and walk up to him. "Adelina," Matteo says.

"I have to do this," I tell him. I turn to Jules and say, "You could have done more to help me." She flushes and refuses to make eye contact. "And you," I say to Enrico. "You are utter scum. You know that? You deserved to have a bruised face. In fact, you deserve more. You deserve to rot in hell."

The passion coursing through me scares me. I've never been this way before.

Enrico looks past me at Matteo. "Control your woman, boss."

Matteo growls as he walks past me and grips Enrico's shirt. "Did you not learn a damn thing from yesterday? I could break your fucking face all over again." He shoves Enrico away.

Enrico has the decency to shut up after that.

"Next time you feel the urge to assault someone," I say, "pick on someone your own size. And if I find out that you're abusing any of these women, I'll tell Matteo." All the women in the room look at me, appreciation in their gazes.

"Ready to go?" Matteo asks me.

Before I can respond, Emma approaches us in nothing but a slinky dress that leaves little to the imagination.

"Where are you going?" she asks. "The party was just getting started."

"Emma," Matteo says through gritted teeth. "Don't start something."

"I wasn't going to." She gives me a tight smile. "I wish you luck on your marriage."

"Thank you," I say, surprised.

Emma continues to speak, and my surprise vanishes. "You might have a hard time handling Matteo's body since you're a virgin and all. So good luck with that." She flutters her fingers in a mockery of a wave.

Heat spreads across my face. As a mafia girl, being a virgin is viewed as a good thing. I took pride in it. For the first time, I'm being shamed for it.

"Emma," Matteo says in a warning tone.

"What?" she asks innocently, blinking her large eyes.

Matteo sighs and turns to me. "Ready to go now?"

"Yes." I turn to Emma. "Matteo is my husband. Remember that." Her mouth opens in surprise. Good. I want the last word. I grab Matteo's hand again, and we walk out of the building.

It feels good to stand up to the people who hurt me. I feel like Serafina almost. She'd be proud of me.

Matteo nods for me to get on his bike. "Your luggage is at the hotel. I had it sent there before our wedding. So you'll be able to change when we get there."

I slide onto the bike and try to protect my thighs from exposure, but the shirt slips up a little too high for my liking. Matteo eyes me, and I can tell he likes what he sees. The thought sends a sudden pulse between my legs. It's

unexpected and quick, but I know what it means. For the first time since meeting him, I've felt arousal for Matteo. The thought makes me want to bury my head into a pillow.

Matteo sits in front of me and starts the bike. The hum of the bike sends another pulse through my legs. Now that I don't have my wedding dress in the way, I can feel more of the sensation. I wrap my hands around his waist, trying to push the new sensations aside.

Emma walks out into the courtyard, a scowl on her lips. I grin at her as Matteo drives away, letting her know that Matteo is mine and not hers. She rolls her eyes and heads back inside.

As I cling to Matteo on the drive to the hotel, the hard ridges of his muscles under his shirt press into my hands. It's not an unpleasant feeling.

We arrive at the hotel in less than thirty minutes. It's a luxury hotel situated right above the ocean with a great view of the water below. A few people who walk out of the hotel give Matteo's bike a dirty look as he parks in the parking lot. While it looks out of place against all the luxury cars, for some reason, I feel the urge to tell those people to stop judging. The irony is real.

A man and a woman holding hands walk out of the hotel and eye my t-shirt with disgust. I sink in closer to Matteo, trying to shield my body.

Matteo notices. "Mind your own damn business," he says to the couple. They scurry away.

"Thanks. For standing up for me."

"Well, I'm the reason you're in that shirt in the first place. It's the least I can do."

"Still. Thanks."

His eyes soften as he looks down at me. "You're welcome."

The air conditioning in the hotel's lobby makes my skin break out into goosebumps as Matteo checks us in.

"We were expecting you last night," the woman behind the counter says.

"Unexpected delay," Matteo explains.

"Well, we've got you all set. Here are your keys to the room. It's on the top floor."

Matteo and I head up to the bridal suite, and the minute I open the door, it's like a breath of fresh air. The suite has a living room and kitchen on one end and a bedroom on the other. It's decorated in white and soft pastels, making me feel instantly calm compared to the dark wood of the meeting

house. My eyes land on the king-size bed. I can't wait to sink into that tonight and get a much better night's sleep.

But it's the view that draws the most of my attention. I walk over to the huge bay windows overlooking the ocean. It's stunning.

Matteo stands next to me. "Look at that view."

"Yeah," I breathe out.

I can feel him looking at me. "Ready to start anew?"

I meet his gaze. "I am."

CHAPTER 12

Adelina

“Now, what?” I ask as we stand by the window, looking out at the ocean. He shrugs. “Now, we get to know one another.”

I can’t help but smile at that. “You make it sound so simple.”

“That’s because it is.”

“So ... what? We just talk?”

He quirks an eyebrow. “Unless you had something different in mind.”

Most definitely not. I’m still reeling from last night. There’s no way I trust Matteo yet when it comes to my body.

“Talking it is,” I finally say.

He chuckles as he opens the door that leads out to the balcony. “Let’s get comfortable outside, shall we?”

I follow him outside, letting the warm summer air wash over me. The smell of the salty ocean below makes me feel refreshed. It’s a brand new day.

We sit down facing each other, neither speaking. I shift in my seat. Matteo clears his throat.

Finally, he lets out a small laugh, and I smile in return. “So, conversing is neither of our strong suits, I take it?”

“I guess not,” I respond. “Um ... where should we start?”

“Well, we agreed to start over, so let’s just get to know each other. Uh ...”

A small laugh escapes me. “We’re bad at this.”

“We are.”

I rest my chin on my palm, looking at him. “Ok. Why don’t we start with our favorite hobbies? That should be easy. Mine is dance, as you know.”

“Mine is ...” He frowns.

“You’re telling me you don’t have a hobby?”

“No ...”

“Yes, you are! Matteo, you seriously don’t have a hobby?”

He gives me a pointed look. “I thought we agreed not to judge each other anymore.”

I hold up my hands. “I’m not. It’s just surprising. I thought everyone had a hobby.”

“My life has been so consumed by the club that I haven’t really had time for anything else.”

“That’s ... sad.”

He barks a laugh. “Wow. Tell me how you really feel.”

I curl my legs under me and get comfortable in my seat. “It is! Everyone should have something they like to do beyond work. What did you like to do before you became a biker?”

“I was in school. And when I wasn’t in school, I was getting drunk or high ... or getting into trouble. I went from school to the club the minute I turned eighteen.”

“What kind of trouble did you get into?” I can only imagine.

He rubs his neck. “I used to vandalize my school. I’d sneak in and spray paint the walls and teachers’ desks. I’d mess with the toilets so they’d explode.”

I scrunch my nose. “That’s disgusting.”

He gives me a cheeky grin. “Well, some things stay the same.”

“Always the vandal, huh? I guess that’s what drew you to join the club?”

“It was. I had no family to support. I had no job prospects. So, when I was eighteen, I heard of the biker club from a friend of mine, and I asked if I could join. The leader at the time, Lorenzo, took me in and mentored me. Though, that didn’t mean I didn’t have to do any grunt work. Trust me. I had to do so much grunt work. I had to clean the bathrooms for years. And when a large group of men come and go in those bathrooms, god, it’s fucking disgusting.”

“It must have been payback for all those times you pranked the toilets in school.”

He chuckles. “Yeah. You’re right. It must have been. It was the world’s

way of self-correcting.”

“So, how did you become the boss?”

“After Lorenzo, his son, Daniel, was supposed to take his place. But he dies. So Lorenzo turned to me as his surrogate son. He’d known me for over seven years at that point and thought I’d make a good boss. So, at twenty-five, I became the boss and have been for the past five years.”

“What happened to Lorenzo? I didn’t see any older men around the place last night.”

Matteo’s face darkens. “He died.”

“I’m sorry.” And I mean it. I know what it’s like to lose a parent. “How, if I may ask?”

“Some bastards kidnapped him and killed him. One of our rivals. A biker club known as the Devil’s Rats. After I found out they were the ones who killed Lorenzo, it didn’t take me long to hunt them all down.” His implied meaning isn’t lost on me.

“You killed them all?”

“I did. And I’m damn proud of it. I’d kill anyone to protect the ones I love.”

I gulp. “So ... you’d killed anyone for me?”

“I would.”

“Then why didn’t you kill Enrico for what he did to me? Why not kill all your men for harassing me the way they did?”

He looks away from me. “I thought we agreed on a fresh start.”

“We did. But that doesn’t mean I can forget what happened to me. Answer my question. Please.”

Matteo sighs deeply, still keeping his eyes locked on the view of the ocean below. “I didn’t kill Enrico because I need my men right now. Trying to replace people is a tricky business. I punished him. He won’t ever do that again.” He settles his gaze on me. “He won’t ever do that to *you* again.”

Tears spring to the corner of my eyes as I nod.

“Would you kill someone for hurting the ones you love?” he asks.

I gasp. “How can you ask that? I’m not a murderer.”

“And I am?”

“You’ve just admitted to killing people, so yes ... technically, you are.”

He snorts. “We can’t have one conversation without you acting all high and mighty.”

“That’s not fair, and you know it. And to answer your question, no. I

wouldn't kill someone. Not ever. For any reason."

"Would you put yourself in the line of fire for someone else?"

"I've never needed to."

He nods slowly. "Well, I don't want you doing that anyway. I don't want to see you get hurt, Adelina. I'm not sure you feel the same way."

"Are you asking if I would be ok if you got hurt?"

"That's exactly what I'm asking."

Now it's my turn to look away. The ocean below is dazzling as the sun shines down on it. I want to sink into it and let it wash away all these complicated emotions.

"Adelina?"

"I'm not sure," I answer honestly, still looking away. "I don't know how I would feel if you got hurt."

"Well, if I died, then you'd be a widow. You'd be free to do whatever you wanted. Be with whoever you want."

I turn back to him. "I've never wanted to be with anyone before."

"No? You've never had any crushes? There've never been any men you've fluttered your eyes at?"

"No," I say, sitting up straighter. "It's only ever been my sister, brother, and me. And dance. Dario kept Serafina and me safe in our home. He rarely had guests over. So there were no men for me to crush on."

"Good," he says darkly. "I want you all to myself. I don't like to share."

My skin warms under his gaze. "But what if I wanted to be with another man? What if I wanted nothing to do with you? I gave you permission to see other women." Which I regret, but I don't say that. "Would you give me the same permission?"

He leans forward so quickly it almost takes my breath away. "I wouldn't. You're mine, Adelina. As I said, I don't like to share."

"You had no problems sharing those women back there with your men."

"Those women meant nothing to me. They were just there for sex. You are my wife. You mean something to me."

"So, Emma means nothing to you?"

He blinks. "Are you jealous of her?"

"No!"

Matteo sits back in his seat, chuckling. "You're jealous. Admit it."

"I am not. I'm just trying to understand you. That's all."

"Fine. Tell yourself whatever you need to. But I think you're jealous."

“And I don’t care what you think of me.”

“You don’t?”

“No!”

Matteo’s laugh starts to grate. “Ok, ok. Whatever you say.”

I shake my head. “If I asked you not to be with any more women, would you do it?”

He sobers up. “If you told me you wanted to be with me, I’d die a happy man. I haven’t wanted to sleep with anyone else since we got engaged. I only did it because you told me to do it.”

“And you’re so easily swayed?”

“Fine. I slept with Emma last night because I was angry.”

“At me?”

“No,” he says softly. “At myself. I hated that I scared you. I was so angry at myself for that. So I turned to Emma.”

“Did you want to hurt me?”

He sighs deeply. “Maybe? In a way. I wanted to push you away like you did to me. The minute Emma and I were done, I regretted it. I should never have done that.”

I shrug, ducking my head. “It’s ok. I told you that you could ... do that.”

“Maybe we should change the topic?”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

We’re both quiet for a moment.

Then Matteo asks, “How did you get into dance?”

“My mom. She wanted me to learn and put me into classes when I was two. I was still wobbly on my legs at times. I think she wanted me to get stronger.”

“And did you?”

“I’m still dancing to this day, so I’d say yes. When she died ...” I pause, collecting myself. The memory of my mom still hits me. I wish I had her here for guidance. Matteo reaches over and hovers his hand over mine. I don’t move. He takes that next step and rests his hand on top of mine, giving me the strength to talk about her. “When she died,” I try again, “it was an incredibly hard time. My dad died at the same time. Serafina and I were only eight. It was tough to grow up without them. At the time, I was tempted to stop dancing. It was the one thing my mom and I shared that no one else did. Serafina was never into it like I was. And when our mom died, I wanted to stop dancing, to rebel against the thing that constantly reminded me of her.

But I knew she'd be disappointed if I stopped. So, I continued to dance, and I'm so glad I never stopped. It's like she's beside me every time I dance, helping guide me." A tear slips out of the corner of my eye. "I'll always have that."

Matteo smiles, a softness in his eyes. "I'm glad you have that. I never knew my parents."

"No?" I wipe away the tear. I notice that Matteo keeps his hand on top of mine.

"I was raised in foster care. I have one memory of my mom from when I was a kid. She was sitting next to me. We were at a park. I remember her looking sad, dejected. I kept asking her to play with me, but she wouldn't. Soon after that, I never saw her again. The next thing I knew, I was being placed with different families. I'd act out, and they'd send me to another family, who'd send me to another family, and on and on. I was trouble, to say the least."

"Yeah, I got that from earlier," I tease.

His lips quirk. "Yeah, I had trouble in my bones from an early age. After a while. I got used to being on my own. Even though I was placed in different foster homes, they never felt like home, you know? I kept to myself when I wasn't causing trouble. Then, when I turned eighteen, I joined the club. That's the only home I've ever had."

"That's why you protect your men so much, isn't it?"

"It's one of the reasons. I've known a lot of these guys since I first got there."

"Enrico?"

He frowns. "Since I was twenty. He joined around then."

"Carlo?"

A grin spreads across his face. "Carlo was here before I even joined. After Lorenzo, he was the only guy who treated me like I was more than just a little kid cleaning the toilets. He was around my age but had grown up in the club. He helped me learn more of the ins and outs of the place. I wouldn't be where I am today without him."

