

Marekto
CRIME FAMILY

corrupted
UNION

IVY DAVIS

Corrupted Union

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE MORETTI MAFIA

BOOK THREE

IVY DAVIS

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CHAPTER 1

Francesca

The painting of the young woman might seem plain compared with the other more colorful pieces of art at the Met, but it's always stood out to me. Her young face, the small smile on her lips, the modesty she exudes, and the hope in her eyes.

“Study of a Young Woman” by Johannes Vermeer is the reason I come to the Met every month. I see myself in the girl in the painting. I could look at this painting for the rest of my life and never get bored.

People walk past me, taking in the more vibrant paintings nearby. Leaving me alone to study it, memorize its every detail. I don't feel alone when I'm in a museum. You can't be. Not when you're surrounded by so much history and beauty. Compared with the chaos that is my home life, this is where I feel most at home.

Someone bumps into me, breaking me out of my concentration. I turn to see it's a man in his thirties, fairly handsome by societal beauty standards. I expect him to apologize for bumping into me. After all, I'm the one standing here, keeping out of the way of the other patrons. But instead of a quick apology, he shoots me an annoyed look and says, “I didn't see you there. You should really move so others can walk by.”

My mouth drops open. I'm not standing in the way. I've made sure of it. There's plenty of space for people to walk behind and in front of me. *He's* the one who ran into me.

“You should really learn to say sorry,” he mutters before moving past me. I flush and look down at my feet. A part of me, a huge part, wants to shout after him that he needs to learn manners, but I remain silent. Speaking up for myself is not my strong suit.

I sit down on the bench directly across from the painting. At least this way, no one can claim I’m in their way. I refocus my breath and mind on the painting, trying to curb my sudden anxiety. It’s hard to not feel like a burden when people treat you like one.

I’ve just about found my quiet, safe place again when an older woman starts to sit down on the bench with me. Except she doesn’t sit down next to me. No. She ends up sitting *on* me. It happens so fast I can barely react before she gasps and stands up, looking at me like she’s only noticing me for the first time now. I guess she is.

She clutches her hand to her chest. “I didn’t see you there. You were so quiet. You blended right on in.”

I give her a tight smile. “It’s all right,” I manage to say as that creeping embarrassment hits me again.

“You should speak up more, dear.” She pats my shoulder before taking the seat next to me. I want to tell her it’s a museum, so there’s a reason I’m quiet. But, as always, I don’t. There’s never a point. I’m either ignored or treated like a problem when other people make the mistake. I’ve learned to let it slide; otherwise, it would eat me up inside. I’m here to find my happy place with my favorite painting, and that’s what I’m going to focus on.

Fortunately, no more embarrassing incidents happen during my visit. After checking my phone, I realize I’ve been here for several hours, and it’s time I head home, not that anyone will notice. My mother has a bad habit of forgetting I exist. With eight kids to think about, one of us has to slip through the cracks.

I motion for George, my personal guard that I’m ready to leave. Middle-aged with a potbelly, he walks away from the wall he had been leaning against and joins me in walking out

of the museum. I didn't grow up with a personal guard, but after one of my older sisters, Gemma, was kidnapped four years ago, my mom cracked down on our protection. Gemma ended up marrying the man who took her, Viktor, so it all worked out in the end for her. But the guards remained.

At least George notices me. He's paid to, but I try to not think about that.

"Enjoy the museum, George?" I ask as we walk down the large steps at the museum's entry. Their slippery with ice, and George has to grab my arm as I stumble.

"Yes, Miss, uh, Francesca," he says. When he became my guard a few years ago, he kept calling me Miss, but I told him I preferred Francesca. Or Fran or Franny, but those are too intimate for George. So, he makes an effort to call me Francesca, and that's all I can ask for.

"What was your favorite painting?"

"Well, I don't really know anything about art. So, I don't have a favorite."

I frown. It's hard to find people to talk to about art. My siblings aren't interested, nor is my mom, and apparently, neither is my guard. I don't really have anyone else I really talk to, seeing as I prefer looking at paintings or reading books about paintings or analyzing paintings. So, I'm a little obsessed.

"There wasn't any you liked?" I prompt, hoping for something more. I shiver in my winter coat, the biting chill in the air stinging my eyes and nose.

"I mostly kept my eyes on you, Francesca. I'm your guard. I need to make sure you're all right at all times."

"Thank you for doing your job, then." I drop the subject, not wanting George to be bored. "Are there any other hobbies you enjoy?" We walk over to the black sedan parked on the side of the road. George opens the passenger seat for me, and I get in.

"Not really," he says, after getting into the driver's seat. "I'm busy being your guard."

I just nod and fall silent. So much for making conversation. It's already hard enough for me, but it's even harder when the other person doesn't give me much to work on. At least with George, the silence is easy and not awkward.

He drives me home and drops me off at the door. George doesn't need to keep an eye on me when I'm in my own home. That's what the other guards milling around the place are there for. I wave goodnight, then head inside, where it's warm and will either smell like a freshly cooked dinner or smelly socks. There's no in between. When eight people live in a household, things can get out of hand. My mom tries her hardest to keep the house smelling nice, but it's not always possible when she has no help cleaning. Which is why I help around the house to make things nicer, but I'm not sure my mom notices.

I'm not greeted by anyone when I step through the door. I take off my snowy boots, winter jacket, and hat before heading upstairs. I can hear the rest of my family in the kitchen having dinner, but I don't join them. It's easier this way.

I spend the next half hour reading my favorite book about Roman architecture when someone knocks on my door. It's Gemma. "I didn't know you came over," I say, closing my book. My older sister is gorgeous, with blonde hair and stunning blue eyes. She looks so much like our mom. I got our father's looks, with dark hair and slightly less pale skin; though it's still easy for me to burn when out in the sun too long.

"Viktor wanted a home-cooked meal, so I suggested we come over here." She rolls her eyes and plops down onto my bed. Even at twenty-two, she retains a teenage vibe. "It's not as if we don't have nice meals at home. But I know Viktor is trying his hardest to gain our mom's trust, so I think that's the real reason he likes to come over so often."

Viktor kidnapped Gemma, using her as a bargaining chip to gain influence. When they ended up falling in love, it was a shock to all of us. But Gemma has always been insistent that Viktor is her husband, and that won't change.

"So, why are you not down at dinner?" she asks.

I lift my book. “Reading.”

“When are you not? Come down and join us.”

“I’m surprised you even knew I was missing.”

“I know. I was surprised myself.” She winks. “Hey, I’ve grown a lot over the past few years. I’ve become more observant, you know. And I know Mom tends to forget you exist. So, come join us. You’ll regret it if you don’t.” She stands up and holds out her hand.

“Why will I regret it?”

“Because Mom actually made a fancy roast. You’ll be disappointed you missed out.”

With a sigh, I take her hand and join the rest of my family in the kitchen. At one end of the table is my mother. Seated beside her are the twins, Lucia and Luca. Even though they’re fraternal, they share the same dark hair. They’re five, and like typical five-year-olds, they question everything.

“Eat your carrots,” Mom tells Lucia, who scrunches up her face and shakes her head.

“Why? Carrots are gross.” With a devious grin, she picks one up and flings it at her twin brother. Luca grins back and throws one of his carrots at her. Mom looks like she’s about ready to cry.

Beside Lucia is Mia, who’s fourteen and dealing a massive breakout on her face. She’s looking into her spoon and trying to pop one of her zits.

“Mia, don’t,” Mom says, grabbing Lucia’s arm to stop her from throwing another carrot. “You’re going to ruin your skin that way. Stop.”

Mia flushes and drops her hand. Across from her is Antonio and Cecilia, the other two thick as thieves’ siblings. At seventeen and sixteen respectively, they’ve always been close. It also helps that they sort of look like twins, too, with their stark blonde hair. Cecilia says a prayer to herself before eating while Antonio looks bored and like he’d rather be training for a fight than having to eat dinner with his family.

And finally, at the other end of the table, is my uncle Franco. He sits there, overseeing my family, like he owns the place. After our father died when I was fourteen, which was six years ago, Franco moved in and took over as head of the business my father left behind. I know the business is shady. I've heard the words "mob boss" and "Mafia" thrown around enough times to understand, but I don't ask too many questions. It's not really proper for the women in my life to ask questions about such things.

Gemma sits down next to her husband, Viktor, who's honestly one of the most handsome men I've ever seen. I always find myself tongue-tied around him.

Viktor shoots me a grin. "Hey, Franny. How's it going?"

"Uh, good. I just got back," I manage to say. See? Tongue-tied. And it's not because I have a crush on Viktor. I don't. It's more that Viktor is one of the only people to actually acknowledge me when I'm in a room, and it always startles me. I'm dragged out of my safe hiding place of being ignored, and I never know what to do with myself.

Mom glances up at me. "Francesca? I didn't know you were out." *As always.*

"I was at the Met," I explain, taking my seat between Cecilia and Franco. My uncle's energy has always been off-putting. He moved in after my father's death, claiming he needed to rule in Antonio's place. But now that Antonio is nearing eighteen, it's almost time for my brother to take his rightful place as boss. Yet I don't see Franco packing his bags.

Mom gives me a distracted nod before turning to Luca, who's now trying to stage an all-out food war with Lucia.

Franco sniffs, pointing his fork at me. "You shouldn't waste your time at museums, Francesca. You should be out in the real world, experiencing things. In fact, it's probably time we discuss you getting married."

I freeze while grabbing a spoonful of mashed potatoes.

"Ugh." Gemma rolls her eyes. "Don't make Fran go through that. It was bad enough when you tried hosting a

marriage ball for me.” Gemma and Viktor share a look. Viktor took Gemma the night Mom and Franco hosted a ball for her to meet potential marriage suitors. “And besides, I don’t think you get any say in what happens in our family.”

Franco glares at Gemma, but Gemma ignores him as she pops a carrot into her mouth. My sister’s ability to ignore the animosity coming from Franco is a skill I wish I had. But then again, Gemma has always been exceptionally bold.

“Neither do you,” Franco says, “seeing as you don’t live here any longer.”