"I was angry that Carlo didn't step in and help me." I clench my hand into a fist, and Matteo removes his hand from mine. "He was nice to me at the wedding, and he checked in on me after you left me in that bedroom. So I was surprised when he didn't stop Enrico."

Matteo sighs. "I'm pissed at him, too. It's ok. You can tell me if any of

my men are being assholes. I don't want you to think I'm protecting them over you. Adelina, I'd beat any one of them to a bloody pulp if they hurt you. I did to Enrico, and I'd do it to anyone else. I just can't lose them right now. The club needs them. But know that I'll never let them treat you like that again. I'll always protect you."

I stare into his eyes, his expression serious. "I ... I'm starting to believe you. I know your club means a lot to you. And I know you also care about me. Just give me time to trust you."

"Of course. Coming here is the start. I thought we could spend the week here. Just you and me. Getting to know each other."

Having sex is what he's probably hoping will happen. But I can't imagine that happening anytime soon—or even at all. I'll admit that Matteo is handsome. His beard frames his face nicely, and his broad shoulders are appealing. But I still can't see myself having sex with him. Nothing will change my mind.

"Ok," I say. "The whole week. Our honeymoon."

His gaze darkens. "That's right. Our honeymoon."

I gulp. I'm not sure how I'm going to push Matteo away when every time he looks at me, it's like he's looking at his favorite meal laid out before him.

I said no sex, and that's what's going to happen.

Now I just need to convince Matteo of that without losing myself to him.

CHAPTER 13

Adelina

N ighttime comes around, and I know what that means. Time for Matteo and me to sleep in the same bed. After the fiasco of yesterday, we haven't we done that. Something so simple that all married couples do. Yet, I'm nervous about sleeping next to him. Will he expect more than sleep? I'm nowhere near ready to give that to him.

Throughout the day, we spent more time talking as well as giving each other space. I've noticed, even in these few short hours since leaving the clubhouse, that Matteo is being respectful of my space, giving me time to warm up to him. I appreciate it. It shows he's not just some disgusting biker. Maybe he has a soft spot in him, too.

I stand next to the large king-size bed, wringing my hands. After arriving at the hotel, I changed into one of my summer dresses, and now, I realize I'll need to change into my pajamas soon, which might not seem like a big deal, but getting comfortable around Matteo is something I'm not used to.

Matteo approaches me. "Are you all right? You look tense."

I nod at the bed. "I'm just nervous."

"Adelina, I'm not going to try anything with you. I lost control last night, and that's not going to happen now. I promise. I'll stick to my side of the bed."

I let out a breath, nodding my head. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

"I want you to warm up to me eventually."

"I know. I just need time. Everything is still so new. You're still a

stranger to me in so many ways.”

“I’m trying to rectify that. We had good conversations today, getting to know each other.”

“We did,” I agree. “They helped me to see beyond the biker.”

He chuckles. “I’m glad. Now, let’s get to bed.”

“I’m ... I’m going to go change.” I grab my luggage and rush to the bathroom before he can say anything. It’s so strange to have my wedding night the night after our wedding. Last night doesn’t count. It’s a night I’d rather forget in its entirety.

I pull out my simple pink silk shirt and shorts set that I wear every night. Something comfortable is right up my alley. I slip it on and stare at myself in the mirror, trying to calm my racing heart. This is it. Matteo and I are actually going to sleep next to each other. That’s it. And yet, I’m nervous and sweating. He promised he wouldn’t try anything. A blank slate and all that. I want to believe it, yet he’s not the one who has to put aside the fact that I was assaulted last night. I can’t just forget that fact. I’m trying to. I want to. I’d give anything to forget. But the memory struggles to leave my mind.

Finally, I step into the room, immediately noticing Matteo sitting on the bed in nothing but sweatpants. His bare chest is on display. I’ve never seen so much of him—let alone any man. God, it’s intimidating. He’s all muscles and broad shoulders and dusting of hair that makes him look more masculine. Fine, I’ll admit it. Matteo is handsome. But I’m also thinking of how easily he could overpower me with his body. Years of dance have given me muscles, but Matteo could take me in a heartbeat. I hate the feeling of being helpless. I never want to feel that way again.

Matteo looks over at me as I stand in the bathroom doorway. The way he rakes his eyes over me makes me feel like I’m naked. “Are you going to stand there all night?”

His words make me jump. “I was considering it.”

“You can join me, you know. I won’t bite.” He smirks like he wants to say more but doesn’t.

I huff. “You say that and wonder why I’m nervous around you.”

His eyes soften. “Adelina, I promise I won’t try anything. You have my word.”

Slowly, I approach the bed, stopping when I’m next to. “You scare me,” I blurt out.

“I don’t mean to.”

I wave a hand at his bare chest. “Just ... all of that. You’re so strong. You could do anything to me, and there’s nothing I can do to stop you. I’m struggling to trust because of that.”

He sighs deeply. “All I can do is keep to my side of the bed and show you that you can trust me. But you need to take that next step. I can’t do it for you.”

He has a point. He can only do so much to show me that I can trust him. I have to meet him halfway if our marriage has any chance of surviving.

“Ok,” I whisper, slipping into bed and pulling the covers up around me. I lay there for a moment, staring up at the ceiling. “So ... now, what?”

“Now we go to bed, I guess.”

“I’m not really tired just yet.”

“There are things we could do to make you tired.”

I shoot him a look. “Not sex.”

He smiles cheekily. “I didn’t mean sex. We could talk some more. Maybe the less we feel like strangers, the more receptive you’ll be to our relationship.”

“Ok. What do we want to talk about? We’ve already shared our childhoods with each other. What more else is there to say?”

He turns on his side to look at me, and my eyes notice how his muscles flex as he moves. A sudden pulse shoots between my legs. God, why am I feeling like this? I blame it on the fact that it’s primal. Matteo is handsome. Nothing more.

“There’s a lot more to say,” he says. “Like ... what’s your favorite color?”

The question makes me laugh. “That’s your question? What’s my favorite color?”

“Hey, it’s a good question. You can learn a lot about someone from their favorite color.”

I quiet my giggles as I respond. “Ok, fair enough. Uh, pink and white are my favorite colors.” He motions his hand for me to continue. “They’re soft colors. They make me feel comforted. Safe. What about you?”

“I love red.”

“No surprising,” I say before I can stop myself.

“How is that surprising?”

“Red is a passionate color. You’re a passionate man.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “Passionate, huh?”

I roll my eyes in a teasing manner. “You stormed into my life like you were covered in fire. So different from my quiet, solitary life.”

“I’ll take the compliment.”

“I never said it was a compliment.”

Matteo chuckles. “Ok, then. I love red because ... well, because it reminds me of all the blood I’ve spilled in the name of the club. It’s a good reminder to never forget what I’ve done. In my job, death can be a necessary part of it, so I’ve gotten used to it, and that can be ... scary at times. But that’s why I don’t take death for granted. I like red because it helps me never to forget.”

“Wow, that’s a pretty serious reason to like a color.”

“Yeah. I can be serious when I want to be.”

I meet his gaze, and his dark eyes feel like they could swallow me whole. “How many people have you killed?” I whisper. I want to know. I don’t want to know.

Matteo’s eyes turn inward like he’s thinking of a memory. “Twenty-two.”

I gasp. “That many?”

“In this line of work, you run into people who become casualties. Also, working with your brother has put me into some positions where I’ve needed to kill people. A lot of times, it’s been self-defense. Protecting my territory. Other times ... I was on the attack.”

“Were the people you attacked innocent?”

He snorts. “Is anyone fully innocent in this world?”

“Yes.”

He pauses before saying, “Maybe. But the people I’ve attacked were bad people. Human traffickers. Drug lords. Not good, innocent people, trust me. If you’re asking whether I’ve killed innocent civilians, then no. I haven’t. I’ve only killed people tied to my line of work.”

I release my breath and nod. “That’s ... something, at least.”

“I know I’m nowhere near being perfect. I know you’ve lived a very sheltered life. I also know you have high standards. But this is a part of me. I’ve done arguably bad things, but I’ve done them to protect the people I’m loyal to. One of those people is your brother, you know. I’ve gone out on the line for him many times in the past.”

“I see what you’re doing.”

He opens his eyes wider, more innocent-like. “And what am I doing?”

“You’re trying to get me to see that you’re not all bad by using my

brother as an example. You know I love my brother, and you think if you remind me that you're close to him, I'll warm up to you even more."

"Is it working?"

I stare into his dark eyes for a moment. "Maybe."

"Hey, I'll take a maybe over a no any day."

"I know my brother isn't an innocent man. I know he's done arguably bad things in the name of his business. The kicker is he's kept a lot of those things from Serafina and me. He doesn't want us to know."

"Why would he? You're his sister. He just wants to see you safe."

"Just like you do, apparently."

"I do want you to be safe, Adelina. I want that more than I want a lot of things in life."

"You're going to make sure nothing like yesterday happens to me ever again?"

"I promise. You'll remain at my side from now."

I huff. "That's not exactly what I had in mind."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I ... don't know. I just know I never want to feel that helpless again. It was the scariest moment of my life."

He reaches his hand out and clasps mine. "I'll keep you safe. I promise."

Staring into his eyes, I know he means what he says. The question is, will he be able to fulfill that promise? Matteo can't be everywhere at once. If I ever get into trouble again, will he be there?

"I believe you," I finally say.

I can tell by his grin that my words mean a lot to him. A yawn overtakes me at that moment.

"See?" he says. "Talking made you tired."

"I guess I'm ready to go to sleep now." I pull my hand away from him and curl into a ball, keeping my back to him.

"All right. Good night, Adelina."

I pause. "Good night ... Matteo." I turn off the light next to me, plunging us into darkness.

WHEN I WAKE up the next day, I realize I'm still in the same ball I was when I

fell asleep. I also realize that Matteo is still on the other side of the bed. He kept his promise. He didn't try anything in the night. Despite wanting to trust him, I had my doubts. But he delivered. If he keeps this up, maybe, just maybe, I'll warm up to him.

I take a moment to look at Matteo as he sleeps. Instead of the fierce look he always sports, his face is calm, serene. I like this look on him. When he starts to shift around, I know that's my cue to stop watching him like a crazy person. I jump out of bed and grab a dress to change into, going into the bathroom to do so. After I come out, Matteo is awake and wearing a pair of swim trunks, his bare chest still on display. Damn his good looks.

We pause when we notice each other. Matteo doesn't waste a second raking his eyes over me like he always does. I thought he was a disgusting pig when he did it our first time meeting. But now, when he does it, I don't know ... it fills me with warmth. The pulse between my legs returns.

"I was going to go for a swim," he says. "Care to join me?"

"Um, sure," I say breathlessly. I grab a book from my bag and walk with him downstairs to the pool. It's a quiet morning with no one else out. All the hotel guests must be sleeping in today. I sort of wish more people were out. Then, I wouldn't feel so intimidated by being alone with Matteo. "You hop in. I'm going to read for a bit." I settle in one of the lounge chairs and open my book.

Matteo doesn't waste time jumping in. His graceful movements remind me of our first dance when he surprised me with how elegantly he could move. I try to focus on reading my book, but my eyes slip up to watch Matteo swim every now and then. The way the water ripples off his back, his strong arms pushing through the water, he's a sight to behold. I can't believe that I, a woman who's always looked down on bikers, is now admiring one. What has the world come to?

I quickly look back at the page in front of me as Matteo pushes himself out of the pool. He can't know I ogled him. It would go straight to his head.

"Care to join me?" he asks.

I look up. He's right there in all his bare-chested glory. Water drips from his hair and down his chest. "I'm reading."

"Didn't look like it when I was swimming. In fact, I think I caught you checking me out."

I flush and dart my eyes back to my book. "Nope. I've been reading this entire time."

He grabs my book from me before I can react. “It says you’re only on page one. Either you’re a slow reader, or you weren’t reading at all.”

“Give me that.” I rip the book from his hands. “Great. You got it wet. And for your information, I’m a slow reader.” Not true at all, but he doesn’t need to know that.

Matteo smiles like he can tell I’m lying. “Ok. Well, I’m going to get back in. If you want to join me, you can.”

“Thanks for the offer,” I say tightly.

Matteo jumps back into the pool, and I force myself to read more than just one page in case he tries to call me out again.

My stomach rumbles, letting me know I need breakfast. I stand up and take a step toward the doors when a family of four comes walking out. The youngest in the family, a kid no older than five, barrels into me. Even though I’m a lot stronger, the sudden force makes me stumble, and I fall backward, landing in the pool. I feel a sudden pain, and it takes me a second to realize I hit my head on the pool’s edge.

Next thing I know, I’m sinking, suffocating in water.

CHAPTER 14

Matteo

I watch with horror as Adelina hits her head on the edge of the pool and quickly sinks into the water. The kid who ran into her stops and cries. I don't hesitate. I jump in after her. Adelina, weighed down by the water, is heavy in my arms as I scoop her up. She's passed out. Not breathing. Taking in water.

I push off from the floor of the pool and reach the surface. Pulling us both out, I gently set Adelina on the ground. The family of four comes running over, asking if Adelina is all right. I ignore them and check Adelina's breathing. No air comes out of her.

Immediately, I begin chest compressions. "Come on. Come on." She wasn't under long. She can't be dead. Then I notice blood seeping from her head. Shit. "Come on, Adelina. Come on." I blow air into her mouth and do more chest compressions. Finally, she coughs out water and opens her eyes. I sit back, relief coursing through me. She's alive. "Adelina?"

She touches the back of her head and winces.

"I need to get you to the hospital," I tell her. "You hit your head pretty hard. You're bleeding."

She stares up at me in surprise, not saying a word.

"I got you," I say. "Come on." I lift her into my arms.

"Can we help?" the dad of the family asks.

"Keep a better eye on your kids," I mutter, walking past. He looks down, ashamed.

I hurry back into our hotel room, where I left my phone. “I can’t take you on my motorcycle. I need to call for help.” I place her down on the bed. “You hit your head hard. How do you feel?”

She blinks, opening her eyes wider, still not speaking.

“Ok. Ok.” I call Dario.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on your honeymoon?” he asks after he answers.

“Adelina got hurt. You need to drive her to the hospital. I don’t want to take her on my bike.”

“Of course. How bad is she hurt?”

“She hit her head on the pool. She’s alive, but she’s bleeding.”

“Ok. I’m on my way.”

I hang up and rush to her side. “Adelina? Answer me, please. How do you feel?”

She looks down at her fingers, bloody from touching her head.

I run into the bathroom and grab a towel. “Here.” I gently press it to her head, and she winces. “This might help. Please talk to me. Are you in pain?”

She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it, staying silent.

We wait until Dario arrives, and he texts me when he’s at the hotel.

“Your brother is here. Come on. “After I help her stand, Adelina clutches me as we walk out of the room and into the elevator. She stumbles into me. “Woah. I got you. I got you.”

Adelina leans against me, and I lift her back up into my arms. I don’t think it’s safe for her to walk right now. She doesn’t object to being in my arms, which I’m not sure is a win at the moment.

I hurry into the lobby and out the front doors, spotting Dario in the parking lot. He runs over to us.

“Is she all right? Adelina?”

“She’s not talking,” I tell him. “Let’s get to the hospital.” I place her in the back seat of Dario’s car and slide in next to her. Dario drives off, not wasting any time.

We make it to the hospital in record time, with Dario running a few red lights. I carry Adelina into the emergency room, shouting for help, and a nurse runs over. “She hit her head,” I explain. “Now she’s not talking.”

“We’ll take a look at her. Here.” She guides us over to a bed and has me place Adelina down. Dario and I crowd around as the nurse looks at Adelina’s head. “It’s bleeding, but head wounds are notorious for that. I’ll

have a doctor check it out, but looking at it, it will just need a few stitches.” She motions for a doctor to come over. It’s a young man with blond hair.

He observes Adelina and says, “After we get her stitched up, I’ll want to take a head scan, make sure there’s no serious damage.” He motions for the nurse to start work on stitching Adelina. “I’ll be back later.”

Adelina is quiet through the stitches and remains quiet as they take her away to get her head scanned, leaving Dario and me in the waiting room.

“How did this happen?” Dario asks.

“We were by the pool, and some kid ran over and hit Adelina, making her fall in and hit her head. I did everything I could to save her.”

He places a hand on my shoulder. “I know you did. You’d never hurt her.”

I think back to the other day and the chaos that happened with my men. Dario doesn’t need to know. He’ll only try and kill me if he finds out, and all the work we’ve done together will be over.

“Thanks,” I say instead.

“So, despite this, how’s everything else been going?”

I pause. “We’re still getting acquainted with each other. You know how that is.”

“Yeah. When Pia and I got married, she had her reservations, but she opened up to me in time.”

“I hope Adelina does the same for me.”

“I’m sure she will. My sister is nothing if not good. I know she wasn’t exactly happy about this marriage, but she’s gone along with it because she knows it’s her duty. I hope you’ve been good to her.”

“Of course,” I say quickly, hoping Dario doesn’t notice the worry in my voice.

The doctor who treated Adelina comes over to us. “We have her in a room now. Based on the exam, she’s all right. Even so, we’d like to observe tonight to ensure she’s healthy. For now, you can go see her.” He takes us to her room and leaves, giving us some space.

Dario rushes to her side while I stay back. Adelina would probably prefer to see her brother than me. Then a thought occurs to me. What if she tells him about what happened to her? Fuck. I’d be so screwed.

“Adelina?” Dario asks. “Are you all right?”

She nods, clearing her throat. “Yes,” she whispers.

“You can talk,” I breathe out.

“Yes,” she repeats.

Dario grabs her hand. “We were worried about you.”

“Thank you,” she says to him. “For coming to help.”

“Always. I’m your brother. You know I’m here for you.”

Adelina’s eyes flit to me, then back to Dario. Is she going to tell him? “I know. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” He nods at me. “I’ll give you two some space.” He walks out of the room as I approach the bed.

“You didn’t tell,” I say.

“I didn’t want to worry him,” she explains. “He has enough on his plate. He doesn’t need to know about what your men did to me. He’ll just blame you for it.”

“You care what happens to me?”

She lets out a rough breath. “I care about my brother, and I don’t want to worry him. It’s not for you. Besides, we’ve taken some strides since then, and I don’t want to ruin that.”

“I don’t want to backtrack either.”

She meets my gaze. “Thank you. For saving me.”

I grab her hand. “I told you I always will.”

She stares at my hand a moment longer before answering. “And now I know you keep to your word. I was so scared, Matteo. I could feel the water rushing into me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. All I saw was darkness after a while. Then I heard you asking for me to wake up, and when I opened my eyes, there you were. My savior.” She squeezes my hand.

“I’d do it again and again. You need to know that. I don’t want to see you hurt. Ever.”

“I know.” Then she does something that surprises me. With her hand still wrapped in mine, she lifts my hand and kisses the back of it.

I hold still, not wanting to ruin this moment.

Adelina meets my eyes, a flush on her cheeks. She quickly lets my hand go and looks away. But for a moment, I saw warmth in her eyes as she looked at me. Progress. I’ll take it. It only took me literally saving her life for her to look at me like that. I hope I won’t have to continue saving her from death to get her to warm up to me.

“They’re going to keep you here overnight to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

She slumps back into the bed. “Great. On our honeymoon and

everything.”

“I thought you’d be happy you wouldn’t have to spend the night with me again.”

She’s quiet. For a moment, I think I’ve fucked up. Then she says, “I guess. I don’t know. Does anyone want to spend the night in a hospital room?”

Her answer disappoints me, but I keep a smile on my face. “No. I’ve spent my fair share of time in hospital beds, recovering from shit.”

“Like what?”

“Like gunshot wounds. Stabbings. Unlike your brother, who has a doctor working for him, I don’t have that luxury. I’m always questioned about how those things happened since they’re usually tied to criminal activity. I’ve had to talk my way out of a lot of things, so people don’t get suspicious.”

“You’re trouble.”

I smirk. “Never said I wasn’t.” My phone beeps from a text. I check it. It’s Carlo, telling me to get over to the club right away. Enrico is causing trouble again for one of the girls. “There’s something I need to deal with.”

“You can go. I’ll be fine here.”

“I’ll ask Dario to stay with you tonight. I don’t want you to be alone.”

“Matteo, I’ll be fine. It’s fine. I don’t need you.” I know she means to be encouraging, but it stings a little. She doesn’t need me? I hate the sound of that.

“All right.” I bend down and kiss her head before I can stop myself. We both tense. Then Adelina relaxes. I pull back and smile at her. “Be safe. Don’t get hurt again.”

“Even if I did, I’m in a hospital. I’m sure they can fix me up here.”

I leave after that, with Dario promising to stay with Adelina so I can deal with Enrico. Dario also lets me take his car since my bike is still at the hotel. Soon, I arrive at the meeting house, and when I enter, I see my men clustered around one of the bedroom doors. Carlo comes over to me.

“Enrico is there with Jules. We heard her screaming, but he won’t open the door. It’s locked. You told me to let you know if there was any trouble with any of the women.”

“Thanks.” I brush past Carlo and the rest of my men, shooing them away. “Don’t you guys have work to get to?” Grumbling, all but Antonio walk away. “Did you need something?”

He shakes his head. “I thought I could help you out.”

“I don’t need it. Go clean the toilets or some shit.”

Antonio frowns and trudges away.

I knock on the door. “Enrico, open up. It’s Matteo.”

No answer.

“Enrico, if you’ve hurt one of the women, there will be consequences. You know that. I already gave a gift to your face. Do you want another one? Open this door.”

Still no answer.

I sigh, frustrated, as I storm over to my office near the bar and grab the key ring I have stashed there. Running back to Enrico’s room, I unlock it and go inside.

He’s lying on the bed, his eyes closed. I check his pulse. He’s alive. Then I smell the stench of alcohol radiating off of him. He’s just passed out.

A gasp in the corner makes me turn around. Jules is cowered on the floor, covered in bruises, including a prominent black eye.

“Hey,” I say softly. “Did he do this to you?”

She nods, sniffing.

“Ok. Come on.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders and take her to the rest of the women, who are huddled on a couch, looking scared, including Emma. “Make sure she’s all right,” I tell them before returning to Enrico. I shove him off the bed. He lands on the ground hard and wakes right up.

“What the hell?” he slurs.

“You beat up Jules?” I kick him in the face before he can respond. “I told you if you acted out again, there would be consequences. Did you think of that, huh?” I kick him again.

“Matteo, stop,” he whimpers.

I bend down and say calmly and quietly, “Stop treating the women here like you can do whatever you want to them. I don’t want to kick you out of the club, but I think I’m gonna have to.”

Enrico tries to stand and ends up falling over. “No. You can’t do that.”

“Beating the shit out of you clearly didn’t get the memo across. Maybe this will. Pack up your things. You’re out of here.”

“But you need me. You’re low on men. You’ll be too weak if you get rid of your guys.”

“I can replace you well enough.” I didn’t want to at first. I thought if I kept Adelina away from Enrico, I wouldn’t hate the sight of him so much, but if he continues harassing the women, then I really do need to do something

about it. For the women as well as Adelina. I can just imagine the disappointment on her face if I told her about what Enrico did to Jules and that I didn't do anything about it. But I can. I don't need to kill him. I just need to kick him out. I hope Adelina will be proud of me. "Now, get the fuck out of my sight." I walk out of the room and go to Carlo, who's near the bar, nursing a beer.

"Enrico is out," I explain to him. "I should have kicked him out before. Make sure he actually leaves. I have a wife I need to tend to."

Carlo nods. "You got, boss."

I walk out of the meeting house feeling lighter already. Getting rid of Enrico is one less thing I need to worry about. And if this creates even more trust between Adelina and me, I'll take it.

I want her to want me. I just need to show her that she can trust me.

CHAPTER 15

Adelina

“So, how have things been going for you?” Dario asks. He’s sitting next to my hospital bed. It’s nice to talk to him. Even though it’s only been a few days, it’s felt like years, given how much has happened.

The question is, do I tell him about Matteo’s men assaulting me? I didn’t before because I didn’t want to worry him.

But now that it’s just the two of us, I can say something. A part of me wants to tell him. A larger part doesn’t. I don’t want to ruin the little progress Matteo and I have made. For better or for worse, Matteo is my husband, and I’m starting to realize that I want to make things work.

“Well enough, considering I wasn’t happy about this marriage to begin with,” I finally say.

“I’m glad you’re making it work. I hate that you got hurt, though.”

I motion toward my aching head. “This wasn’t Matteo’s doing, you know that.” Wow. Now I’m even defending him. When did that happen?

“I know. But he needs to make sure he takes care of you better. I don’t want to see you back in the hospital.”

“I know. How are things back home? How’s Serafina?”

“She’s good. She’s already moved on from Matteo and has a new crush.”

“Who?”

He shrugs. “Some man on social media she’s been talking to. As long as she doesn’t get into trouble, I don’t care who she crushes on.”

“That’s good at least. That helps me feel better about Matteo and me if

she has no problem with it.”

And speaking of the devil ...

Matteo barges into the room, a scowl on his face. I sit up straighter.

“Everything all right?” I ask. “With work?”

He gives Dario a nod. “Yes. I’d like to have some alone time with my wife.”

Dario stands up, giving me an encouraging smile. “All right. I can do that. I’ll have one of my men send a car for you to take you back to the hotel tomorrow.”

“Bye.” I give him a small wave. Once Dario leaves, it’s just Matteo and me. “You don’t look happy.”

He sits down heavily in the chair Daria vacated. “I had to do something tough, even though it was the right call.” He inhales deeply. “I kicked Enrico out of the club.”

I freeze. “You did?”

“He was beating on Jules, and after how he treated you, he needed to go. I don’t have the time to worry about whether my men are causing problems. He needed to go.”

My heart picks up speed, and sweat beads under my arms. “And everything you said about being unable to find new men right now?”

“It’s not that I can’t find someone to replace him. I can. It was just easier to give him a beating the first time. I hoped he would have learned his lesson. But it seems he didn’t want to.”

“So, he’s gone for good?”

“Yes.”

I suck in a quick breath. “I’m glad.”

His frown turns into a small smile. “Yeah?”

“Of course. I hated him for what he did to me. I’m glad you did the right thing by letting him go.” I squeeze his hand. “I’m proud of you.”

We stare into each other’s eyes. I could get lost in his dark irises. It’s surreal to me that I’m thinking of Matteo this way, but he’s growing on me. In fact, I think I’m starting to care for him. And now, after getting rid of Enrico, the gap between us should shorten.

Matteo lifts my hand and grazes his lips across the back of my it. Goosebumps erupt over my arm. “You didn’t pull away this time.”

I gulp. “I’m starting to think I don’t want to,” I whisper.

“I like to hear that.” He doesn’t say anything more, just continues to hold

my hand. A blush blooms across my cheeks at his intense stare. I have to look away. Otherwise, I might be consumed by him before I'm ready.

"I'm tired," I murmur. "I've been here all day. I might try and get some sleep."

"Ok. I'll stay right here, protecting you."

"From my dreams?"

"From anything."

I squeeze his hand again. "Thank you for saving me."

"You already thanked me."

"I know. I just wanted to say it again."

The smile Matteo gives me could melt even the coldest of hearts.

IN THE MORNING, the hospital discharges me. No complications with my brain. A clean bill of health. Though I'll have to come back later and get my stitches removed once the cut on my head heals.

Matteo drives us back to the hotel in a car Dario sent us. Neither of us talks, content to be in each other's presence. That's a first. I'll take it.

Matteo is attentive once we arrive back at the hotel room, making sure I'm comfortable and that my head doesn't hurt too much.

I grab his hand to stop him. "I'm all right. I don't even have a headache anymore. You don't need to worry about me."

"I'll always worry. I care for you, Adelina."

I duck my head. Do I care for him? I'm starting to, which scares me. "I appreciate that. I do. But I'm fine. Why don't we do something to pass the time? We could go back out to the pool."

He frowns. "I think I've had enough of pools to last me a lifetime."

I laugh. My hand is still in his, and it feels normal, right, like there's nothing to it. "Ok. Fair enough."

"Well, there was some maintenance I wanted to do on my bike," he says. "If you care to join me. You could learn more about it."

"Your motorcycle?"

"Why not? My bike is my livelihood. I'd like to share it with you."