“You shouldn’t either,” she snaps back.

I’m not sure why they hate each other so much beyond Franco trying to be our father when he’s clearly not. But her anger seems to extend deeper.

Viktor chuckles, placing a hand on his wife’s arm. “Gemma, dear. Let’s not fight tonight. Something tells me that if we do, I’ll somehow get blamed.”

Gemma deflates a little and pointedly turns away from Franco.

“What do you think, Giulia?” Franco asks my mom. “Isn’t it about time Francesca gets married? She’s already twenty. Well past her prime.”

I sink lower in my seat as Mom’s attention is pulled from the twins. “What? What about marriage?”

“Francesca.” Franco nods at me.

Realization dawns in Mom’s eyes. “Oh. Right. Yes, well ... I mean, sure. I guess it is time to get her married.”

I feel all eyes swing to me, and I want to bury myself under the ground and never leave again. When it came to my two older sisters, Emilia and Gemma, Mom spent so much energy into making sure their marriages furthered our family’s influence, so it hurts that she barely seems to care about mine.

Emilia’s presence is missed at our table. She lives in LA with her husband, Marco, and has been for the past six years. I keep thinking I’ll miss her less, but it lingers. Just as much as I

miss my father, who's death can still leave me waking up in the middle of the night, gasping for breath.

I feel like I should speak because everyone is still looking at me, but I have no clue what to say. Thankfully, Lucia starts crying that she doesn't want to eat carrots, drawing everyone's attention away from me.

"Lucia," Mom snaps. "You're five now. Stop throwing temper tantrums."

"No," she says deliberately, and with added pizzaz, she knocks her plate over the table, sending the carrots flying across the floor. Lucia is trouble, and I hope she grows out of it one day.

Mom instantly tears up. "I can't do this." Her chair scrapes on the floor as she gets up and leaves. It's an awkward, tense moment.

I can't stand it, so I get up, grab the broom, and begin cleaning up the carrots.

Franco follows Mom upstairs, and the moment he leaves the room, it's like everyone can breathe again. "What a brat," Antonio mutters, looking at Lucia.

She's full on crying now. Mia pats her back, but Lucia brushes her off. Mia shrugs and returns to looking at her zits in the reflection of her spoon.

"I hear crying," a deep male voice says as a man walks into the room. Theo Williams, Cecilia's new personal guard. He also helps around the house by guarding the perimeter on occasion. At thirty, he's the youngest of the guards and, frankly, the most handsome. With a rugged appearance, it's no wonder Cecilia blushes every time he comes into a room.

"All good here," Viktor explains. "Just some simple temper tantrums. You know how five-year-olds can be. They all hate carrots."

"I don't," Luca interrupts, making a show of eating a carrot.

Viktor points at him. "See? Already proving me wrong."

Theo nods while gazing around the room. “All right. If everyone is fine here, I’ll return to my station.” He leaves the room with an upright back and a military way of walking. Cecilia looks disappointed when he goes.

I throw the rest of the carrots away.

Since Lucia is still crying and no one is paying her any attention, I go over to her and rub her back. “You don’t need to keep crying,” I tell her. “But you need to learn to be more respectful.”

She shoves me as she runs away from the table. I don’t bother following her. Comforting our younger siblings is Emilia’s ability. Not mine. Luca follows his twin sister. The moment they leave, the chaos goes down exponentially.

Antonio sits up straighter in his seat as he says, “I don’t have time to deal with family dinners. I need to be training. I’ll be eighteen in a month. It’s almost time for me to take over the family business.”

“Tell that to Franco,” Gemma mutters.

Cecilia sighs, taking a sip of her water. “It’s your turn to take over,” she says to Antonio. “You have Dad’s pendant. It’s your legacy. Uncle Franco needs to learn he won’t be boss forever.”

“As I said.” Gemma grips her wine glass. “Tell that to Franco.”

Viktor leans across the table and shakes Antonio’s hand. “You’ve got my support.”

“Thanks, Viktor.” Antonio smiles faintly. I still remember when he was all awkward limbs and height. Now he’s grown into his body and will make a formidable boss. If it means kicking Franco out, I wouldn’t mind. Franco brings negative energy with him everywhere he goes.

“Someone should go check on Mom,” Gemma says.

“Why?” Mia asks, still not looking away from her reflection. She’s going to drive herself crazy constantly looking at her pimples.

Gemma frowns, her eyes darkening. “Just ... someone should go check on her.”

“Why don’t you?” Cecilia asks, guanine curiosity in her voice.

“Because I don’t live here anymore. Besides, Mom doesn’t always appreciate me checking on her. So, one of you should go do it.”

It’s clear no one else is going to take the bait, so I sigh and say, “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.” Gemma looks incredibly relieved. I’m not sure why. It’s not like I’m saving the world or anything. I’m just going to see how Mom is doing.

I go to her room and stop outside the door. It’s open a crack, and I can hear Franco talking to her. I start to walk away when his voice makes me stop.

“You will look at me when I talk to you.”

I’ve never heard Franco sound so aggressive. Like everyone in the house, he usually ignores me. But something about how he’s talking to Mom makes me look through the crack in the door.

Franco has his hands on Mom’s arms. Tightly, by the looks of it. He’s causing her pain. Mom refuses to look at him. “Giulia,” he growls. And before my eyes, he smacks her across the face.

I step back, covering my mouth with my hands. Mom cries out and begs him to stop. I want to rush in there and protect her, but my feet are rooted to the spot.

“You need to listen to me,” he says. “Get Francesca married now, and make sure it’s a good match that benefits our family. You brought this on yourself by waiting so long.” He makes his way toward the door.

I scramble into the bathroom across the hall and shut the door, leaving it just a crack open. Franco bursts out of my mom’s room, muttering to himself as he walks down the hallway.

What just happened? I've never seen Franco do that to my mom before. Granted, I don't really pay attention much to other people. I'm usually daydreaming and in my own head. Has this happened before? I know Mom has lost some of her color since we lost Dad, but now I can't help but wonder if Franco has helped subdue her color. If this has happened before, how could Mom keep it from us?

Maybe this was the first time, and if that's the case, Mom needs my help. The only problem is, I can't move. I'm too scared.

After a few minutes, Mom leaves her room and walks right across the hall to the bathroom. Where I am.

I stumble back when she enters, freezing at the sight of me.

"Francesca?"

"Um ..."

Her eyes widen, and she looks toward her room. "Are ... did ..."

Everything feels fuzzy, and I can barely breath, so I do the one thing I'm good at. Running and hiding.

I walk past Mom and hurry down the stairs. She doesn't stop me. I burst outside into the backyard. Despite the cold, I walk farther into the yard, trying to clear my head. I'm a coward. Franco hit my mom, and I didn't help her.

How could I not help her?

Deep in my mind, I wonder if it were in the same position, would she have helped me? Or would she brush me off like she normally does?

That's no excuse, though. I should have helped, and I didn't.

I start to shiver and turn to go back inside when I slip on a patch of ice and land on my back, all the breath leaving my body. I groan as I stare up at the night sky, the stars actually shining through all the clouds tonight. I lay there for a few seconds, consumed with an overpowering emotion.

Guilt.

I know if Gemma or Emilia had seen that go down, they'd have confronted Franco. I've seen them do it before, but I never understood the reason. I think I understand now.

Has Franco been hurting my mom for six years, and I've been so caught up in my own solitude I never noticed? The issue is I'm not brave like my two older sisters. Emilia had the courage to move across the country for a marriage alliance to a man she never met, all in an effort to protect our family. And Gemma, even when kidnapped, never lost her courage.

But me? I'm the invisible girl who everyone either forgets or doesn't pay attention to. I've gotten so used to living my life for myself that I haven't noticed anyone else's. How ironic is that?

I should go check on my mom and make sure she's ok. That's something I can do, at least.

I push myself up and limp inside, my leg on fire from the pain of landing on it. Gemma and Viktor have left now, leaving only Cecilia behind in the kitchen to do dishes. Antonio is probably in his room playing a video game while Mia is likely in the bathroom, lamenting over her pimples. As for the twins? Well, if they're not causing destruction, then that's a good day.

I don't see Franco, so he must be in his office. My *dad's* office. I've always resented Franco for thinking he could take my father's place when no one asked for Franco to be a second dad to us. In fact, I don't think I'm alone in wanting him gone. Time can't come fast enough for Antonio to take over, so Franco can move out.

Mom is in the living room, a towel pressed to her cheek.

"Mom?" I ask tentatively. She doesn't respond. Instead, she stares blankly in front of her. "Mom?" Still no answer. I swear, it feels like she ignores me on purpose. I try one more time, raising my voice. "Mom?"

She finally blinks and looks at me. "Oh, Francesca. I didn't see you there. Have you been there long?"

I stifle a sigh. “Not long. Are you ok?” I point at her cheek.

“Oh, this? It’s nothing.” She pulls the towel away, revealing a cheek that’s already bruising. “I was opening the bathroom cabinet and bumped my face.”

We both know that’s not true, yet I can’t seem to ask her about it.

“Right. Well ...” I shrug and limp out of the living room. God, my leg hurts.

Mom calls out to me. “Francesca, wait. There’s something we should talk about.”

“Yes?” I limp back to her. She doesn’t even notice.

“I do think it’s time you get married. You’re twenty now, so it’s a good age. But I don’t have time to find you a suitor.” Disappointment flares through me. She had the time for Emilia and Gemma. For Gemma, she threw her an entire party full of suitors. “I’m too busy with the twins right now, and with Antonio getting ready to take over, I just don’t have the time. I have other priorities.” I’m not sure my mom is aware how hurtful her words can be. “So, I had an idea.”

“Oh?”

“I think it would be a good idea if you go and stay with Emilia in LA. She can probably help you find a good husband. Sounds good?” She smiles. “Good.” I haven’t even answered.

I just nod. I do miss Emilia, so it’ll be nice to see her again, even though it hurts that my mom gives everyone but me attention. But I’m so used to it by now that I don’t cry about it anymore.