While the thought of watching Matteo tinker with his bike doesn't sound very appealing, I know it would mean a lot to him if I showed interest. That's

part of being a good spouse. A blank slate.

“Ok,” I finally say.

We head out to the parking lot where his bike is, with Matteo carrying a toolbox he had stashed in the room. “I asked the front desk for it,” he explains. Even on our honeymoon, he still needs to have tools to work on his bike.

He pushes his bike to a more secluded area of the lot, farther away from the hotel, and starts working on it. I honestly don’t understand a thing he’s doing, even when he’s explaining it to me, so I just watch.

As he tinkers with his bike, something occurs to me. He looks good doing it. *Very good.*

His sleeves are rolled up, giving me a good view of his muscular arms. Sweat pools on his neck, which would normally gross me out, but on him, it looks sexy. His white shirt clings to his body, showing off his physique. I’m sitting on a bench nearby and have to cross my legs as the pulsing begins between my legs. I don’t know how Matteo does it, but he’s managed to turn me on. I never thought I’d be attracted to a biker, and yet, here I am.

Even as grease covers Matteo’s hands, I still find him sexy. I shift in my seat, trying to find relief from the sensations going through me. It’s not enough.

Matteo, who’s been talking to me this entire time, explaining the ins and outs of his bike, pauses and glances at me. “Are you all right?”

“Mm-hm,” I say, keeping my lips clamped shut as well as my legs. They’re crossed so tight that the circulation to my legs might stop soon.

He eyes me over. “You seem tense. Are you getting bored? We can stop if you want.”

“I do want.” I spring up from my seat and start walking toward the hotel.

Matteo springs after me, wiping his dirty hands on a towel. “Are you in a hurry for some reason?”

“Nope.” I pick up my pace until I’m back in the hotel, Matteo right next to me. I’m worried he’ll see the expression on my face and understand. I want him. I want to feel his lips touch mine again. I’ll fully admit I like how he’s kissed me before. I want more of it.

I hurry into an elevator, and Matteo slides in next to me, still looking at me like I’ve gone crazy.

Once we’re back in our room, he turns to me and says, “Listen. We agreed to give each other a chance. It meant a lot for me to show you my

bike. If you're not interested—”

I cut him off by grabbing his face and pulling it down to mine, our lips colliding. Matteo grunts and is still for a second before he wraps his arms around me and pulls me closer. It feels so good having his strong body pressed against mine. I've never felt safer. I kiss him like I'm losing air by the second. I just need to feel this. I've pushed him away for so long, and I'm tired of it. I'm attracted to him. I like how he kisses me. Why not give in to him?

Matteo growls into my mouth and presses my back into the wall. He's not even questioning this. He's always wanted to be with me. He's said so himself. I'm giving him what he wants, and he's taking it.

I gasp as he roams his hands up and down my body, squeezing my behind and pulling me closer. I frantically kiss him back as I wrap my arms around his shoulders. He's so strong.

Matteo's hands move from my behind to my breasts, where he cups each in his large hands. I don't stop him. It feels amazing. The throbbing sensation between my legs grows stronger, and I know only Matteo can help me with it.

“God, Adelina,” he says as he kisses down my throat. “Fuck.” He doesn't say more. He doesn't need to.

I lean into his hands as they massage my breasts. I wonder what it would feel like to be skin-to-skin with him, our pesky clothes out of the way.

I gasp again as he rips his hands from my breasts and cups them around my thighs, lifting me. I have no choice but to wrap my legs around his waist lest I fall over. Our bodies are so close now, but it's still not enough. This sudden passion overtaking me is almost scary, but I don't care. All I need right now is Matteo.

Matteo walks us to the bed and lays me down, his body still on top of mine. He kisses my lips again in a frenzied way. It's a little sloppy. It's perfect.

I let out a small sigh as he grips my hips and squeezes them. Another shot of pleasure goes straight between my legs. I want to shift them together, but Matteo's between them.

Before I can react, Matteo grabs the straps of my dress and pulls it down, exposing my bra to him. I arch into him as he kisses my breasts. His large hands encompass my waist. He's all I know right now. All I can think about.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he growls into my skin, his breath

sending goosebumps over me.

All I can do in response is let out small moans and gasps of pleasure. I'm not sure my voice works anymore.

"I need to see more of you." He unclasps my bra. I don't stop him. I'm a little nervous since no man has ever seen me naked before, but the pleasure and need for release are much greater than my nerves. Matteo drags my bra off and tosses it onto the ground. "Fuck." He bends down and captures one of my nipples in his mouth. I gasp and arch into him.

Matteo brings his hand down to my upper thigh and bunches my dress up until it's around my waist. I open my legs wider on instinct, and he doesn't waste the opportunity, using his hand to cup me over my panties. The softest of moans escapes me. I feel like I'm on fire. Matteo rubs his thumb over my most intimate area. The friction of the fabric rubbing into my skin is almost too much for me to handle. My body shifts on the bed, seeking more.

"You want this?" he growls, still giving attention to my breasts. I gasp again as he kisses my other nipple. Right then, he presses his thumb hard onto my bundle of nerves. Even through my underwear, I can feel it. My hips jerk up. "I'll take that as a yes." He presses his finger down again. Another spike of pleasure hits me. God, this is too much. How do people stand this kind of pleasurable torture?

"Matteo," I sigh, gripping his shoulders. His strong, broad shoulders that I love so much.

"You need more?" He kisses the space between my breasts. "Answer me."

I know what he wants from me. If I say yes, there's no turning back. If I say no, I don't know if our relationship will survive. Matteo can only take so much before I push him away for good.

And I want to be with him. I know it's sudden, this shift in me, but it feels right. What he's doing to me feels right. He's no longer a dirty biker touching me. He's my husband showing me pleasure.

"Adelina?" He grinds the palm of his hand down between my legs. I open them wider, seeking more, needing more. "Tell me. Do you need more?"

This is it.

I nod frantically, my hips shifting up to meet his hand.

He kisses up my chest to my neck, leaving a trail of goosebumps over me. "I want to hear you say it," he says. His breath is warm and sends tingles over me. "Tell you need more."

I part my lips to speak. "I need more," I finally say.

"Are you ready to be with me?" He keeps rocking his hand into my most intimate area. It's distracting.

Am I?

Knowing the answer, I seal my fate.

"Yes."

CHAPTER 16

Matteo

Adelina is finally ready to be with me. I don't waste a second more. Watching her arch her back and lift her hips to get closer to me makes my cock harder than it's ever been before. She's a vision, a goddess right before my eyes.

"Yes," Adelina repeats. "I'm ready. Matteo, I'm ready." Her frantic voice excites me even more. I always said I wanted her willing in my bed, and now it's finally happened.

I need more of her. I need all of her.

I rip her panties down her legs and toss the fabric on the floor. If I had my way, Adelina would never wear underwear again. She gasps. I press my hands into her thighs, keeping her legs open wide for me. Adelina blushes, but there's no hiding from me.

"I need to touch you," I growl into her ear, planting a kiss on the sensitive area of her neck.

"Yes," she gasps.

The sight of her dress bunched around her waist makes this even hotter. Like there's just the tiniest bit of her skin not showing, tantalizing me, teasing me.

I cup her pussy, skin to skin for the first time. Her wetness coats my hand, letting me know she really is ready for this. I'm not sure why the sudden change came over her, but I'm not going to question it. Adelina is ready to be mine, and that's all that matters.

She cries out when I swipe my index finger through her folds, brushing against her clit.

“You like that, huh?” I repeat the motion, and she nods. She’s never looked more beautiful than now with her naked body before me and her hair clinging to her sweaty forehead.

I rub my finger over her bundle of nerves, getting her body prepped for when I fuck her for the first time. It’s happening. I’m fucking ready to make her mine.

Her hips lift to meet my fingers. “Matteo, it’s too much.” She brings a hand down to move my hand away, but I push it away.

“You like this,” I tell her. “Let me make you feel good. Don’t fight this.”

Adelina’s body melts into the mattress. “Matteo.”

I take my time with her body. I want her to know that I control what she feels and doesn’t feel. Leaning back down, I kiss her as I pleasure her with my fingers. She grips my arms tightly and pulls me in closer. I can’t help myself. I kiss back down to her breasts and shower them with attention. I’m fucking obsessed with her body.

My index finger probes her entrance, and her body tenses.

“You’re ok,” I tell her. “Trust me.”

She nods and settles back down. I try again, and this time, she relaxes enough for me to slip the tip of my finger inside her. Fuck, she’s tight. For a moment, I wonder if I’ll even be able to fit my cock inside her, but then her body loosens, and my finger slides in deeper.

I slowly twist it in and out, getting her ready. Adelina keeps letting out little moans that sound so hot my cock gets harder by the second. I press my thumb into her clit, rubbing it around, showing her how her body can feel pleasure. Every time she cries out, it’s another stroke to my ego.

“Does this feel good?” I whisper into her ear as I begin to thrust my finger in and out of her and pleasure her bundle of nerves simultaneously.

“Matteo ...” She’s gripping my arms so tight the tips of her fingers are becoming white.

“Answer me, Adelina. You like this?” I flick my thumb against her clit. She cries out, her hips jerking up.

“Yes,” she finally says. “I like it.” Her breathless voice makes me feel powerful. I’m the one doing this to her. God, it feels good.

“Yeah, I knew you’d like it. Feel how much my finger fills you. How good I can make you feel.”

Her lips part as I drive my finger in deeper, stretching her inner walls. “Matteo ... something’s happening.”

I nod. “You’re getting close, aren’t you?” She nods frantically. “Come for me, baby. Come on. Let me see you come for me.” As if my words are the magic key, Adelina’s inner walls clench down on my finger, and she cries out as her release washes over her. Her head drops back, and her body arches up. She’s a sight to behold.

I continue to cup her pussy as she rides out her orgasm. I want her to feel every last ounce of pleasure.

Once she stops trembling, I remove my hand. She pouts. Actually fucking pouts. I knew I was good, but fuck, Adelina is making me feel like a god.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I’m not done with you yet.”

She looks at me with lust in her eyes. It’s a good look on her.

I finally rip her dress off her body, depositing it with the rest of her clothes on the ground. Now she’s laid out before me, fully naked. Fuck, I must be in heaven. There’s no other explanation for Adelina’s beauty.

She shifts under my gaze. “Matteo?”

“Just taking you in. You’re perfect.” She blushes at my words. “I told you I’m not done with you yet. I need to taste you. Before anything else, I need that.” My cock is so fucking hard it hurts, but I need to see Adelina orgasm one more time before I take her. I’m addicted. She’s my drug.

I kiss each of her breasts before my lips travel down her body until I’m right above her pussy. Her glorious pussy. It even smells like springtime; she’s that perfect.

“Matteo?”

“Trust me, baby.” Then, as I keep my eyes locked with hers, I bend over and kiss her folds. Adelina’s hips immediately jerk up. I have to grab her thighs and keep her in place. I put her legs over my shoulders which helps keep her legs wide open for me. I’m going to taste every inch of her before the day is over, and it’s not even noon yet.

Adelina’s lips part as I pleasure her with my mouth. I kiss over her folds, tasting her arousal. Fuck, she’s delicious. I flick my tongue over her bundle of nerves, watching as her eyes roll back from pleasure. Oh, yeah. I definitely feel like a god.

“Touch your breasts for me,” I command before resuming my attention on her pussy.

Adelina is hesitant as she touches her breasts, but then she gets into a

groove, becoming more comfortable with it. She's a vision before me. My cock won't last much longer. I need to be inside of her soon. But not before I make her come again.

I growl into her pussy as I kiss it, tasting all of her. Adelina cries out. The sounds of pleasure she makes are enough to drive any man wild, and I'm only human.

I pick up my intensity and lick and kiss her all over her pussy, making sure she knows I'm the one to claim her like this. Her head shakes back and forth on the mattress, frantic. She continues to knead her breasts while her legs tremble from the effort of keeping still. I hum into her as I flick her clit with my tongue. The soft moan that escapes her lips is so fucking sexy.

"Come for me again," I order as I kiss her pussy. "I need to see it."

With another flick of my tongue on her clit, Adelina falls over the edge again. Her body trembles. I can feel it against my hands. I continue to pleasure her with my tongue as she rides the waves of her orgasm. I can watch her come again and again, and it'll never be enough.

Adelina melts into the bed with a content smile on her lips. I kiss back up her body, paying special attention to her breasts before reaching her lips. She kisses me back lazily, probably tired from her two orgasms.

But I'm not done with her yet.

My cock is throbbing so hard for her.

"Ready for me?" I ask, giving her wet, casual kisses.

She sighs in contentment. "Yes. I'm ready to be with you completely."

"You'll be fully mine."

"I know." She doesn't sound bothered by it. Fuck, this woman will kill me with how perfect she is.

I stand up and strip off my clothes as fast and gracefully as I can. I'm eager as fuck to be with her, but I don't want to look like a teenage boy who's never had sex before. I've had sex countless times, and yet, at this moment, I've never felt more excited or nervous. That's what Adelina makes me feel—like a virgin all over again. I know what's about to happen between us will cross a new line in our relationship, and there'll be no going back. Neither of us will be able to hide from the other ever again.

Adelina looks me over as I stand naked before her. Her eyes land on my erection and widen a fraction.

"I'll make you feel good," I say as I crawl over her. "Trust me."

"You've already made me feel good," she murmurs.

“And I’m going to do it again.”

“So full of yourself,” she teases.

“Damn straight.” I lean down and kiss her again. She inhales sharply as I deepen the kiss. I’ll never be tired of kissing her. Never.

As we kiss, I line my cock up to her entrance, then lift her legs around my waist, settling in.

“Ready?” I ask, pressing my forehead against hers.

“Yes,” she whispers.

I rub her waist to get her to relax as I ease my length inside of her. Since she’s so warmed up, I slide in easily, but I still take it slow. I don’t want to hurt her. I fear she might not forgive me if I do.

Adelina’s body gradually relaxes as I take my time filling her. She wraps her arms around my shoulders and digs her fingers into my back. I settle completely inside her. God, she feels so fucking good around me. Her inner walls clench down on my cock, and it feels so good I see stars. No woman’s body can compare to Adelina’s.