I start to walk out of the room when she frowns. “Did you hurt your leg?”

I’m honestly amazed she even noticed. “It’s not important.”

She looks relieved. “Good. I should go check on Cecilia with the dishes.” She walks past me without even looking at me.

I slump onto the couch, wincing as a sharp pain rips up my leg. Alone as usual. But at least I'm going to visit Emilia. That's a win in my eyes.

So, I force a smile onto my face and focus on the positive.

CHAPTER 2

Francesca

I leave for the airport this morning, and no one woke to say goodbye. I'm used to it by now. My siblings are busy with their own lives, and I'm ok with that. It would just be nice for my mom to say goodbye before I leave, but she doesn't even make the effort to come down and see me off.

I think back to a few days ago when I saw Franco hit her. I still haven't asked her about it. I want to make sure she's ok, but I keep holding back. It's cowardice. I just don't know how to talk to my mother.

I say a quiet goodbye to the house before meeting George outside. He's driving me to the airport. "Ready to go, Francesca?"

"I am, George."

He puts my bag away for me. "You know, I'm going to miss you."

"It's too bad you can't come with me, but you have your family here to be with."

We both get into the car and head for the airport. New York in the early morning hours is at its quietest, even though the occasional horn and roar of a garbage truck can be heard. The snow makes everything look pristine. I'll miss the cold. There's something very cozy about it. But LA will be my home now for some time—at least until I can find a suitable husband. Hopefully, Emilia can help me with that.

My older sister is probably the only person who has ever truly given me attention. It's easy to get along with her warm

nature. I'm not very good at talking to people, so another person's energy is important for me to be able to talk to them.

George lingers by the car after he drops me off at the airport. "Good luck, Mi—uh, Francesca." He pats my arm. "It was nice guarding you."

"Thank you." I take my bag from him. "You're a really good guard, George."

He shrugs. "I'm not sure how much I helped. You're fairly low maintenance. I just had to accompany you to all those museums." He chuckles. "Not a bad job, if you ask me."

Without thinking, I hug him. George startles before hugging me back. We pull apart, and he flushes, looking down. He clears his throat. "Well, have a nice trip, Francesca. I'll be here when you get back."

I wave goodbye as I head into the airport. Even this early in the morning, JFK is crowded. After checking my bag, I walk to security, and once I'm done, I head to my gate. I've never traveled by myself before. Only with my family. But now I'm heading on a journey into adulthood.

As the plane boards, a young boy runs past me, bumping into me as he goes.

"Jack!" a woman screams as she chases after her son. I watch, and as if in slow motion, As Jack looks back at his mom, he slams into a kiosk. He sprawls onto his back, groaning in pain.

His mom is several yards away, so I head over to Jack to make sure he's not seriously hurt. "Are you ok?" I ask him.

Jack, who can't be more than five, squints his eyes up at me. "I fell."

"I can see that. Do you need help?" I offer him my hand.

He takes it, and I pull him up. Jack continues to stare at me for a few moments before saying, "You're pretty."

"Uh, thanks." I've never had a five-year-old compliment me before. It's sweet.

His mom finally reaches us, looking relieved that her son is standing. “Jack.” She pulls him into a hug, her face burrowing into his hair. “You can’t run from me like that.” She glances at me, frowns, and pulls Jack away from me before hurrying down the corridor.

I shrug. I don’t expect thanks from anybody. I figure it’s good enough to do a good deed and keep my head down.

I get back in the line, which has grown, and wait my turn to get on the plane. A teenage girl steps in front of me, chewing gum and scrolling on her phone. She cut me in line, but I don’t say anything. If I were Gemma, I’d tell her off until she cried. But I’m not brave like her. My shyness can be crippling at times. So, I let the annoyance roll past me and focus on where I’m going. LA. Emilia. A potential new future.

When I’m on the plane, I head for my seat, only to discover someone else is already sitting there. Since it’s in first class, there are only two seats to a row. A woman with a toddler in the seat next to her. I double check my ticket to make sure I have the right seat. I do.

I’ll have to speak up. “Excuse me?” I say to the woman. She’s digging through a bag and pulling out toys that she tosses at the little girl. “Excuse me?”

She finally looks up at me. “What?”

I point. “You’re ... you’re in my seat.”

“No, I’m not.” She doesn’t even check her ticket or look confused.

“Uh, you are. This is my seat.” I show her my ticket.

“Oh.” She blows her bangs off her head. “Well, I have to sit next to my daughter. So, you can have my seat.”

“But ...” I clear my throat. “But I paid for this seat.”

“Well, I have to sit next to my daughter so you can have my seat.”

“And where is your seat?” At this point, I’m holding up the line, and the people behind me look incredibly annoyed to be standing and waiting.

She points to the economy part of the plane. “It’s the middle seat at the back of the plane.” I almost want to laugh. This woman wants me to trade my first-class seat for a middle seat at the back of the plane.

“Is there a problem here?” A flight attendant comes over, looking between the woman and me. The little girl is playing with a box of crayons.

“She’s in my seat,” I whisper.

“What was that?” she asks in a kind tone.

“She’s in my seat,” I repeat in a louder tone. Now, everyone is looking at me. I want to curl into a ball and never be seen again.

The flight attendant, Sarah, as her name tag reads, turns to the woman. “You’re going to have to move to your own seat, Miss.”

“But then I can’t sit next to my daughter. You have to understand. I need to sit next to her.”

“Do you think you can switch seats?” Sarah asks me.

“But ... that’s my seat,” I say lamely. “I reserved it.”

“But I need to sit with my daughter,” the woman says.

Sarah sighs, putting her hands on her hips. “Well, someone needs to move.”

All eyes turn to me. I want to object, but I don’t want to draw any more attention to myself, so I nod and turn to the woman. “What’s your seat number?”

Her eyes shine with glee as she rattles it off. And that’s how I end up at the back of the plane, in a middle seat, stuck between a man wearing horrible aftershave and a woman who insists on talking to me, even though all I want is to be left alone with my book.

LA IS SURPRISINGLY cold when I land. It's the winter, after all, but without all the snow, looks are deceiving. I wrap my jacket around myself, waiting for Emilia and Marco to pick me up. I wait and wait and wait.

Checking the time, it's well past the hour they were supposed to come for me. I try to keep my tears back. I'm just exhausted after traveling and dealing with all the people. It's so draining for me.

When another half hour passes, I decide to just get a taxi and head for Emilia and Marco's house. It takes another hour to get to their place, and once I see the familiar Spanish-style mansion, I feel instantly better. I can't wait to snuggle into my new bed with a good book about Greek sculptures.

I knock on the door when I arrive. A middle-aged woman answers. "Yes?"

"Uh, I'm Francesca. Is Emilia and Marco home?"

"Yes, they are. May I ask your business with them?"

"I'm Emilia's sister," I say with a frown. "I'm here to stay with them for a while."

She motions me inside. "I'll let them know you're here."

After a couple of minutes, Emilia comes down the stairs, looking happy but confused. "Francesca." She's heavily pregnant at eight months. It's her first baby, which means I'll be an aunt for the first time. Even as pregnant as she is, she still manages to look effortlessly beautiful, with her golden hair and glowing skin. "What are you doing here?" She hugs me. "Are you ok? You're not in danger, are you?"

I pull back. "Uh, didn't Mom tell you I was coming? She wants me to stay with you for a while. At least until you can help me find a suitable husband."

"Did she now?" Emilia shakes her head. "No. Mom must have forgot. I didn't know you were coming. Trust me. If I had, I would have made sure to pick you from the airport."

"She made it seem like she'd called to ask you guys."

“You know Mom. She can be forgetful. But no worries. I’m happy you’re here. We have plenty of space. Stay as long as you want.” She grabs my back from me.

“Should you be carrying that?”

Emilia waves her hand. “I’m pregnant. Not dead. You should hear Marco. He thinks I should rest in bed all day. Like that’s going to happen.” She grunts as she heads up the stairs. “Let me show you to your room.”

Marco’s mansion is just that—a mansion. It’s huge, with long twisting hallways and hundreds of rooms. I keep offering to carry my bag, but Emilia keeps insisting she can do it.

The room she puts me in is decorated with soft rose gold hues. It’s cozy enough for me to read in, which is perfect.

“Who was that at the door?” I ask.

“Our housekeeper, Hannah. She’s great.” Emilia grunts again as she lifts my bag onto the bed. “Now, I think we should chat and catch-up. I want to know how you’ve been.” She places a hand on her low back as she lowers herself onto the bed.

My mind immediately goes to Franco slapping Mom, but I can’t get the words out. What I saw terrified me. I’m not ready to speak about it just yet.

“The usual,” I say instead.

Emilia pats the spot next to her. “Tell me more. What book are you reading now?”

I huge grin crosses my face as I sit down and tell Emilia everything about several famous Greek sculptures from Ancient Greece. Emilia listens attentively. Trust my sister to make me feel seen. After I’ve exhausted myself with that, I ask her how she and Marco have been.

She rubs her stomach. “I’m a little nervous to become a mom. I hope I do a good job at it.”

“You were practically a second mom to us growing up. You’ll be a natural at it.”

Emilia watches me with a small smile on her face. “You’ve grown a lot, Franny.”

“I don’t think so.”

“No, you have. You’re not quite as shy as before.”

I huff as I look down at the bed. “I think I’m still plenty shy. Franco wants me to get married, and I don’t even know how to go about that. Who am I supposed to meet? Mom hasn’t given me any men to choose from. I’m not ready for this, Emilia. I’m not ready to be married.”

She squeezes my hand. “It’s ok. I’ll help you find someone. If Mom won’t, I will.”

“Emilia?” A deep voice sounds off. “Who are you talking to?” Marco, Emilia’s husband, enters the room and pauses when he sees me. With a deep scar across his face and a huge stature with broad shoulders, he makes for an intimidating sight. There’s also the fact that he’s a powerful mafia boss, which adds to the intimidation factor. I can see him looking at me and trying to remember which Moretti sibling I am. Granted, there’s eight of us, so I don’t blame Marco for needing to think about it.

“Francesca,” Emilia says, “will be staying with us.”

Remembrance dawns in Marco’s eyes. “Right. Francesca. Why will you be staying with us?”

Emilia makes a face. “My mother forgot to tell us she was coming. I’m supposed to help her find a husband.” Emilia rubs my arm. “In fact, I’m looking forward to it. I think it’ll be fun.”

“Huh. Ok, then.” Marco crosses his arms. “Well, any member of Emilia’s family is a member of mine, so you’re welcome to stay for as long as you want, Francesca. I know it will make Emilia happy.”

“It will.” Emilia wraps her arm around my shoulders. “I’ve missed you, Franny.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“Emilia,” Marco says. “Care to talk with me? There’s something we need to discuss.”

“Of course.” Emilia gives me a big smile. “Make yourself at home.” She joins Marco in the hallway, shutting my door behind her.

I’m sure they meant for their conversation to be private, but the walls are thin, and I can still hear them.

“Do you think it’s a good idea to be helping your sister find a husband when you’re pregnant,” Marco says. “You need to focus on the baby.”

“I can do both. My sister needs me, Marco.”

“Why can’t your mom help her?”

I frown as I listen. Marco may have welcomed me into his home, but his private words reveal something else.

“Because my mom tends to forget Franny is even alive. I’m the only one who seems to ever give her attention. She’s shy. She can be a ... little weird, but she just needs someone to help her.”

I flinch at my sister’s words. *I’m weird?* I never knew Emilia thought that about me. Sure, I prefer books to people, but that doesn’t make me weird. I can’t help it—the tears finally come.

Marco sighs deeply. “All right. Just don’t let her get in the way of you focusing on the baby. He’s what’s most important.”

“Or she,” Emilia says in a lighter tone. “We could be having a girl, Marco.”

“True. But I feel like it’s a strong boy.”

“We could just ask the doctor the sex.”

“No,” he says. “We should wait to know after the baby is born.”

I let my tears spill down my cheeks. I’m crying from the exhaustion of travelling, the energy drain of dealing with all those people, my mom forgetting to tell my sister I was

coming, and lastly, hearing the sister I've always looked up to calling me weird.

I'm used to being alone. I find it more of a comfort now. But I don't like feeling like an outcast within my own family. It hurts too much.

Emilia and Marco walk farther down the hallway, continuing their conversation. I was looking forward to settling in and continuing my book, but now I'm too upset. I can't just sit here.

So, I wipe my tears and leave the room, intent on checking out my new home for the next... however long until I find a husband, I guess. The mansion is easy to get lost in and that's what happens when I turn a corner and find I'm right back where I started. I keep trying until I find the stairs and head downstairs.

I turn another corner and bump into a man. His gaze is on his phone. "Oh, sorry," I whisper, stepping out of the way. He glances up at me, and I almost gasp at how handsome he is. With dark blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and a sculpted jaw, he reminds me of Grecian sculptures. He also looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place him.

His lips curl up into a nasty smirk before he looks me up and down. "And who are you?"

"I'm Francesca, Emilia's sister."

"Oh, you're one of the many Moretti's. I'm Leo, Marco's second in command." That's where I know him from. He was at Emilia and Marco's wedding years ago. He holds up his phone. "Wish I could stay and chat, but I have work to get to. I hate having to pass up the opportunity to talk to a beautiful woman."

I flush and look down.

"See you later, Francesca." His deep voice sends a shiver through me.

Ok. I've never had a man talk to me like that before. Granted, I'm normally in my room or at a museum, not exactly the most conducive places to meet men. After shaking myself,

I keep walking until I find the back door leading out to a gorgeous garden. Off to the left is a large pool. I go over to it and sit down, taking my shoes off and dipping my feet into the water.

Throwing my head back, I soak up the sun and remind myself to remain calm. My anxiety never helps me. I'm sure Emilia didn't mean to call me weird. Even though I want to ask her about it, I know I won't. My own limitations frustrate me.

"Whatcha doing?" Leo's voice startles me out of my reverie, making me yelp and fall forward, straight into the pool. The cold water makes me gasp and thrash around, seeking air. I scramble for the surface, but my jacket weighs me down. I struggle to take it off, and the longer I'm under water, the more I start to panic.

A pair of hands grab my wrists and pull me out of the water. I slump onto the tile, coughing and sputtering. Leo looks down at me with amusement.

"Not the strongest swimmer, huh?"

I scramble up to stand, feeling self-conscious as my clothes stick to my body. Given how Leo eyes me over, he notices, too. "You startled me. I thought you were busy with work."

"I was. But that was a while ago. I finished and came looking for you. I didn't mean to startle you."

I frown. How long was I out here for? I got lost in the peaceful tranquilly of the garden, the sun, and the softly rippling water of the pool. "It's ok."

"But maybe I should have meant it. I didn't know you were going to fall in and give me a good look at your body. If I'd known, I would've pushed you in myself."

"What?"

Leo chuckles, still giving me that rude smirk. "You have a fine body, Francesca." He whistles. "I could look at it for hours."

I step away from him, covering my body with my arms. “What do you want?” Normally, I would run, but there’s something about Leo that makes me want to stay and fight.

“You’re over eighteen, correct?”

“I’m twenty.”

“Whew.” He makes a show of wiping his forehead. “Good. I know Emilia has a lot of younger siblings, and I wouldn’t want to get into trouble. Granted, I love getting into trouble. Take off your jacket and show me what you’re working with.”

I tug my soaking wet jacket around myself. “No.”

“Fine. You’re loss. I’m great at making women feel good.” He winks.

I scrunch up my nose and walk around him. “No, thank you.” I can’t hurry away from Leo fast enough.

His laughter follows me as I run away.

CHAPTER 3

Leo

Francesca Moretti is a pretty little thing. I can't stop thinking about her pretty face as sit down in my brand-new therapist's office. Today is a special occasion. The therapist before me is Dr. Elizabeth Shay. In her fifties, she has a golden bob and a pearl necklace. She reminds me more of a country club trophy wife than a therapist. I chose her for a reason.

"Hello, Leo." She takes a seat across from me, her Prada heels crossed at her ankles. Her office smells faintly like vanilla. Must be used to calm the crazies who come in here. The thing is, I'm not crazy. I have a purpose. "Since today is our first session together, I thought you could tell me why you wanted to see me. What are you hoping to get out of therapy?"

"I need help. I'm struggling, you see, because I'm in need of a good woman."

Dr. Shay nods, keeping her expression neutral. "And what makes you feel like you need a good woman in your life?"

"I'm a bit of a womanizer." I wink at her. "Like your shoes by the way. And your hair. It reminds me of a sunset." She looks flattered, but I can tell she tries not to show it. "And I just feel like it's time for me to settle down, you know?"

"Why? What has prompted this change?"

"Because I'm not a good man."

She shifts in her seat, tapping her pen on her notepad. "How are you not a good man?"

“I like to fuck women and leave them. Call that what you will, but I’m thinking that’s not exactly healthy. But man, I love fucking women.” I stretch my arms overhead, giving Dr. Shay a good look at my midriff. I can tell she notices by how she shifts in her seat again. “I love hearing them moan when I fuck them with my mouth. The way they squeal when I thrust my cock into them. It’s my favorite thing to do, Doctor.”

She clears her throat while hiding her mouth under her hand. “Sex isn’t a negative thing, Leo. It can be healthy. What makes you think you have an unhealthy sex life? Why does that make you not a good man?”

“Because, Elizabeth.” I pause. “I can call you Elizabeth, can’t I?”

“If you want.”

“Great.” I take out a box of breath mints from my pocket and pop one into my mouth. “Because I have a bad habit of leaving them in my wake. You know, I give them a great night of sex, then never call them back. I think that kind of makes me an asshole.”

“Are you clear with these women about your intentions?”

“I mean, I don’t promise them the world or anything.” Actually, that’s a lie, but the good doctor doesn’t need to know about that. Just yet anyway.

“Then if you’re clear about your intentions, having a sex life isn’t a bad thing. Are you looking to settle down?”

“Maybe. Are you, Elizabeth?”

“Am I what?”

“Looking to settle down?”

“Oh.” She points at a ring on her finger. “I’m married. I am settled down.”

I lean forward, eyeing her over. “Ever think about having an affair with one of your clients?”

She’s silent for a moment as she rubs a hand over her neck. “That’s an inappropriate question, Leo. We’re here to talk

about you. Not talk about me.”

“But still. Have you? Because you’re sexy, doc. I’d fuck you.”

A strangled noise escapes her. “That’s enough about that now. Let’s get back to you. Why haven’t you settled down if that’s what you’re looking for?”

I shrug. “Just haven’t found the right woman yet. Could you be that woman, doc?”

“If you’re going to keep making inappropriate comments, Leo, I’m afraid we’ll have to cut this session short. Can we focus on you now?”

“You see, I was just thinking ...” I stand up and walk over to the bookshelf against the wall. “I’ve never fucked a woman in her fifties before. Women in their twenties? Easy. Thirties? Honestly, easier. Forties? Those women like to give me a hard time, but they eventually give in. But I’ve never fucked a woman older than that.” I turn to her. “Care to fix that problem for me?”

She stands up and rights her shirt, looking flustered. “I think you should leave now.”

“Fine.” I stalk over to her. “But first, give me a kiss.”

“No.”

“But if I’m no longer your client, it wouldn’t be inappropriate, now, would it?”

“But you are my client.”

“Not anymore.” I grab her face and kiss her. Dr. Elizabeth Shay resists for only a second before kissing me hungrily back. I’m not surprised. You see, I’ve done my research on the doc. I know she’s having marriage troubles and hasn’t had a good fuck for a long time. I’m ready to provide that for her. I also know she has a daughter who I’ve fucked. What can I say? I’m a fucked-up dude.

It doesn’t take long to fuck Dr. Shay on the sofa in her office. She’s a screamer, let me tell you.

Once we're done, Elizabeth lays on my chest, running her hand over my stomach. I'll give this to her—she's one sexy fifty-year-old woman. "Good thing you're not my client anymore," she says.