I capture her lips in a kiss as I begin to rock my hips back and forth, taking it slow, giving her time to adjust. At first, Adelina just lays there, though she kisses me back. But then, after a little bit, she begins to move her hips to match my rhythm. Soon, we’re moving together.

“Fuck,” I growl against her lips. “Adelina, you are perfect.” I grind my hips down harder, letting her feel more of me. She gasps and clutches my back. “So fucking perfect.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh.” Her little gasps drive me wild. I want to fuck her with abandon, but I keep my steady pace. She needs to know she can trust me. So I keep it slow.

I move my hips in a circle, not thrusting, letting her feel every inch of my cock while I feel every inch of her. Wrapping my arms around her body brings us even closer together until there’s no space between us. Not even a piece of paper could get between us.

Adelina lifts her hips higher and locks her feet around my waist. This new angle brings us even closer, letting me slide in deeper.

Her taste is like vanilla, her smell is like lavender, and the rest of her is just pure perfection. Even though Adelina and I have had our ups and downs, I know I’m fucking whipped for her. There’s no other way I can explain how I feel.

I growl as I pick my pace. I just *barely* begin to thrust in and out of her,

giving her a taste of what's to come. Because I'm definitely going to fuck her hard in the future. But for now, for her first time, I'm content to make love to her. That's what we're doing. Making love. Even though neither of us is in love. Yet.

"Matteo," she gasps against my lips as I grind my hips down, thrusting my cock deeper into her. "It's too much. It's too much."

"I'm close," I groan out.

She nods and urges me on.

With another rock of my hips, my orgasm washes over me, and I come inside her. Adelina clings to me. Once I calm down, I ease my length out of her, making sure not to hurt her.

Then I reach over and play with her clit.

"Matteo, what are you doing? I can't stand it."

"You didn't come again. I need to see it one more time."

She sighs and melts into the bed, letting me pleasure her with my finger. Soon, she's crying out as her third orgasm of the day consumes her. Her legs flop open, and a tired but pleased smile crosses her face.

"That was ..." She trails off.

"I know." I reach over and draw circles into her stomach. "You were amazing. Who knew you could lose yourself like that?"

"I'm full of surprises, I guess. I surprised even myself. I had no plans to do that today."

I lean down to kiss her breast again. I can't help myself. "What made you change your mind?" I pepper kisses back and forth between her breasts. Adelina doesn't stop me. She just sighs, relaxing even more. "Before today, you made it clear you didn't want me touching you."

I look up at her to see her blushing. It's amazing she can do that after what we just shared.

"Um." She looks away from my gaze. "I saw you working on your bike, and ... it made me feel things, ok?"

Her words make the biggest shit-eating grin spread across my face. "So, me being a biker turned you on? Talk about irony, huh?"

She gently swats my shoulder. "Don't remind me."

I sober. "You don't regret this, do you?"

Adelina meets my eyes again, her expression serious. "No," she says after a beat. "I never imagined I'd want you touching me, but you've surprised me these past few days. I like what I see in you. So, no, I don't regret this."

I press a kiss to her lips and let it linger. “So, what you’re saying is, you want to do this again?”

Her serious expression turns to one of teasing. “Matteo!”

“What? I had to ask.” I smother her reply with another kiss.

CHAPTER 17

Adelina

The next few days of our honeymoon are pure bliss. I never thought I'd be so happy around Matteo, but here we are.

We spend every day getting to know each other emotionally, mentally, and especially physically. Who knew one person could make another feel so good? And Matteo is definitely a pro at making me feel good.

After spending the morning at the pool, we rush back inside to explore each other's bodies more. Even though he's touched me all over, it still feels like he's discovering new places on my body that light me up.

Matteo picks me up once we're back in our room and leans me against the wall. "I need you now," he growls, planting kisses down my neck. We've had sex every day since our first time, and it gets better and better. At first, Matteo was very gentle with me. I think he knew that I needed time to open up to him. But he's been getting progressively rougher in our bedroom activities, and I can't say I mind it.

I gasp as I cling to his back. My legs are wrapped around his waist, but it's not enough. It's never enough. We're both in our bathing suits, and it doesn't take Matteo long to rip my top off. He tosses the fabric on the ground like it's an annoying pest in his way.

One of his hands remains on my waist while the other reaches up and grabs my breast, kneading it and sending spikes of pleasure over me. I let out a soft moan as he kisses down my neck and pays special attention to my breast. I rock my hips against his, seeking some sort of friction. His muscular

chest is pressed against mine, and the skin-to-skin contact is intoxicating. My nipples brush his chest hair. I've never felt more sensitive there in my entire life.

Matteo grinds his hips against mine, sending shockwaves over me. The wall behind me is rough against my back, but I don't care. It heightens the sensation. With every rock of his hips, my back presses harder against the wall. I cling to Matteo as if I'd die without him holding onto me.

He kisses hotly down to my chest. I arch into him, needing more.

"You like this?" he asks, kissing one of my nipples. "You like the way I touch?"

"Yes," I gasp out.

"Good girl." He gives me a cheeky grin. "I know how much you like it when I touch. I always knew you would. God, I need to be inside you. I need to fuck you."

I gasp again at his words. Despite having had sex a few times now, I'll never get used to his dirty mouth. While the old me would have been repulsed by it, the new me finds his dirty words exciting and sexy.

"I need you, too," I admit, planting kisses down his cheek and neck. "Matteo, please."

He growls so deeply, sending shivers to the space between my legs. I'm tingling. Before I can react, Matteo grabs the edge of my bikini bottoms and rips them off, tossing the spare fabric on the ground along with my top. Being fully naked before him still makes me feel vulnerable but in the best way.

His eyes rake me up and down, and I love how he admires my body. I've never felt more special than when Matteo looks at me like he wants to eat me.

And he does just that.

He gently sets me back on the ground before kneeling. I inhale deeply as he lifts one of my legs over his shoulder. I'm spread wide for him. The good prim and proper me would have had a fit over being in this position against a wall, but the new me doesn't care. It feels too good to care.

I let out a soft moan as Matteo begins to kiss me between my legs. The feeling is hot and heady. It's addicting. He licks between my folds, tasting all of me and sending tingles over my entire body.

"Matteo," I gasp, clutching the back of his head. His tongue brushes my bundle of nerves. The pleasure he gives me is both wonderful and torturous. His hands grip my upper thighs, keeping me in place. "Matteo."

He pulls back. "I love hearing you say my name." He nuzzles my inner

thigh before resuming his attention on my clit. With every lick and flick of his tongue, it sends me closer and closer to the edge. My hips arch into his mouth, seeking more, always more. I've learned with Matteo that it's not enough. He continues giving me pleasure like it's my first time all over again.

The little growls he gives off as he kisses me down there send shivers through me, heightening the levels of pleasure. I gasp harder as his tongue touches my entrance. He hasn't done it quite like this yet, and my head drops back when I feel his tongue enter me. "Matteo." I grip his head harder than I intend to, but that doesn't stop him. He continues, driving his tongue deeper into me. I never knew two people could be this intimate.

After spending time there, he pulls back and pays attention to my bundle of nerves. With another flick of his tongue on my clit, it finally gives me what I've been waiting for.

My release hits me with a shuddering breath and a smattering of goosebumps. "Matteo!" I cry out louder than I've ever been. He kisses me on my folds, extending out my pleasure. Finally, my body relaxes, and I feel more at ease.

Matteo sits back on his heels with a smug grin on his face. I know he likes that he's the one who makes me feel this way. Probably even more so since I was so against him at first. He's won me over. I don't know how he's done it, but he has, and the orgasms he gives me don't hurt.

But it's not just the sex.

Over the past week, Matteo has shown that I can trust him. When he saved my life during the pool incident, when he saved me from his men, and when he got rid of Enrico. He's been actively showing me that when he gives his word, he sticks to it. And that means a lot.

"I need you," he says darkly, kissing my body from my stomach to my lips. I sigh into his mouth as he consumes me with a passionate kiss. I can taste myself on him. I thought I would hate it, but it's not bad. In fact, it makes things even hotter.

Matteo lifts me back up, and I wrap my legs around his waist. I tug at his shorts, and they fall to the ground. His erection presses against my opening. God, I'm so ready for him again. My arousal is coming out strong.

"Fuck, baby, I need you," he says against my neck.

"Yes." I cling to his shoulders. "Yes."

Matteo takes my cue and thrusts his erection into me in one fell swoop. My gasp gets stuck in the back of my throat. He's never done this before.

He's always given my body time to adjust. Instead, he's showing me this time that he intends to be rough with me. I don't mind it.

Matteo groans as he begins to thrust in and out of me, our bodies making a sound every time they come together. It's dirty and raw. Intoxicating. I never thought I could be so consumed by another person, especially one like Matteo. Yet, I've found myself becoming addicted to him.

Oh," I gasp as he grinds his hips down, sending his length deeper into me. I wrap my legs tighter around him. "Matteo."

"I love how you say my name," he growls into my ear. "Fuck, baby. You feel so good around me." His thrusts become frantic and rougher. I'm going to be sore tomorrow for sure. I don't stop him, though. It feels too good to end anytime soon.

My head drops back against the wall as he claims me. All the other times we've had sex, it's been making love. Sweet and tender. But today, it's rough. It's ... fucking. I never thought I'd be doing this, letting myself go with such abandon, but Matteo has brought it out in me.

"Adelina," he groans as he thrusts harder into me. His hands on my hips are rough and tight. He kisses my exposed neck. I couldn't lift my head even if I wanted to. Matteo has complete control of my body, and I can't think about anything else.

"Oh," I gasp again as his pace becomes frenzied. "Matteo. Matteo." I cling to his shoulders with all my might. With each thrust of his hips, I'm getting closer to my edge again. Matteo must sense this because he reaches between our bodies and presses down on my bundle of nerves. It's enough.

I cry out as I come, burrowing my head into his neck and calling out his name. I repeat it like a mantra.

Matteo groans as he thrusts once more before his own release washes over him. My inner walls clench down hard on him, and the way he fills me up is heady.

His thrusts become shallow as his orgasm passes until he finally stops moving. His arms still hold me up against the wall. I kiss his neck, wanting him to know I really enjoyed his lovemaking.

Matteo, while still inside me, carries me to the bed and lays me down. Only then does he gently pull out of me. He looks down at me like I'm a goddess walking this earth, and I blush at the attention. I can't help it. Matteo makes me feel so special.

He chuckles as he lays down next to me, his arm behind his head,

showing off his strong bicep. I have the urge to lean over and kiss it, but I resist. I can't let Matteo's ego grow even more than it already is.

"That was fun," he says, breathless.

"That was." I snuggle my head against his chest.

He wraps his arm around me and pulls me in closer. This is part of what I love about having sex with Matteo. It's not just the orgasms; it's also the aftercare. The way he holds me and cherishes me. I'm addicted to it. I used to be fine doing my own thing, being alone most of the time. I had dance to keep me company. But now that I've given myself to Matteo, I've learned that having another person like this is special.

"I wasn't too rough with you, was I?" he asks, stroking his fingers up and down my spine. More goosebumps travel over me.

"No. You were rough, but ..."

"But?"

I duck my head into his chest to hide my smile. "I liked it," I whisper.

The laugh that escapes him is contagious, and I join in. "Adelina Santoro, little Miss Prim and Proper, likes to get fucked? I knew it."

I swat at his chest. "You're good at what you do, so sue me."

"I know I'm good," he growls, kissing my lips. "I always said you'd come willing to my bed, and I'm happy I get to show you how wrong you were to judge me."

"Ok, so maybe I was a little wrong." I giggle as he kisses down my neck. "Not so fast there. My body needs time to rest. I'm sure yours does, too."

He glances down at his flaccid length. "Maybe you're right. But I promise it won't take too long to be ready to go again." He winks.

"I have no doubt about that." Matteo's stamina is impressive. Almost intimidatingly so.

He chuckles as he pulls me in closer to him. "Now, this is a real honeymoon."

"You mean sex?"

His eyes grow more serious. "Not just sex. I think this time away from everybody else has allowed us to get to know one another better."

"I agree." My fingers travel up and down his chest. I can't get over his body. It's like he was sculpted from marble. "It's been nice."

"Do ..." He clears his throat. It's strange to see him nervous. He's never normally this way. "I would hope after everything that you have a better opinion of me now."

I raise my head to look at him more clearly. “Are you asking if I like you now?”

“Yeah, I guess I am. I know at first you couldn’t stand me. Now you’re lying here in my arms.”

I sigh deeply. “That’s because you showed me that I could trust you. You’ve done a lot to prove yourself to me, and I appreciate that. And ...” I sigh again. “I’m sorry.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Sorry?”

“For judging you so harshly when we first met. For pushing you away as I did. It caused unnecessary conflict between us that could have been avoided if I’d just accepted you.”

“It’s not just your fault, Adelina. It was my fault for bringing you to the clubhouse. It was my fault for leaving you alone with my men. It was my fault for ... sleeping with another woman.”

“But I pushed you toward her. I said you could do it.”

“I know you did. But it didn’t feel right for me to do, and I don’t think you liked it either. Am I right?”

I duck my head. “No, you’re right. I hated seeing you covered in her lipstick. It was then that I realized I didn’t want you to be with anyone else.”

“What a complicated pair we are.”

“True.” I meet his gaze again. “But we’re figuring it out. And that’s what counts.”

“Let’s agree that we were both to blame for parts. But you were never at fault for what my men did to you. You need to know that, Adelina.”

“I do. I know that. And thank you.”

“For what?” he asks softly.

“For showing me that I was wrong about you.”

He sucks in a quick breath and then smiles. “I’m glad.” He glances down at his waist before smiling back at me. “You know ... I could go for round two if you’re up to it.”

I just laugh as he kisses me.

CHAPTER 18

Matteo

Our honeymoon has come to an end, and I'm going to miss this hotel room where Adelina and I spent glorious days having sex. It still amazes me that she's let herself go with me. She's no longer afraid to be in this relationship. Nothing could be better.

Which means it's time to take her to my home. Her new home.

She still hasn't seen it yet. No one ever has. I bought it soon after becoming the club's boss and kept it to myself. I didn't want any of my men bothering me at home.

As we leave the hotel, Adelina and I hold hands. It fills my heart that she finds comfort with me. I finally got my dream girl.