"Yeah, good thing." I grab my phone and send of a message.

Elizabeth looks up at me. "What was that?"

"Oh, nothing you need to worry about." Another lie. Soon, it will be something she needs to worry about.

It only takes about fifteen minutes of lying here with Elizabeth before she gets a phone call on her cell phone instead of her work phone. "It's my daughter. I need to get this." She answers it. "Honey, hello?"

"Mom?" I can hear the girl's voice on the other line. Cindy is her name, and I fucked her just last week. As a horny college girl, she was an easy lay. She loved putting on a show for me, and I was able to snap some nudes of her.

Elizabeth frowns. "You sound upset. Are you ok?"

"Mom, someone posted nudes of me online."

I smile.

Elizabeth starts getting dressed, not even looking at me. "Ok, honey. We'll deal with this. Do you know who did it?"

"Some guy I ... slept with. He has blond hair. Insanely hot." She cries harder. "Mom, he made me feel special. He told me my hair reminded him of a sunset."

Elizabeth freezes and turns slowly to face me, her eyes widening. "Do you know his name?"

"Leo something. That's it."

I get dressed, taking my sweet time, even though Elizabeth is shooting daggers at me.

"I let him take photos of me, Mom!" Cindy wails on the other line. "How stupid can I be?"

The message I sent? It was to one of my contacts. I had him post them everywhere online, then send Cindy a message, giving her my thanks. I like to hurt the women I fuck, and I always make sure they know it was me.

As I said, I'm a good man.

"I'm calling the cops," Elizabeth tells me.

"Tell Cindy I said hello," I say in a loud voice, knowing Cindy can hear me. "Actually." I grab the phone from Elizabeth who fights me for it, but I'm stronger than her. "Cindy? Hi, it's Leo. I just fucked your mom, and she loved it. Thought you should know."

Cindy gasps, but I don't hear the rest of her response because I hand the phone back to a stunned Elizabeth. I whistle as I walk out of her office.

"THAT WAS COLD, MAN," Henry says, taking a sip of his beer. We're at some dive bar Marco owns. The barstools are falling apart, and the bar is always stained with something sticky, but out of all of Marco's properties, this one is my favorite. It even beats out the nicer ones he owns. Henry is one of Marco's employees, just like me, but as Marco's second in command, I outrank every one of Marco's other employees. I have the job they all want and know they'll never get. "Cold." He laughs softly.

"What can I say? I love doing it. It's fun to mess with women like that."

"I get it." Henry smiles widely, showing off his insanely white teeth. Like, dude goes to the fucking dentist every week and uses whitening strips every day type of white. His tan skin and dark hair just make his teeth look even brighter. "If I had your charm, I'd fuck my way through every woman in this city."

"It's not my charm. Henry. It's my looks." I take a swig of my beer and dodge Henry's hand as it comes for the back of

my head.

“Ok, you fucking egotistical asshole. Don’t need to rub it in.” After taking another drink, he asks, “So, what was it like, fucking both mom and daughter?”

“It’s not like I did it at the same time.” He raises a curious eyebrow, and I relent. “Ok. The mother was better.”

Henry chuckles. “I’m sure she was. She has many more years of experience.”

“Mmm. I love a woman who knows what she’s doing.” As if on cue, a gorgeous woman with large tits eyes me from across the bar. I salute her with my drink. She smiles coyly back, taking a sip of her fruity cocktail.

“I bet,” Henry says. “But damn, dude. Fucking a virgin is a lot of fun, trust me.”

I shrug. “I’ve never done it.”

Henry spits out his drink. The bartender—some guy who thinks he’s hotter than he is—rolls his eyes and grabs a rag to wipe down the counter. “You’ve never fucked a virgin? Leo, you’re missing out man. You don’t even have to try in bed. They don’t know any better.”

“See, that’s the thing, Henry. I might be an asshole, but at least I like giving the women I fuck some enjoyment. I want them to like how I fuck them; otherwise, what’s the point?”

“To fuck,” Henry says like it’s obvious.

“Sure.”

Henry shakes his head. “I will say, even though it’s easy to not even try with a virgin, it’s damn hard getting one into my bed. They’re all prudes.”

“Mmm. Then maybe I need to try to fuck a virgin. I should find one who won’t give it up easy. Make it a challenge to seduce her.”

“Yeah, but who? We’re in LA. There aren’t many here.”

The image of a pretty face, surrounded by soft brown hair, with large innocent eyes fills my mind. “I might know

someone.”

“Who?”

I take a sip of my beer before setting it down slowly. “Francesca Moretti.”

Henry’s eyes widen. “Isn’t Marco’s wife a Moretti?”

“Yep. Francesca is Emilia’s sister. Apparently, she’s staying with them for who knows how long. I met her yesterday. It was brief. Fucking work got in the way. But I met her, and she’s cute, man. Too cute for her own good.”

“Those are the best types.” Henry rubs his hands together eagerly. “So, are you gonna try to fuck her?”

“Did you miss the part where I said she’s Emilia’s sister? Emilia fucking hates me. I’m pretty positive Marco has told her about my ... proclivities. A girl like Francesca is off-limits. Marco would probably kill me if I went after her.”

“That’s why you need to do it.”

I give him a look. “Seriously? Do you want me to die?” I point at him, narrowing my eyes. “Unless you do because you’re vying for my position.”

“Maybe you’re just chicken shit.”

“What?” Now it’s my turn to almost spit out my drink. “I am not chicken shit.”

“Do you want to make this interesting?” There’s a dangerous glee in Henry’s eyes. “How about we make a bet. You’re always looking for the next challenge. This could be the perfect one for you.”

“What kind of bet?” I hate to admit it, but Henry has piqued my interest. I can never resist a good bet.

“You seduce Francesca and take her virginity.” When the bartender glances over at us, Henry lowers his voice. “And if you fail, you give me your position as second in command. Step down and let me have it.”

I scoff. “And if I win?”

“Uh, you get to fuck the forbidden fruit, dude. Shouldn’t that be a good enough win?”

“Nope. I want your car.”

Henry blinks. “My car?”

“You have a sweet car. I want it. If I fuck Francesca, then I get your car, and—”

Henry groans. “I thought you just wanted my car!”

“Well, there’s more. I also want you to make yourself look like a fool in front of Marco.”

“Why?”

“Because that’ll distract him from finding out the truth, which is that I fucked his wife’s younger sister. His wife’s very off-limits sister. So, you have to make yourself look stupid in front of him, so Marco doesn’t even think to look my way. Do we have a deal?” I hold out my hand.

Henry hesitates. “How do we even know she’s a virgin? If she’s not, then it’s all a moot point.”

“Girls like her, they’re virgins. Those Moretti girls are raised Catholic and are expected to wait for their wedding nights. Which will make this challenge even harder.”

Henry grins wickedly. “Ok, then. Any way to make sure you lose.” He shakes my hand. “There should be a set time for this, though. You don’t get endless time here.”

“Fine. How long?” My beer is sweet on my tongue, even sweeter now that I have this game plan.

“Let’s say ... two months. I’ll be generous. I don’t think it’ll be easy to get to her so you have some time. But if you lose ...”

“I know, I know. I’ll step down. Which is why I won’t lose. I’ve worked hard to become Marco’s second-in-command. I’m not just giving that up.”

“No. But you may be giving up your life for this bet. So, cheers.” He clinks his beer with mine.

Henry has a point, but that's why I never lose. I love a good challenge, and this is the ultimate one.

My gaze returns to the large breasted woman across the bar. She's practically eye-fucking me. Well, I can't seduce Francesca tonight, so I might as well have more fun with another woman. I start to approach her when a blonde girl bursts into the bar. Oh. It's Cindy.

When she sees me, her eyes narrow into slits. "How could you? Posting my nudes online?" She shoves me in the chest. Large-chested woman sees and turns away. Damn. Cindy just fucked over my chances of getting another good fuck in tonight. "You need to take them down. Now!"

"Uh ... no."

She sputters. "You have to. This will ruin my entire life."

"Then maybe you should've thought about that before letting me take naked photos of you."

Her jaw drops. "I'm the victim here. Not you. You don't get to blame this on me."

"Cindy." I grab her arms, but she wrenches away from me. "It's what I do. Accept it." I pat her on the arm before walking around her. Henry laughs behind me. I approach the other woman and give her my most charming smile. "Don't mind what she said back there. She's crazy. How about you and me get out of here."

She starts eye-fucking me again. "I'm Lucy."

"And I'm whatever you want me to be. Just for tonight, though."

"Tonight it is." She takes my hand, and we get out here, leaving behind a laughing Henry and an outraged Cindy.

Turns out, Lucy is disappointing in bed. All the breasts in the world can't make up for her bring a pillow princess. She does

none of the work, and I pull out all the stops to impress her, but she just looks bored the entire time.

Ouch.

I look up from between her legs. “Not enjoying this, baby?”

“I am,” she claims before dropping silent.

“Ok. Well, if you’re not liking it, then I should just stop.” I sit up, but Lucy grabs my head and shoves me back down. Ok, so I guess she does like it.

Lucy doesn’t become more vocal, but at least I know she’s enjoying it. I lay beside her once we’re done fucking, both of us breathing hard and covered in sweat. Lucy immediately goes on her phone.

I’m gonna have to find a way to hurt her later on. That’s where the real fun is. I’ll have to think about it. The perfect plan doesn’t just come to me in a matter of hours. I say goodbye to Lucy and head out.

On my drive home, I think about Francesca. I’m going to ruin the poor innocent girl, and she’s won’t know what to do with herself once I’m done with her. Marco will definitely be pissed with me. That’s why he *cannot* find out. He only tolerates my behaviors toward women because of how good I am at my job, but this is something I know he won’t excuse.

The memory of my father slapping my mother across the face hits me, almost making me slam on the breaks. The car behind me honks their horn and speeds around me.

Where did *that* memory come from? I haven’t thought about my parents in years.

The look of fear on my mom’s face. The anger on my dad’s face. The red welt on her cheek. The way she asked me for help, and I—no. I can’t think about that. That memory needs to stay away.

I push it from my mind and instead focus on the image of Francesca’s face. She’s my next challenge.

This will be interesting, to say the least.

CHAPTER 4

Francesca

My father, Riccardo Moretti, knew how to light up a room. When he was home, that is. Most days, he'd be busy with work, but on the odd day he'd have off, he'd make sure to spend it with my siblings and me.

I was never forgotten when it came to him. The last memory I have of him still sticks with me to this day. I was fourteen at the time.

He was in the kitchen, trying to pour himself a glass of orange juice, but his hands were shaking too much. Riccardo looked years younger than he really was, but at that moment, he seemed to age twenty years.

No one else was in the there at the time, so I approached him, offering to help pour his juice. He gave me a kind smile. "No, Fran. I need to do this. I can't have you and the rest of the family doing everything for me. I'm still the man of the house. I need to act like it."

I rested my hand on his, and his hand instantly stopped shaking. "Dad, let me help you."

After looking at me for a moment, he relented. "All right. Thank you, honey." He shuffled over to the table, and every step looked painful. I wanted to tell him everything that was on my mind—how I loved him and wanted him to get through this—but my throat choked up.

He watched me over the rim of his glass as he took a sip. "You need to be brave for me when I'm gone."

“Why are you talking like you’re going to die?” I could barely get the words out. They hurt my throat.

“Because I’m going to die, Fran. Soon. My time is coming. I know I’m not around a lot, but I’m an observant man. You get lost in the chaos of this family. You need to stick up for yourself once I’m gone. I won’t be here to do it for you.”

I couldn’t respond because tears were falling down my face, and my throat was closed up from the force of the sobs coming out of me.

He reached across the table and grabbed my hand. “I have an idea. For today, let’s go to Coney Island. Just the two of us.”

“Can you handle that?” I sniffled.

“I’m Riccardo Moretti. I can handle anything.” Even though he struggled to get up, he still did it. He didn’t tell anyone else where we were going. On the drive to the theme park, Dad and I talked the whole way there.

“What’s your new interest now? Last month, it was Picasso.”

“I just discovered Frida Kahlo, and I’m in love.”

He laughed that boisterous laugh of his that always made me feel better. “What’s not to love? I remember learning about her in school. Glad to see you taking an interest in all different kinds of art. You inspire me, little sweet.”

I beamed under his praise. He knew exactly what to say to make me feel seen.

The only issue was that good things must come to an end.

When we got to the parking garage near Coney Island, Dad received a phone call from Mom. “Where are you?” She sounded panicked on the other end.

“I’m spending a day with Francesca at Coney Island.”

“What? Why?” Her words made me flinch. “You should be back home, resting. You could get hurt. Francesca can’t take care of you. Come home now.”

I wanted to shout at my mom that I'm more capable than she thinks but, as usual, the words didn't come.

Dad sighed, bowing his head. "You're going to worry until I return home, correct?"

"Of course. So, come home, Ric."

"Ok, Giulia. I'll come home." And just like that, I lost all my hope of having a nice day with my father. "Time to go home," he said to me, pulling out of the parking garage. I could just see the Ferris wheel in the distance as we drove away.

Mom was livid when we got back home. "You can't just go off on your own anymore, Ric. You could have gotten hurt."

"I'm still moving." He gently took her shoulders and kissed her on the head. "I'm not gone yet."

Mom softened. "I know. And I need you here for as long as possible." She helped him into the living room, not even acknowledging me. I stood in the archway, unsure what to do.

Everything took a turn for the worse after that.

Dad passed away in the night. I'd never see him again, never hear his laugh or receive his praise. He was gone.

Mom was a wreck, crying and crying and crying. I kept my distance from her while Emilia did everything she could to comfort her. I figured Mom wouldn't even notice I was alive since Dad was gone, but she found me in my bedroom and said something to me I've never forgotten.

"He shouldn't have taken you out yesterday. Now he's dead. He was too sick. Do you understand? He was too sick!"

Emilia came running and took Mom by the shoulders, leading her away from my room while giving me a sympathetic look. All I could do was sit there in shock.

Was I somehow responsible for my dad's death? He wanted to have one last day with me, but that was probably too much strain on him, and he took a turn for the worse.

Nothing was ever quite the same between my mom and me after that.

I CAN'T GET Emilia's words out of my head. *She can be a little weird ...*

When Emilia comes to check on me, it's all I can think about.

Yesterday, after I came back inside soaking wet, Emilia saw me and rushed over to me. "Why are you wet? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine. I just want to change. I fell into the pool," I admitted, feeling sheepish.

"Oh. How did that happen?"

"I was ... startled. By, uh, Leo?"

Emilia frowned and looked around me as if was searching for the man in question. "Leo made you fall into the water?"

"No. He just startled me, and I fell in." I don't know why I was defending him. I didn't like him after his gross comments.

"Mmm." Emilia looked me over before nodding. "Ok. Well, just keep your distance from him. I'll have Marco tell Leo to stay away from you. I don't trust him when it comes to women."

"Ok. Thanks." I walked past her, desperate to get into a hot shower and wash the day away.

Now, Emilia waddles into the room, one hand on her low back, another on her stomach. "How are you feeling today?"

I stand up, feeling self-conscious as I set my book down on the nightstand. "Better." *She's a little weird ...*

"So, I thought we could spend the day together. I haven't had a good sister bonding day in a long time."

“Thanks, Emilia, but ... I think I’d prefer to be alone today.” My sister’s words hurt me, and I can’t stand to look at her all day and pretend as if they don’t. The thing is, I’m never going to tell her how I really feel. I don’t want to make things awkward between us.

“Oh.” She frowns. “Are you sure? I thought we could go get our nails done or something. I can’t really move around a whole ton.” She nods at her large belly, laughing.

She’s really trying, which makes it even harder on me to say no. “I appreciate it, but maybe another time. Ok?”

A flash of hurt passes through her eyes—or at least I think so. It’s gone in a matter of seconds before she smiles. “Ok, fine. I’ll leave you to it. I’ll just be downstairs, resting.” She pats my arm, waiting for me to respond, but when I don’t, she just nods and leaves the room.

I slump onto the bed, desperately wishing I could go back in time and agree to spend the day with my sister. Why are things like that so hard for me? Why can’t I just be normal and have no issues with talking to people?

I spend the rest of my day, alone. Normally, I would have no issue with this, but today, it makes me feel sadder than I’ve felt in a long time.

I FORCE myself to join Emilia and Marco for dinner when the time comes. They’ve let me stay in their house. I need to show them my gratitude.

I freeze when I reach the foyer and see Leo coming into the house. I try to walk past him without him noticing, but he calls out to me. Why is it that I’m normally ignored, but the one time I actually want to be, the person I don’t want to talk to notices me?

With a deep breath for courage, I turn to face Leo. “Hello.”

“Trying to sneak away from me?” He saunters up to me with a charming smile. “I have to say, I’m offended. I thought

you Moretti girls had more manners than that.”

“Sorry,” I apologize instinctually.

He leans in closer, and I resist the urge to step back. “You don’t actually have to apologize for that. In fact, I should be the one apologizing. My comments to you yesterday were rude. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. You’re a guest here. Shit, you’re Marco’s family now. So, I’m sorry.”

I don’t know what to say. He sounds sincere, and I always try to forgive and forget. Key word—*try*.

Leo steps back, chuckling softly. “You look like a deer in headlights. Literally.” His eyes narrow. “Do I scare you?”

“No,” I squeak out. Shoot. Ok, maybe Leo does intimidate me a little bit.

“That didn’t sound convincing.”

I point toward the dining room. “I’m going to have dinner, so ...”

“So ... mind if I join you? Or do you prefer that I leave you alone?”

My hands flop at my sides. I’ve never been this hyperaware of my body movements before. There’s something intense about Leo’s gaze that makes me sense everything within and outside of myself.

“Aren’t you supposed to stay away from me?” I ask.

He leans against the wall, looking the picture of confidence. “Why would I stay away from you?”

“Because ...”

His eyes light up. “Your sister. She told you to stay away from me, right?”

With a shrug, I nod.

“Typical. Emilia doesn’t like me. But that has nothing to do with us.” He stalks closer to me, and this time, I take a step back. Leo notices and a dark grin spreads across his face. “I think you’re afraid of me, Francesca.”

Before I can even think of a response, Emilia comes down the stairs and calls Leo, drawing his attention away from me. The moment his eyes are off me, it's like I can breathe again.

“Leo, what are you doing here?” Emilia asks, grunting as she reaches the final step. “It's late. Are you here for Marco? He's in his office,” she says pointedly.

Leo smiles softly as he looks at her, but she continues to stare him down. He huffs. “I can tell when I'm not wanted. I'll just go see Marco now.” He gives me a wink on his way past, which makes me flush.

Emilia watches him leave with a hard look, then turns to me. “You ok?”

“Why wouldn't I be?”

“Was Leo bothering you?”

Yes. “No.”

Emilia lopes her arm through mine, and together, we walk into the dining room, where Hannah is laying out food. “How was your day?”

“I mostly read. You?”

“I mostly slept.” She grunts as she takes her seat. “God, being this pregnant kind of sucks. I can barely move.”

The chatter of voices can be heard in the hallway coming towards, and moments later, Marco and Leo walk into the dining room, with Marco going straight to Emilia and kissing her on the head. For such a big, muscular, scary looking man, Marco is really a softie when it comes to Emilia.

Leo sits beside me.

“What are you doing?” Emilia asks him as Leo makes a big show of grabbing a dinner roll and taking a huge bite of it.

“Leo invited himself to dinner,” Marco explains, keeping his hand on Emilia's back as he takes his eat. Marco and Emilia share a moment as they look at each other. After a beat, Emilia nods.

“Just be polite,” she tells Leo.

“When am I not?” He throws the roll into the air and catches it with a cheeky grin.

Marco snorts but doesn’t say anything.

We all dig into the food Hannah made. Roast chicken, asparagus, and a simple salad. I take small bites while Leo practically funnels food into his mouth like he might die if he doesn’t eat fast enough.