"I hope you like it," I tell her once we're in the parking lot. I hold out a helmet for her.

She slips it on. "As long as it's not dirty, I'm sure I won't mind."

"Very funny."

She laughs as she gets on the bike behind me and wraps her arms around my waist. I glance at her legs. I'll never tire of them. God, she's fucking sexy. And she's all mine.

I rev the engine, and we take off, leaving the hotel behind. I love the feel of the wind on my face as I drive my bike. It's refreshing. It reminds me that I'm free from the pain of my childhood. That I've found my place in this world.

Within half an hour, we arrive at my home. I pull into the driveway and

turn to look at Adelina. Her expression doesn't disappoint. An expression of awe covers her face as she looks at my house, which is now hers, too. It's a two-story home painted all white, which shimmers in the sunlight. It's a very modern build situated in a nice neighborhood. The ocean is on the other side, and the views from inside are extraordinary.

"What do you think?" I ask.

Adelina takes off her helmet, her gorgeous brown hair shining around her shoulders. "It's beautiful, Matteo."

"Let me guess. You were expecting something similar to the clubhouse."

Her cheeks turn red. "Maybe. But here you are, proving me wrong once again."

"Let's go in." I take off my helmet, then help her off the bike. We hold hands as we go inside. Similar to the outside, everything is white and modern.

"What made you choose this house?" Her voice echoes in the cavernous room.

"I grew up in shitholes most of my life. This place spoke to me. It was so clean and white. I instantly fell in love."

"I can tell." She looks around the living room. "Despite how white it is, it's very cozy. I think I'll be happy here."

"I'm glad. Now, let me show you to the bedroom." I deepen my voice with purpose.

Adelina rolls her eyes. "You can't help yourself, not even for a moment."

"I can't." I scoop her into my arms, making her laugh. "Welcome to your new home." I open the door to the master bedroom. Inside is more white and clean lines with a view overlooking the ocean.

"It's stunning." Adelina smiles at me. "You never cease to surprise me, Matteo."

"A pleasant surprise, I hope."

"Very."

I set her down on the bed, but before I can kiss her, she pushes me back gently. "I thought we could bless our new marriage bed."

Adelina shakes her head and stands up, a small smile on her face. "Not yet. You—sit there." She points to the bed, and I sit, obliging her.

"What's going on?"

She stands before me, looking suddenly nervous. "You've shown me so many reasons why I can trust you. You've made such an effort in our

marriage. I want to do the same. I want you to know that you can trust me, too.”

“I do.”

She dimples. “Thanks. That’s why I wanted to do this for you. I’ve never done this in front of anyone since I was a child.”

I frown, having no clue what she’s talking about.

But the minute she begins to move, I understand. Adelina is dancing. For me.

She doesn’t even need music to make this moment count and be graceful. Her body and its beautiful movements are more than enough.

At first, she dances like a ballerina—all airy and light. She’s magical to see. Her legs are toned and strong. Her arms show her strength. I also can’t stop looking at her tight stomach. She’s a vision before me.

Soon. Adelina begins to slow her movements. Then before I know it, she gazes at me with lust-filled eyes as she traces her hands over her body. My cock twitches. I’m obsessed with this woman.

I lean back and watch her, spreading my legs open. I want her to know that even while she dances, she still belongs to me.

Adelina’s hands start roaming up and down her body, between her breasts and over the tops of her thighs. She’s not touching anywhere I desperately want to touch. She’s keeping her hands near the intimate areas, teasing me.

Then finally, one of her hands brushes over her breast. I swallow. Fuck, I want her. She keeps her eyes on me as her hand travels over her breast and down her stomach. She just barely brushes her pubic mound. The minute her hand goes near her pussy, I lose it.

I lean forward and grab her around her waist, pulling her close.

“Matteo! I wasn’t finished.”

“I don’t care,” I growl. “I need you now. You’re being a little tease.” I capture her lips in a kiss before she can respond and flip her around so she’s on her back. She laughs, and the look she gives me fills my ego.

Adelina gasps as I grab the ends of her shorts and rip them down her legs. I don’t waste time removing her panties, too.

“Matteo,” she moans as I lean down and begin kissing all over her pussy. I’m obsessed with tasting her. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough.

I place both her legs over my shoulders and open her wider so I can fuck her with my tongue. God, she’s a goddess before me. I really am not worthy of her.

Adelina's body shifts on the bed as I eat her out, and her hips jerk when I flick her bundle of nerves. I love her responses. She knows just what to do instinctually.

"Undo your top for me," I murmur before resuming my attention on her pussy.

Adelina's fingers are shaky as she unbuttons her top and opens it wide. Instead of trying to fiddle with her bra, she pulls it down and lets her breasts spill over the top.

"Play with your nipples," I command. She moans as I lick up her slit. I groan into her, letting her feel the vibrations from my voice. Her movements are becoming frenzied. She needs her release. I know her body intimately now.

Adelina plays with her breasts for me, tugging at her nipples and kneading them all over. "Oh, Matteo," she sighs, melting into the bed.

I lick her harder. I want to see her come before me. I need to see it.

I blow air onto her bundle of nerves, and Adelina's thighs clench from the sensation. I know she's close. I recognize the signs. I pay special attention to her clit and encircle it with my tongue.

"Matteo," she cries out as her release hits her. "Oh!"

I smile against her as I continue to kiss her pussy, making sure she rides out the wave of her pleasure. Then I stand up, eyeing her all over. "Fuck, you're gorgeous."

She stretches, filled with contentment.

I quickly remove my clothes, then grab her by the hips and flip her onto her stomach. "I want to see how dirty you can really get," I murmur into her ear.

She gasps as I lift her hips, and in one smooth motion, I enter her. Adelina grabs onto the blanket and lets out a soft moan. "Matteo."

"I know. Trust me. This will feel good."

She looks over her shoulder and nods, showing me that she trusts me.

God, this woman is perfect. I love her.

I don't waste any more time and begin to fuck her from behind. Adelina braces her hands on the mattress and shifts her hips back to match my pace. I thrust into her, making sure she knows I'm the only one who can claim her like this. I'm the only one who will know her body like this.

With every thrust of my hips, my cock fills her deeper and deeper. She lets out little cries of pleasure with every movement. Her moans of pleasure

turn into my name. “Matteo. Matteo. Matteo.” God, I love when she chants my name like a mantra.

I grip her hips tighter and fuck her with wild abandon. “You are perfect,” I groan as I grind my hips into hers. “God, so fucking perfect.”

Adelina’s only response is to say my name again.

I reach around her body and touch her clit, making sure she’s ready to come with me. I’m so close. I won’t last much longer. Her cries of pleasure get louder. I pick up my pace, thrusting into her roughly.

Finally, Adelina lets out a moan as her orgasm hits her. The sound of her coming sends me over the edge, and I join her. Together, we share our release, both of our bodies trembling.

Once we finish, I stay inside her and kiss her back and over her shirt. I didn’t even bother taking it off her—I was that desperate to be inside her. I reach around her body and cup one of her breasts. I’ll never tire of her.

As I ease out of her, Adelina sinks to the mattress, catching her breath. I lay down next to her, breathing heavily. “Welcome home.”

She laughs. “That was some welcome party.” She sits up and slips her shirt and bra the rest of the way off. I love that she’s become so much more comfortable around me. Being naked in my presence is nothing to her now.

I lean over and kiss her stomach. She sucks in a breath. “That tickles,” she admonishes.

“I don’t care. I just need to kiss you. Touch you.” I pepper kisses over her abdomen, smiling every time her stomach contracts.

“Matteo, sometimes we have to take a break, you know.”

“I know. But not today.” I lean up to kiss her lips this time. “I need you again.”

“Ok,” she breathes out. “We don’t have to take a break today.”

Another round two on the books.

PEACE CAN’T ALWAYS last forever, though.

The next day, someone unexpectedly calls. Antonio.

Adelina and I are lounging in bed, and I get up to answer it. “Yes?”

“Matteo, boss?”

“Yes, what is it, Antonio?”

“You need to come to the meeting house, quick.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Enrico’s here, and he’s causing problems.”

“Shit.” I grab the bridge of my nose and try to calm myself. “All right. I’ll be right over.” I hang up and turn to Adelina. “I need to go to the meeting house. Enrico is there.”

“Do you have to?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I walk over to her and cup her cheek. It’s sweet how she leans into my touch. “I’m not going to get hurt. If anyone’s going to get hurt, it’s Enrico. If he’s back there, he’s in for another beating.” I kiss her forehead. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be back soon, and when I do get back, we can go for another round.” We’ve already had sex twice this morning. Since awakening Adelina’s sexual side, she’s unstoppable, and so am I.

She rolls her eyes but still kisses me on the lips. “All right. Be safe.”

“I always am.”

I leave and ride over to the meeting house. When I arrive, the first thing I see is Antonio in the courtyard. Nobody else is outside. “Is Enrico in there?” I ask.

He nods and motions for me to go in. “He’s getting into a fight with Carlo. He just showed up and started beating on him.”

“Shit.” I run past Antonio toward the door.

“Do I not get a little bit of thanks for telling you?” he asks.

I glance back. “You’re just doing your job. You don’t get a thanks for that.” He scowls as I turn around.

Once I make it into the clubhouse, I notice something isn’t right. There’s no fight going on. No one is in the main room. It’s empty. Quiet.

“Carlo? Enrico?”

“In here, boss,” Carlo calls out from one of the rooms down the hall. I frown and go to the room he’s in. Raven is in there with him, naked from the waist up, lying with him on the bed.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Carlo chuckles. “What does it look like? Raven and I are having some fun together.” She smiles demurely.

“No, I mean ... where’s Enrico?”

“Enrico? I don’t know. Ever since you kicked him out, he hasn’t been

back. Now, did you need something? Otherwise, Raven and I were going to finish what we just started.” He grabs her breast, not caring that I’m right here. That’s the way my men do it. They don’t give a flying fuck if anyone sees them have sex.

“Antonio told me you were getting into a fight with Enrico.”

Caro glances at me. “Clearly, I’m not. Why would he say that?”

“I have no fucking clue.” I pause. “I guess I’ll leave you two to it.” I rap the doorframe and shut the door.

When I walk back into the main room, I know something isn’t right. Why would Antonio call me here if it was all just a lie?

I’ll just ask him.

I turn to go outside when I hear a loud boom. I hear it before I feel it. The next thing I know, the meeting house is collapsing around me, and I’m thrown off my feet.

I land on the ground hard.

As I stare up at the ceiling, I notice it’s coming closer to me. Someone set off a bomb. There’s no other explanation.

I don’t have time to question it before I’m covered in darkness, dust in my lungs, and pain all over my body.

CHAPTER 19

Adelina

It's been a while since Matteo left to deal with Enrico, and I'm worried. The last time he dealt with Enrico, he was back within an hour. Now, it's been several hours, and I haven't heard from him.

My gut is telling me something is wrong.

I call Dario. "I'm worried," I blurt out after he answers. I'm standing in mine and Matteo's bedroom, overlooking the ocean, and while the sight is beautiful, I can't get rid of my nerves.

"About what?" Dario doesn't even ask me how I'm doing. Once something serious happens, he gets down to business.

"Matteo. He went to deal with one of his men and hasn't been back since."

"Well, sometimes business matters can take a while."

"I know, but ... I don't know. Maybe it's nothing. It's just ... ever since Matteo and I married, he hasn't left me alone for more than a few hours. It's been more than a few hours, Dario. I've tried calling him, and he's not answering. I think something's wrong."

"Ok," he says calmly. "I'll check in with him if it'll make you feel better, all right?"

"Thank you," I breath out.

"But I'm actually in the middle of dealing with some of my own business right now. A shipment issue that requires my attention. It'll probably be another hour before I can check on him."

I deflate. “You can’t leave now?”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could. But I promise, the minute I’m done with work, I’ll see to him.”

“Ok.” There’s nothing else to say.

“It sounds like you care for him.”

My heartbeat picks up its pace. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re worried about him. That means you care. I knew you’d come around. I’m glad. I never wanted to see you suffer, Adelina.”

“You *did* tell me that Matteo and I would make a good match. And ... I guess you’re not completely wrong in that regard.”

“That’s because I know you, and I know Matteo. And I promise I’ll see him after I’m done with work.”

“Thanks.”

We end the call.

I know Dario will keep to his word, but I’m nervous. Something isn’t sitting right with me.

I call Serafina next, realizing I haven’t spoken to my sister in over a week—the longest we’ve ever gone without speaking. “Am I crazy?” I ask her once she answers.

“And hello to you, too,” she responds in her dry tone.

“I’m worried about Matteo, and everything in me is saying something’s wrong, but I’m trying to rationalize it.”

“Why are you worried?”

“Because he’s been gone for hours now, and he’s normally not.”

“You sound like you care,” she says, eerily similar to what Dario just said to me. “I remember how much you despised him, and now you’re worried for him.”

“Yes, I care!” I snap, surprising myself.

I can tell I’ve also surprised Serafina by her tone when she replies, “Ok, sorry. Jeez. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

I rub my hand across my face. “No, sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. It’s just ... yes, I do care for Matteo. I never thought I would, and yet, here I am. Calling everyone to make sure I’m not losing my mind in fear for him.”

“So, why did you call me? For advice?”

“I’m asking if I’m crazy or if my feelings are valid.”

“Well, if I thought my man was in danger, I’d run off to find him. You know me.”

“I do, and I know you also don’t always think before you act. I always think before I act.”

“And that’s why you called me. You’re worried for Matteo. Do you know where he is?”

“To his meeting house.”

“Ok, then you know where to go.”

“But I can’t just go there.”

“Why not? Adelina, if you’re so worried for him that you’re calling *me* for advice, then you’re just looking for an excuse to go after him. You know where he is, so go there. See what’s taking him so long. Problem solved.”

“The issue is the last time I was there, I ... didn’t have the best experience with some of his men.”

“So? If you’re worried about your man, you find him. Simple as that. If you actually care for Matteo as you claim, then go after him. Nothing else to say.”

I realize she’s right. I need to listen to my gut.

“Thanks,” I breathe out. “I’ve got to go.”

“You’re welcome,” she barely manages to get out before I hang up.

I can’t wait another hour for Dario to be done with work. I have the time now, and I can go to Matteo myself and see what the hold-up is. I’m his wife. If any of his men try to disrespect me again, I’ll put them in line. I’m a biker’s wife, after all.

The only problem is, I have no way of getting there. I’ll have to take the underground line, which I’ve never used before. I grew up sheltered because of Dario. I haven’t had the chance to use much of the city.

Well, I better get walking since I need to get to Matteo as soon as possible.

I hurry out of the house and walk to the nearest metro station, which only takes a few minutes. I pay for my card and get to the station to wait for the next train car. I feel out of place in my frilly dress and heels, but when I look around, no one else is even looking at me. Everyone has their eyes glued to their phones. It’s strange, having grown up in this city yet never actually experiencing it.

Finally, the train car arrives, and I hurry on. I vaguely remember where Matteo’s clubhouse is located, so I keep my eyes and ears peeled for the location of the next few stops. It doesn’t take long until we stop at a station that sounds close enough to his clubhouse location. I hurry out of the train car

and go above ground, searing for a familiar landmark.

Then I spot one. I remember the seedy-looking motel across the street from me. I walk as fast as I can until I turn a corner, and there it is.

Matteo's meeting house.

Smoke is rising into the air. I don't hear the sound of sirens, though. Why has no one called for help if there's a fire?

I run into the courtyard, and what I see terrifies me.

The meeting house is in ruins. Crumpled to the ground. A few of Matteo's men linger outside, tearing at the wood and stone, calling for Matteo.

I run to the nearest person I see. Carlo, who's sitting on the ground, looking dazed.

"What happened?" I ask.

He blinks when he sees me. "Adelina."

"What happened?"

"Matteo's still in there. I managed to get out. We haven't heard from him in a while." He rubs a hand over his face, and his voice comes out choked. "I think he may be dead."

My heart stops for one beat before resuming. "No," I say immediately. "He can't be. He's not." Matteo can't be dead. Not after I've grown to care for him. Not after I've grown to love him.

I run to the rubble and start picking up pieces of the building and tossing them aside. Thankfully, as a dancer all my life, I have some strength. It's still tough, though, and some pieces are impossible for me to lift.

"How did this happen?" I ask as Carlo comes over.

"It was a bomb. I heard the boom before everything exploded."

"Who would want to blow up your meeting house?"

His gaze darkens. "I know one person. Enrico. It must have been. That slimy fuck. Matteo kicked him out, and he retaliated."

"But Enrico isn't smart enough to make a bomb," another one of Matteo's men says.

"True." Carlo rubs his chin. "Then he must have had help."

I hear a faint groan in the distance. I gasp. "Matteo?" I run over to the spot and start digging away at the rubble. His men join me.

Soon, a face is revealed as more of the building is pushed aside. It's Matteo, lying there, looking hurt but alive.

"Matteo!" I reach down and cup his cheek.

“Adelina?” he asks groggily.

“Hurry, men!” Carlo calls. “Let’s get this off him.”

With everyone helping, it doesn’t take long to get Matteo out. Amazingly, he doesn’t have any broken bones. Only a few scrapes and bruises.

His men help him off the ground and away from the rubble.

“Are you all right?” I ask, kneeling next to him. I don’t care if my skirt gets dirty. Matteo means more to me than a piece of fabric.

“I’m fine. I hurt.” He coughs. “But I feel fine for the most part.”

“How are you not more hurt?” Carlo asks.

“I managed to dive behind the car before the bulk of the building fell down. It protected me. But then I was stuck beneath the entire building, losing air, fast.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Though, I have a serious kink in my neck.”

I laugh and throw my arms around his shoulders. “That’s nothing compared to what could have happened to you.” I pepper kisses across his face. “You’re alive.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you seem actually glad that I’m alive.”

“Of course, I am. You could have died, and I don’t want to lose you.” I don’t care that I’m pouring my heart out in front of all his men. I need to say these words. I’m ready to say them. “Matteo, I love—”

“You were supposed to die!” a voice shouts. I glance over and see one of Matteo’s men pointing a gun at him.

“Antonio?” Matteo asks.

“How did you manage to survive?” Antonio asks. “How?”

“It was you? You caused the bomb?”

“With Enrico’s help, I made the bomb. He rigged it to the club.”

“Put the gun down, and we can talk,” Matteo advises, shifting his body in front of me, even though he can’t even stand up yet.

His men are scattered around the courtyard, all looking worried. No one moves, or their leader may get hit with a bullet.

“No!” Antonio screams. “You don’t get to talk down to me any longer. You’re such a patronizing asshole. I’ve come to you repeatedly with plans and ideas, and you always shut them down. Whenever I reach out to help you, you act like I’m an inconvenience. But a good leader is supposed to do just that. Lead his people. Instead, you’ve treated me like a nuisance you’d rather not have around. Now, how do you think that makes me feel?”

“Bad enough to blow up the club,” Matteo replies flatly.

“I wanted you to know it was me before I killed you.” He pulls the trigger.

I can't let Matteo die for real. I've finally found love, and I can't lose it.

I throw my body in front of Matteo's on instinct and gasp when the bullet hits me. The force of it is so strong that it knocks me onto my back. Pain radiates through my body. I can barely breathe; I'm gasping so hard.

“Adelina!” Matteo shouts, turning to me. “What did you do?”

I can just barely lift my finger to point beyond Matteo toward Antonio, who's lining up his next shot. Matteo turns to face him, raw anger written across his face.

Matteo stands up and starts to run right at Antonio. I hate this. He's going to die, and what I did will be in vain. I wanted to save him since he's saved me so many times, and I couldn't even do that right.

A loud shot rings out.

I stop breathing for a second as I look at Matteo, waiting for him to drop dead.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he stops running and looks at Antonio in confusion. I wonder why. Then I turn and see that Antonio has a bullet through his head. He falls over, completely dead.

Standing behind him is my brother. So I guess Dario did come to check on Matteo after all. He lowers his gun, breathing heavily.

Matteo runs back to me and scoops me into his arms. “Adelina? You'll be all right. I'll get you to the hospital. Dario! I need to use your car again.”

Dario runs over and looks at me with concern. “Of course. Come on.”

I'm shaking now. The bullet went through my upper arm, and I'm bleeding a lot.

“Matteo?” I whisper. “Am I dying?”

“No,” he says roughly. “You're not dying. I got you, you hear me? I've always promised to keep you safe, and this is no different.” He places me gently into Dario's car before getting in beside me. Dario gets into the driver's seat and takes off.

It's a little funny to me, watching the same scene play out as it did earlier this week when I hit my head on the pool. But back then, my injury wasn't serious. Now, I know I'm slowly dying.

Matteo clutches me to him as we head to the hospital. He murmurs words I can't hear as blackness edges at the corner of my vision. But there's one

phrase that slips out I do understand.

“I love you.”

I gasp harder as I struggle to breathe. Matteo loves me. So maybe sacrificing myself for him wasn't completely in vain after all.

Despite everything we've been through in this past week alone, we've managed to find love between us. I never thought that would be possible, yet it happened. It's honestly a miracle.

I'm just glad I hear it before the darkness takes over, and all I see is black.

CHAPTER 20

Adelina

I blink my eyes open to a soft light above me. It doesn't register where I am until someone says my name.

I look over and see Matteo next to me, holding my hand. He's alive.

That's right. Dario showed up and saved him.

I'm alive, too.

"Thank god," another voice says. It's my sister. I turn and see her, Pia, and Dario on my other side.

I'm in the hospital.

"We thought we'd lost you for a moment," Serafina tells me. "I ..." Her voice catches. "I can't lose you, sister."

I reach out for her, and Serafina takes my hand. "I couldn't lose you either."

"It was touch and go there for a while," Dario says. "You lost a lot of blood. But the doctors saved you. They told us that you would be all right."

Matteo smiles. "You need to take it easy for a couple of weeks and let your arm heal, but other than that, you'll be fine."

I breathe out, melting into the bed. "I'm glad. I didn't want to die. Not after I realized I ..." I trail off, glancing at my family. "Never mind. How are you guys?"

We're fine, Pia signs. "We're not the ones who got hurt." *I'm glad you're ok.*

Me, too, I sign for her. I know she appreciates it when we use sign

language with her. She smiles wide.

Dario clears his throat. “Now that we know you’ll be fine, we’ll give you and Matteo some space. Come on.” He motions for Serafina to follow him.

She leans down and gives me a quick hug before following him and Pia out of the room.

I turn to Matteo. “How are you?”

“A clean bill of health. A doctor looked me over and said I was good.”

I gasp. “What about Enrico? He could still try to hurt you.”

He’s already shaking his head before I finish speaking. “Enrico’s dealt with. Carlo found him soon after I left to take you to the hospital. The bastard was lurking around. He was supposed to meet up with Antonio after, but since Antonio is dead ... Well, that obviously wasn’t going to happen. Carlo killed Enrico the minute he found him. He called me earlier with the news.”

I melt back into the bed. “That’s good. Carlo did the right thing, after all. I’m glad he didn’t just stand by and let everything happen. Not like he did with me.”

Matteo’s face darkens. “Carlo has learned his lesson. When he called with the news, he told me to tell you that he was sorry for not helping you that night.”

“That’s something, at least. Did anyone else get hurt?”

“No. Thank god. The only woman there was Raven, and Carlo got her out. The rest of the women and my men are fine.”

“That’s a relief. I wouldn’t wish death on someone who didn’t deserve it.”

He squeezes my hand tighter as he says, “I was so fucking scared. I really thought you were going to die. Why would you throw yourself in front of me, Adelina? It’s my job to protect you. Not the other way around.”

“Because that’s what married couples do. They’re there for each other. You’ve saved me countless times. It was time I returned the favor.”

“Well, I appreciate it. But never do that again. I can’t lose you.”

“And I can’t lose you.” I gulp, readying myself to say the words. “Matteo, I realized something. It’s been building for a while, but when I saw you trapped under that building, I knew my feelings were real.” I pause. “I love you.”

His eyes widen a fraction before a smile breaks across his face. “And I love you.”

“I know. You told me in the car. I wasn’t completely passed out yet.”

He chuckles. “You have me there. You really love me? I thought you hated bikers.”

“Well, there’s one I don’t hate that much.”

Matteo leans down and places a lingering kiss on my lips. “I don’t hate you that much either.”

His words make me laugh.

AFTER WEEKS of letting my arm heal, I finally have my full range of motion back. It was tough for a while since I had to take a break from dance, but I managed. Having Matteo’s support really helped. He’s been right beside me, showing me that he has my back.

And I have his.

It’s astounding how far we’ve come in our marriage. We started off disliking each other. Well, I disliked him. He just disliked my attitude toward him. But we found our way in time.

Now, Matteo is pressing into me as we make love in our bed. Once I was officially healed, he didn’t waste time taking me to our room and touching me in that perfect way of his.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he sinks his length into me. Our bodies move as one, completely in sync. I gasp every time he rocks his hips against mine. Our connection is beyond sex. It’s one of understanding, compassion, and love. Though, the sex part is nothing to complain about.

Matteo groans as he presses his head against mine, keeping his pace steady. There’s no need to rush this. We have the rest of our lives to explore each other’s bodies even more. Despite us having sex many times now, I still discover new parts of him. I’m also discovering more of him as a person, and with every new thing I find, I grow to love him more and more.

With every thrust of our bodies together, Matteo reaches new places in me that give me pleasure. It doesn’t take long before I’m shuddering in his arms as I climax.

Matteo follows suit and burrows his head in my neck as he groans out my name. He always knows how to make me feel special.

We hold onto each other for a while before he rolls off me, and I snuggle into his arms. I’ll never get bored of this. In fact, every time we hold each

other after sex, I fall in love with him more and more.

Everything is perfect.

Matteo didn't start as my prince charming, but he's become mine, and there's no one I would want more as my husband than him.

I only had to give him a chance.

I'm so glad I did.

The End

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE Wicked Oath!

I had everything in life... except his love.

I was always the spoiled princess of the Irish mob.

Never lacking for anything.

That was until I married James Kelly.

Head of his own clan, James knows power.

Just like me, he has everything he could ever want.

He makes it so easy to fall in love with him.

The way he seduces me, I've never felt it before.

But if everything seems so right, why is it tough for James to love me back?

Secrets about his intentions, with me and my family, are exposed.

And I start to learn that my husband isn't quite the prince charming I thought
he was.

Now I'm torn between my feelings...

I want to stay happy with the man I fell for.

But I also want to kill him for breaking my heart.

There's only one way this is ending...

In love or in death.

[Start reading Wicked Oath NOW!](#)

Sneak Peek - Chapter One

THE FIRST TIME I laid eyes on James Kelly, I was enthralled. A mixture of ruggedness and pure masculine energy, I knew I wouldn't be able to resist him. His silken hair that fell around his ears and the tattoos covering his arms made me weak.

I'm the good girl of the Irish mob. That's how I was raised.

But something told me that the minute James walked into my life, I wouldn't be good for much longer.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I'M LIVING my normal life, or as normal as one can be when one's family is the Irish mob of Boston, completely unaware that my life is about to change.

Before James enters my life, before he's even a thought on my mind, I'm playing the good girl by reading in my room decorated in pastel pinks and whites, the epitome of innocence—as I was raised to be. I'm not one to push boundaries. Much.

A knock on my window makes me glance over. The face of my best friend, Lucy Kennedy, all blonde hair and blue eyes, shines through. I sigh as I place my book down and go to open the window.

Lucy, unlike me, loves pushing boundaries. She stumbles as she steps into my room, rightening herself after I catch her arms.

"Lucy, you're not supposed to be here," I comment, letting her go.

"Well, where else am I supposed to be?" She sits down on my bed, bouncing slightly.

"Not *here*. Won't your parents wonder where you are?" Lucy is a mafia daughter just like me, with her father working for mine. My father, Patrick Donovan, is the head of the Irish mob in these parts of the city. Mafia fathers tend to be overprotective. I know. My father hardly lets me leave my room. I know for a fact that Lucy's father is just as protective, but Lucy always finds a way to sneak over to my house without a care in the world about getting caught.