I’m so aware of his body next to mine that it makes it hard to eat. Leo has a dangerous air about him that both excites and terrifies me.

“How are you enjoying this illustrious estate?” Leo asks. It takes me a second to realize he’s talking to me.

“It’s a beautiful house,” I offer. I turn to Marco and Emilia. “Thank you for letting me stay with you.”

“You don’t have to thank us,” Emilia says as she takes a sip of water. “You’re my sister. You’re always welcome.” *She’s a little weird ...*

I force the words from my head. Emilia has always been there for me and is there for me now. I can’t be mad at her for something she said to her husband in private.

“You know, when I first met Emilia,” Leo says after swallowing a bite of food, “I thought she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.”

“Careful, Leo,” Marco warns.

He holds up a finger. “But that was until I met another Moretti sister.” I can feel his eyes on me, but I refuse to look at him.

Marco tosses down his napkin. “Leo, enough. You’re making Francesca uncomfortable. Keep your thoughts to yourself. Understood?”

Leo leans back in his seat, not at all affected by his boss’ order. “Understood. No more comments from me.”

“Thank god for that,” Emilia teases.

The rest of the meal goes by without Leo commenting about me or my appearance. I can't tell if he likes me or if he's just messing with me. Marco and Leo turn to talk about business, which I'm grateful for. It means I can eat my dinner in peace without having to talk.

Once dinner is done, Marco walks Leo to the front door. Marco and Emilia tell me they're heading to their room for the night, and I think the coast is all clear to go to my room when Leo's voice calls out to me.

He's outside the house, looking through the window. What the ...?

"Francesca." I can just barely make out his voice through the window. I should keep on walking, but curiosity gets the better of me.

I open the door, and Leo grabs my hand, tugging me outside. I pull away instantly, even though his hand on mine feels nicer than I want to admit.

"Did you need something?" I ask.

"I just wanted to see you again." He leans against the door, preventing me from leaving. I can't tell if it's deliberate or not. "I didn't get to say goodnight."

I frown. "Well, goodnight." I take one step toward the door when he gets in my way. Ok, so I guess it is deliberate.

"Just one question, and then I'll go. Ok?"

"What is it?"

"Now, you have to be honest, all right?"

I stifle a sigh. "Ok. I'll be honest."

"Do you find me handsome?"

My mouth practically drops open. I didn't expect that sort of question. "What?" I squeak.

"Do you find me handsome?"

I thought he looked like a Greek sculpture the first time I saw him, so I'd say yes, I find him very handsome. But how

can I tell him that? But I promised to be honest.

My cheeks burn as I look away from him. “Uh, I mean ...”

“It’s ok. You can tell me. I won’t tell anyone else what your answer is.” I still don’t respond. “Will it help if I tell you what I think? I think you’re beautiful. Honestly. I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I just needed you to know that.”

He truly thinks I’m beautiful? No man has told me that before. I mean, I’m normally alone with a book, so there haven’t been any opportunities for someone to tell me that. *If* anyone has ever thought of me that way before, that is. I know how easy it is to get lost in the shadows of Emilia and Gemma. Both my older sisters are stunning as well as outgoing. My shyness makes me invisible most of the time.

And yet, Leo sees me.

Why does he see me?

“Why do you like me?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Well, as I said, you’re beautiful.” He stands there, looking so confident and at ease with his statement. But it feels wrong to me.

Sure, I’m flattered to be told by a man as handsome as Leo that I’m beautiful. But it feels so artificial the more I think about it. I love to engage my mind. I want Leo to see that part of me and find it beautiful.

The kicker is, for him to see that part of me, I have to actually talk to him and not run away and hide. And that’s incredibly hard for me.

“Leo, thank you,” I finally say, “for the compliment.” A smug grin spreads across his face. “But I want you to leave me alone.” His smile turns to a confused frown in a matter of seconds.

“Wait. What?”

I push past him back into the house.

“Why?” he asks. It looks like Leo’s never been rejected in his life before. It’s honestly kind of empowering to be the one

to do it.

“Because I’m more than how I look.”

“Then let me get to know you.”

I hesitate. Dang it. I should have just walked away.

Leo leans in through the doorway, desperation in his eyes.
“I want to get to know you, Francesca. Let me.”

“Why? And don’t say because I’m beautiful.” I don’t know where my voice is coming from. I think there’s just something about Leo that makes me feel braver than I normally am.

“Why not? Most women love to be told they’re beautiful.”

“Do they really? Or do you just not go past the surface level? I’m not interested in talking about looks, ok? If you want to talk to me, then make it more than that.”

Leo looks so surprised I almost want to laugh.

I walk away before I can put my foot in my mouth and make an embarrassment of myself. After I walk up the stairs, I glance back and see Leo is still standing there, looking like his world has just been blown up.

CHAPTER 5

Leo

“Who doesn’t love being told their beautiful?” I ask, gripping my beer.

Henry snickers beside me. “I guess your usual charms won’t work on her. You’ll have to think outside the box with this one.” He motions for the bartender to send another beer his way.

“Francesca is a mystery, man.” I shake my head as I take a sip of my drink. “I don’t understand her.”

“Well, you haven’t really tried yet. You’ve had what? One conversation? And you expected the girl to just fall into your arms?” Henry snorts, grabbing the beer the bartender hands him. “Maybe you’re not as smart as I thought you were.” A woman across the bar throws a smile in Henry’s direction. “Listen, man. I have a beautiful woman eyeing me up, so I’m gonna talk to her instead of listening to you whine about Francesca.”

“I’ll have to think of a way to seduce her that doesn’t make her run from me.”

Henry pats my back. “You do that.” He saunters over to the woman, leaving me alone.

Fine. I’m determined to win this bet, but Francesca is already proving different from a lot of the women I typically go after. I have a type—easy to get into bed and screw over. Francesca won’t be easy, so I need to woo her. Laying my charm on too thick will just scare her away.

I need to be the perfect gentleman for her to open up to me. Emotionally and physically. Because, for a girl like Francesca, the two are inextricably linked.

Which gives me my first idea.

I show up at Marco's house the following day with a bouquet of flowers in my hand. Roses, of course. What woman doesn't love roses?

Hannah answers the door, giving me a disapproving look. I'm sure Emilia has told the housekeeper all about my womanizer ways, but who cares? Hannah isn't the one I'm interested in fucking.

"Yes? Mr. Aldi didn't tell me you were coming over today."

"That's because I'm not here to see Marco. Can you let Francesca know I'm here?"

She makes a big show of sighing but nods and walks away. A couple of minutes later, Francesca shows up, alone, I notice. I don't need big sister Emilia getting in the way of my plan.

"Hi," she says, not stepping outside to join me but not immediately running away either.

"Hello." I make sure to deepen my voice. Women love that. "These are for you." I thrust the bouquet at her.

She jerks back, not taking the roses. "What for?"

"For you?" I wiggle them. She still doesn't take them.

Francesca looks at the roses, then at me, then back at the roses before smiling softly and finally grabbing the bouquet. "Thank you." She sniffs them.

"So, did I do good or what?"

"I appreciate the roses, Leo. But if you'd asked me, you'd know I prefer lilies."

I frown. "But ... all women love roses."

"Have you asked every woman in the world if they love roses?"

Shit. This is not going how I expected. Time to change tactics. “Ok, then. Fine. You’re right. I haven’t. I assumed, and clearly, it made an ass out of me.” She smiles at that. “I should have asked you what type of flower you like. Next time, I’ll bring lilies.”

Glancing over her shoulder like she’s checking on something, Francesca quickly turns back to me and steps outside. I don’t move. Her scent is intoxicating, like a mixture of warm vanilla and the smell of books.

“Why did you get me flowers?” she asks. “No one has ever gotten me flowers before.”

“Then those other guys were idiots.” I stuff my hands in my pockets, putting on my typical “I-don’t-give-a-fuck” attitude. Drives women wild.

She flushes. “I normally spend my day with books, so ...”

“So, there aren’t any other guys.”

She ducks her face into the flowers, not making eye contact. That’s a shame. I’m great at the eye-contact-game. Makes it hard for women to resist me when they’re looking into my baby blues. “Do ...” She clears her throat. “Do you have a favorite flower?”

I start to laugh when Francesca looks up, and I realize she’s being serious. “Uh, hmm.” My laughter dies. I’m about to tell her I’m a man and what man has a favorite fucking flower? But I stop myself. I can use this as an opportunity to draw her in. “Lilies.”

“Really?” There’s hope in her eyes that speaks to her innocence.

“Yep. I love how they ... smell.”

She smiles slightly. “You don’t know anything about lilies, do you?”

“You got me.” I give her my most charming smile. By how the pink in her cheeks deepens, I know it has an effect on her. “I was just trying to impress you.”

“Well, lilies are my favorite flower because they’re hard to grow. They only bloom for a short while, but that makes them even more magical when they do. It makes the moment feel more special.” She picks off one rose petal and holds it in her hand. “Roses are beautiful, too. But they’ve never really spoken to me. They feel too ... manufactured.”

I lean against the wall, the smooth stone cool against my skin. “Manufactured how?”

“Oh.” She flutters her hand by her face. “It’s not important. I don’t want to bore you.”

“You’re not boring me.” And I mean it. This is probably the longest conversation I’ve had with a woman that didn’t include the topic of getting naked and fucking right away. It’s ... refreshing.

“Roses are used as gifts for all women. There’s nothing special about that. No individuality. As women, we’re all different, and we all like different things. I think it’s important for someone to realize that. Especially if he brings roses as a gift.” She can’t meet my eyes, so it takes me a second to realize she’s teasing me. Who knew Francesca had it in her?

I lean in close to her. Francesca looks up, startled, her eyes big and wide, but she doesn’t pull back. “Next time, I’ll bring lilies. I promise.”

“Um ...” Her lips part, and all I can think about is kissing her. How would she react? Would she be tentative or secretly wild?

“Franny?” Emilia’s voice interrupts the moment, making Francesca back away from me. Damn. I was so close to getting a kiss. My seduction will take longer than I thought.