"Of course," she says way too cheerfully for the situation. I'm already an anxious mess, worried we'll both get in trouble. Our parents have no issue

with Lucy and me being best friends. My parents just don't like how wild Lucy can sometimes be, and her parents don't like losing track of her, when they notice she's missing, which is hardly ever. They tend to not notice their daughter too much. They like their daughter seen and not heard and all of that. "But I'll be back before they even notice I'm gone."

"Keep your voice down," I hiss. "I don't want my parents to come in and find you. Or worse, Owen."

Lucy perks up. "You mean Owen might find me here? That wouldn't bother me at all."

I stare at her. Lucy has been in love with my older brother Owen for years now. I mean, I can't understand why. Owen is annoying and just as overprotective as our father. He'll take after our dad once Dad is ready to retire, which I hope is no time soon. Dad dotes on me, whereas Owen ... not so much. Mostly, I'm just a thorn in his side when he's not obsessing about my safety. But for whatever reason, Lucy has a massive crush on him. Owen never even glances her way.

Lucy pouts. "Oh, Olivia, don't worry so much. You're always such a worrywart. Learn to relax every once and a while."

I give her a rueful smile while pushing some strands of my brown hair behind my shoulder. "It would be easier for me to relax if you weren't always sneaking into my room."

"You got to live a little, right?"

"Lucy, you're a bad influence."

She waves a hand. "Tell that to my dad. He's always harping about how good girls are never supposed to go out and have fun. Well, I say we should have some fun. Maybe we could go down to—"

"No," I cut her off. "We're not going *there*."

Lucy manages to pout even more. "But it sounds like an adventure."

"Going to a fighting ring is not an adventure."

"But Owen likes to go there often."

I just laugh. "Lucy, why in the world would I want to see my brother fight in the rings?" There's a well-known underground fighting ring that my father partly owns. Lucy's right. Owen does like to go there often. But I also know I'm not supposed to know about it. I only found out when I overheard my brother and dad talking about it. I mentioned it to Lucy, and now, all she wants to do is go, mostly to see my brother fight, shirtless. Or at least, that's how she imagines him, as she's told me repeatedly.

She opens her mouth, then snaps it shut. “True. But I would still like to go, and I’d like you there. You could cheer your brother on.”

“No. He’d only find us and take us home, getting us both in trouble.”

Lucy stands up, her blonde curls bouncing. “Well, I’m going.”

“How do you know Owen will even be there tonight? Dad sent him off on business.”

“One can only hope he’ll be there.”

“Wait,” I say, stopping her before she can leave through my window again. My house doesn’t have any guards surrounding it since my father believes he can handle any intruders himself, making it even more ironic that Lucy sneaks in undetected. Lucy glances back at me, her eyes open wide. “I don’t want you to get hurt, so I’m not going to let you go by yourself. But,” I hold up a finger, “we’re getting my parents’ permission.”

Lucy deflates. “No. Your father won’t allow you to leave.”

“He will if he thinks we’re going out shopping. Whenever my dad hears me mention anything girly, he blanks out and lets me do it. So let’s go downstairs and tell him that’s what we’re doing. But first, you need to come in through the front door to make it look less suspicious.”

“But he’ll send a guard with us.”

I smirk. “You’re not the only one who’s good at out-maneuvering a guard.” I may be a good girl who never gets into trouble, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have my own tricks up my sleeve. There have been times I’ve wanted to do something by myself, and I’ve managed to trick one of our guards into letting me go off and do my thing. I’m always back by an appropriate time to never raise suspicion, and they’ve never tattled on me. “Let’s just hope my dad sends Garret with us.” Garret is the easiest of my dad’s guards to manipulate. He’s young, and I’m pretty positive that he’s infatuated with me. I might not have many life experiences, but I’ve read enough romance novels to understand how to flirt.

Lucy smiles wide. “So, we’re really gonna do this?”

I sigh. “If it means less of a chance of you getting hurt, then yes, I’m going to go with you. That’s what best friends are for. Doing something stupid even though they know better just to protect their friend.”

Lucy runs over and hugs me, her light lemony scent wafting over me. “Thank you, thank you. Olivia, you really are the best friend I could have hoped for.”

“All right.” I pat her back. “Just go to the front door and knock like a

normal person. I'll talk to my parents."

Lucy bounces over to the window and scales out. Taking in a deep breath, I steady my nerves and find my parents in the living room, where my dad is nursing a glass of something alcoholic and my mom is reading a book. That's something I've always marveled at—that they can be together and yet exist in quiet and not be bothered by it. Their love shines through even when they're not looking at each other.

"Olivia," Dad says in his deep voice. Mom glances up from her book.

Patrick and Siobhan Donovan, the power couple of the Irish mob. Many people have spoken about my parents and how they make a great team. I can only hope to find someone like that someday, though more than likely, my dad will arrange a good match for me.

My dad sits tall with his robust frame, dark hair, and eyes that make him seem more sinister than he really is. Deep down, he's a bit of a softie. And my mom—the radiant redhead who would rather face her fears of spiders, catch one, and let it outside than kill it. How she hasn't been beaten down in the mafia world, I have no clue. Maybe it helps that she always has a wine glass in her hands. But it's thanks to both of them I've been saved from the horrors of the world we live in. It's also thanks to them I'm not allowed to leave the house often, all in the name of protecting me.

"Dad. Mom." I give them each a nod.

When I don't say more, Dad asks, "Is there something you need?"

"Um, yes. Lucy wanted to come over, and we're thinking about going out to do some clothes shopping."

Mom glances at the clock on the wall. "At this hour? I'm sure most stores will be closing soon."

Crap. I'm starting to sweat. I'm not exactly good at this deception thing, but I need to protect Lucy from doing something stupid. "Um ... better to avoid the large crowds."

Dad shrugs. "That seems true." My dad really has no idea how clothing stores work. Anything remotely girly is just a mystery to him, even if he pretends otherwise. "You really want to do this, sweetheart?"

And that's the kicker right there. Even though my dad prefers me to stay home, if I ask sweetly enough, he'll never say no to me. "Yes, Daddy, I do." I call him "Daddy" for extra effect. He's powerless to resist it—I know it reminds him of when I was a little girl. He'd prefer to keep me that way forever.

Mom eyes me with suspicion. She knows I only call Dad “Daddy” when I really want something, but she won’t go against Patrick Donovan. Once he says something’s done, that’s it.

And he does. He nods, taking a sip from his glass. “Just take Garret with you.” He pulls out his phone. “I’ll have him come over right away.”

“Thank you.” I hug him, and he smiles sheepishly.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.” He kisses the top of my head. “Now, have a fun time.”

As if on cue, Lucy knocks on the door. “That’s Lucy. I’ll wait with her out front for Garret.”

“You do that.” He doesn’t even question that Lucy’s already here before I have the chance to call her to come over. My dad is very observant when it comes to his business, but when it comes to me, he’s oblivious. As long as I stay his sweet girl, he never questions me.

I hear my mom murmur to him as I walk away, “You can never say no to her.”

I don’t hear Dad’s response as I open the door for Lucy. I give her a quick nod that we’re all set, and she squeals and hugs me.

“Shh.” I step onto the front porch and shut the door behind me. “We’re just going shopping, remember? Don’t get too excited.”

Lucy zips her lips. “You’re right.”

“Now, we just wait for Garret to arrive, and he’ll take us.”

Garret arrives in less than ten minutes. He springs out of his car, all gangly and long limbs. “Ready at your command, Miss Donovan.” He bows low to me.

Lucy shoots me a look and giggles, but I just roll my eyes.

“Thanks, Garret,” I say dryly. “We’re heading to the mall.”

He gives me a salute. “Right away.”

Lucy and I chat in the backseat as Garret takes us to the nearest shopping mall. I think about what to say to him to convince him to take us to the underground fighting rings. I still can’t believe I’m doing this, but it’s for Lucy.

Once Garret parks in the mall parking lot, neither Lucy nor I leave the car. Garret glances back at us. “Everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine,” Lucy squeaks.

I shush her again and elbow her gently. She just laughs some more, high on the thought of doing something dangerous. “Garret.” I lean closer to him. I

can tell right away he appreciates it. His eyes linger on my lips before darting up to meet my eyes. I try not to grimace. “Garret. Lucy and I were actually thinking of doing something else tonight.”

“Oh?”

I let my fingers trail over his shoulder. “Would you mind taking us to see my brother fight tonight?” God, I’m hoping Owen is on tonight. Otherwise, this will blow up in our faces.

Garret pauses. “You’ve never asked to see Owen fight before.”

“Well, I’m asking now.” I drop my voice, hoping it sounds husky enough.

Garret notices. “You know, I’ve always wanted to see your brother fight.”

Hope sparks in my chest. “So, you’ll take us, then?”

“Is your dad all right with this?”

“Since Owen will be there, he’ll be fine with that.” Lie. “Owen can help keep us safe in case anything happens.”

Garret nods slowly. “Good point. Ok, then. Let’s go.”

I settle next to Lucy, who gives me a thumbs up and mouths, “Good job.”

I just shake my head and push aside the worry coursing through me.

It only takes a short drive to reach the fighting rings. They’re located in a nondescript building that I would never have guessed housed an underground fighting ring. I also love that Garret is too naïve even to question how I know about this.

When we get out of the car, I’m immediately aware of how out of place we look. Outside the building, a line is forming with a bouncer in front of the doors. It looks like a typical line outside a club, but inside, it’s not so innocent. Everyone in line is dressed in varieties of black leather. Lucy is in a preppy dress with a high collar, and I’m in a floral pink and white summer dress. It’s smothering hot in the Boston summers, but you wouldn’t guess that by how much leather the people in line are wearing.

We get some stares as we pass by the line, approaching the bouncer. Some smirks, some looks of confusion, some people laughing at us.

“Maybe this isn’t a good idea,” I whisper to Lucy.

“Nonsense. I want to see Owen fight, and that’s what I’m going to do.” She grips my arm and pulls me toward the bouncer.

The bouncer eyes us. “Line starts back there.” He points down to where the line wraps around the side of the building.

“Actually,” Garret says, leaning in closer to the bouncer, who wrinkles up his nose and jerks his head back, “this is Olivia Donovan. She’s here to see

her brother, Owen, fight.”

The bouncer looks at me more closely, more interest in his eyes. “Fine,” he says after a beat, opening the rope. “Go in.”

Lucy lifts her hand for a high five, which I slowly return as we step inside a world much different from the one I’m used to.

Instantly, I notice the loud sounds of music, shouting, and grunting. It’s a symphony of noise, making me sweat harder.

We turn a corner and enter the main room, where a large ring is in the middle, with two men already fighting inside. I don’t recognize either of them.

A sea of people surround the stage, making it tough to walk through. Lucy points toward a booth near the back of the room, where we settle in and watch the show.

Garret watches enrapt as Lucy and I huddle together. “This is all so ... violent,” I say, scrunching up my nose as one of the guys punches the other one in the nose, making blood spurt out.

“I know,” Lucy breathes. “Isn’t it exciting?”

“I guess,” I mutter, slouching down in my seat. I can’t risk getting spotted and the word getting back to my dad. The fact he owns the place means a lot of people here might know who I am. Then again, my dad would never imagine me here in a million years, so ...

Once the men on the stage are done, another pair of guys take their place.

I recognize one of them this time. My brother.

Owen Donovan, next in line to everything our father owns, stands with his chest puffed out, his eyes set in a glare as he stares down the man opposite him, a bulky, bald guy. Owen is shirtless, which I’m sure elates Lucy. Since he’s my brother, his bare chest is kind of gross, but glancing at Lucy, it’s like she’s looking at God right before her. With his dark hair and muscular body, I see even more women around the room checking him out.

I roll my eyes and settle in to watch the fight.

Even though my brother is leaner than his bulky counterpart, he beats the guy in a matter of seconds with just a couple of punches in the first round. As they start the second round, Lucy leans over to me and says, “Owen is amazing, isn’t he?”

“Sure.”

Lucy doesn’t even hear me as she keeps her eyes on my brother. Owen quickly wins the second and then third rounds. A round of applause sounds

off, with Lucy standing up and shouting.

I grab her arm. "Sit back down," I hiss.

Fortunately, it's so loud in the room that Owen doesn't even notice. He walks off stage and into a back room.

"I should go thank him." Lucy starts to get out of the booth.

"No." I grab her arm again and make her sit back down next to me. "You'll get us caught."

Garret glances over. "Caught? I thought your dad gave you permission to be here."

I pause, and Lucy and I exchange a glance. The next fighters walk on stage. "Oh, look," I say, pointing. "Let's watch this."

Garret shrugs and turns back to the ring. I let go of a deep breath, and Lucy winks at me.

I cross my arms as I watch the next fight.

It only takes a second for my entire body to light on fire when my eyes focus on one of the fighters. A man with dark hair that brushes his ears and tattoos covering his entire chest and arms, standing with purpose. He's the most handsome man I've ever seen in my life.

My body responds to him even though we've never spoken, even though he's not even looking at me. I've never seen him before, but something deep inside me is calling me to him.

The ref announces the fighters' names, and I pay attention. When the ref says *his* name, I sit up straighter.

James Kelly.

I know that name even though I've never met him.

The Kelly family is the other mob family in the area, owning the other half of Boston. I know the Kelly's have worked closely with my father in the past, but I've never seen James around. I heard he took over as leader after his father passed away a few years ago, which means I'm looking at a mob boss.

Once the ref tells them to begin, James attacks with a ferocity that makes me both scared and aroused, a combination I've never felt before.

He takes down his opponent just as fast as my brother did his. In a few short rounds, James has won, and it's announced that he'll fight again later that night.

I don't stand up as Lucy did for Owen. Instead, I just gently clap and watch James stand tall as he's announced as the winner. And in one beat, his

eyes flick to mine, and I feel like I'm lost forever.

He keeps his gaze steady on me. A few other people in the crowd notice and glance back toward me. I sit down deeper in my seat. This is the opposite of staying low.

James doesn't wait for the ref to finish announcing his win. He stalks out of the ring and begins walking through the crowd.

Walking right toward me.

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I was meant to protect her... instead I consumed her

Sofia Di Luca is spoiled and innocent.
A mafia princess I was chosen to keep safe.
I wasn't supposed to desire her.
To press my mouth against her soft, plump lips.
To show her pleasure she's never known before.
Her body was off limits.
Until evil men threatened to take her away.
So I made a choice.
I claimed her instead...
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