Emilia steps outside, freezing when she sees me. “Leo. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to see Marco.”

“Well, Marco is in his office,” she says pointedly. “Not out here with my sister.”

“Careful, big sis,” I say. “I haven’t done anything wrong. I was just giving Francesca some flowers. I wanted to welcome her because I know she’ll be staying for a while. I’ll go see Marco now.” I try to walk past Emilia, but she grabs my arm.

“You be careful, Leo,” she warns.

I lean in so only Emilia can hear me, even though Francesca is watching us with wide eyes. “Last I checked, your sister is twenty. There’s nothing wrong about talking with her. We good?”

Emilia sighs and lets me go. “Fine.”

“Great.” I throw a cheeky grin in Francesca’s direction, which promptly makes her stick her face back in the bouquet of roses before I head off to see Marco.

I can hear Emilia asking Francesca about me, but I’m too far away to hear Francesca’s response. I need to be more careful with my seduction. Emilia has her eyes on me and won’t let me get too close to her sister. And I can’t tell Marco what I’m up to because he’ll definitely never allow it.

“Knock, knock,” I announce, walking into Marco’s office. Other than Emilia, I’m the only person on this planet who can enter his office without asking permission.

Marco flicks his eyes at me from the paper in his hand. “Leo. I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“You know me. I love to go above and beyond.”

“Well, since you’re here, I do have a job for you.”

I slap the back of the leather chair across from Marco’s desk. “Sign me up.”

“I think one of our guys might be stealing from us. I’m not sure who, though. I’ve just noticed, going through our payments, that we’re missing a little bit of money from the Velvet Lounge. Go talk to the manager and see if he’s noticed any of my guys skimming from the top.”

“Will do, boss.”

Before I can walk out of the room, Marco says my name. “And Leo, if you try anything with my sister-in-law, you’ll be in trouble.”

Goosebumps prickle at the back of my neck. “I’m not trying anything, Marco.”

He watches me intently for a moment before nodding. “Good. Emilia just told me some things, but if you’re leaving Francesca alone, then we have nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll head over to the Velvet Lounge now.” I hurry out of his office before he can say anything else. I don’t need to be castrated before I get the chance to fulfill my challenge.

The Velvet Lounge is one of Marco’s more upscale nightclubs, and it’s swarming with people ready to blow money on overpriced drinks. I walk through the throngs of people to the back of the club to find the manager, Jerry. A stout man with a full head of thick black hair, Jerry looks more like a mobster than Marco or I do.

“Hello, Jerry,” I say in my warmest voice as his gaze jerks up from where he was looking at his lap.

“Oh, Leo. Uh.” The sound of someone banging against the desk makes me chuckle. I can just make out the legs of a woman from behind the desk.

“Getting a blowjob, Jerry?”

He pushes the woman away from him, and she stands up, looking disheveled and wiping at her mouth as she hurries out of the room. I give the woman, who’s young, blonde, and pretty, a wink as she walks past. She smiles demurely before leaving.

“So, Jerry.” I smack my hands on his desk, making him jump. “Notice anything ... fishy lately?”

“Fishy?”

“Like someone stealing from the club.”

“What?”

I lean in close to him while he tries and fails to straighten his tie. “You’re the manager here. All the money goes through you before it gets to Marco. So, if you’ve noticed anyone skimming from the top, it’s best if you tell me now.”

“I swear, Leo. I haven’t seen anyone. I swear!”

“Hmm.” I stare Jerry down until he starts to sweat, but he doesn’t tell me anything more. I sniff. “Fine. If you say so. But keep an eye out, will you? Anything at all, you tell me.”

“I promise. I promise.”

“Good.” I pat Jerry on the cheek, which only serves to make him look like he’s about ready to piss himself. “Have a great evening, Jerry.”

Instead of heading back home, I decide to spend some time at the club, getting a drink and dancing with the first cute girl I see. It doesn’t take me long to find a woman who’s practically eye-fucking me. I ask her to dance.

But after grinding it out with her, I get bored. Francesca is my main challenge right now. I don’t have time for another. So, I bid the woman farewell and head out.

But as I leave, I bump into Henry at the door.

“Leo!” He gives me a bro-hug. “I thought you were on your way to seducing Francesca.” Behind him is the woman from the bar earlier. I guess they’re continuing their party.

“I was, but those things take time.”

“Remember, not too much time. You have less than two months to go.”

“Which means I still have more than plenty of time to fuck her.” I nod at the woman with him. “You have tonight yourself.”

“I most certainly will.” Henry throws his arm around the lady as they walk into the club, laughing as they go.

I TRY a different tactic with Francesca the next day. Flowers again, but this time, lilies. And chocolate. Seriously, who dislikes chocolate?

I also have one other surprise I know is a risk, but Henry's reminder last night was a kick in the butt. I need to get things moving faster.

Hannah looks even more annoyed with me when she answers the door and somehow even more annoyed when I ask for Francesca again.

But just like yesterday, Francesca meets me, just her—no overbearing sister present.

“Ta-da!” I present her with the lilies, and Francesca looks so touched I almost feel bad about what I'm doing with her. Almost.

“Lilies. Thank you.” She takes them instantly and inhales them deeply. “This means a lot.”

“And these.” I give her the fancy chocolates. “Have no clue if they're any good, but I figured, chocolate is chocolate, right?” I keep the other box behind my back.

She smiles as she takes the gift. “I don't understand why you're going to all these lengths to give me things.”

“Maybe it's because I like you.”

“You don't even know me.”

Feeling bold, I step inside the house, standing so close to Francesca I can feel the heat coming off her. “I know you like lilies because they're special to you. I know you're shy.” She blushes. “And that you're hard to read. Which, honestly, is tough for me.”

“How so?”

“Because I'm used to reading people, but you're not exactly an open book, Francesca. And I also know I like how your name sounds on my tongue. It just rolls right off. Francesca.”

She tightly grips the chocolates to her chest and focuses on the bouquet of lilies. “I don’t know anything about you.”

“You know I’m persistent.”

She huffs. “I guess.”

“Fine.” I step back. “Ask me anything you want to know.”

She’s quiet for a moment before asking, “What’s your favorite hobby?”

“Scaring people.” I wiggle my fingers at her and make a ghostly noise. Francesca can’t hide her smile.

“No, really.”

“I guess I’d say ...” Seducing women and then leaving them in the dust. Shit. Well, I can’t tell her that. So, I go to the next true thing. “I like to hike. There’s a lot of good hiking spots right outside the city. It’s a nice way to clear the head and stay in shape.”

“That sounds nice. I really love museums. I haven’t had the chance to go to any yet here, but I can’t wait. My personal favorites are anything to do with art.”

“Isn’t that what most museums are about?”

“You’d be amazed at how many different museums there are. You can find almost any topic in any kind of museum.”

“Why does the fact that you love museums not surprise me?”

She flushes again, ducking her head into the lilies. “Some people think it’s boring, but museums are my favorite thing on this planet.”

“Your interests aren’t boring, Francesca.”

She jerks her head up. “Really?”

“Who told you they were?” I reach out and trace my finger over the back of her hand. She pulls away, and I drop my hand.

“Most people don’t care. I’ve just grown to accept it.”

I give her my most piercing look. “I care.”

She inhales deeply, looking like she might cry. She really is a mystery to me. Time to give her what I really came here for.

“I also have one more gift.” I hand her the gold box, and Francesca takes it slowly. “But don’t open it until you’re alone.”

She freezes. “Why?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.” I straighten up and head for the door. “I better go before your sister sees me and whacks me with a broomstick.”

Francesca smiles, but I still haven’t gotten a full-on laugh from her yet. There’s still time. I whistle as I leave her to her present. I’m sure it’ll surprise her, hopefully in the best way possible.

As I drive home, another memory of my parents invades my mind. I have to slam on the breaks and pull over to prevent running into the person in front of me. Why the hell am I thinking about my parents lately? First, I was thinking about how cute Francesca looked in her dress this afternoon, and now, I’m thinking about the day my dad slammed his fist into my mom’s face.

I was a kid when it happened. Kindergarten, I think. I just remember I was sitting at the kitchen table with my mom.

She set a plate filled with crackers before me, telling me to eat my snack. “Dinner won’t be ready for a few more hours, honey.” She ran her hand over the back of my head, smiling down at me with her calm eyes that everyone told me were just like mine. With her blonde hair, she glowed in the sunlight that entered the room. Like a halo around her, she was my personal angel.

“Thank you,” I told her, stuffing a handful of crackers into my mouth.

“You’re my sweet boy, Leo.” She leaned down to kiss my head when the front door banged open. We both jerked up as my dad stormed into the room, reeking of alcohol.

Mom pushed me behind me as she carefully approached my dad. “Tom, where have you been? You’ve been gone for the past day.”

“Stop nagging me, Kate,” he growled as he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer, gulping it down in one go. Mom glanced at me, worry in her eyes. I slunk down into my seat. For some reason, I didn’t want my dad to see me.

“Tom, you’re drunk. Why don’t you go lie down?”

“*Why don’t you go lie down?*” he mocked in a higher pitched voice. “Why don’t you stop telling me what I should do, huh? Or is that impossible for you? Bitch,” he muttered.

“Ok.” She turned to me and grabbed my hand. “Let’s go into your room, Leo. Time to work on homework.”

“Oh, don’t protect the boy,” he shouted as we hurried down the hall. I could hear my father’s footsteps pounding after us. “He should know what kind of woman his mother is.”

Mom nudged me into my room, but before she could shut the door behind us, my dad barged in and ...

... smacked her across the face. The force from it was so hard, she fell over.

“Mom!” I cried, rushing over to her, but Dad stopped me. He picked me up and made me look at him.

“You’re my son,” he growled. “You’re my blood, boy. Remember that. Your mother is trouble. All women are.”

She groaned as she sat up, clutching at her face. “Give me him, Tom.”

“No.” He carried me out of my room, leaving my mom alone. Even though we didn’t leave the house, I felt like every step my father took, took me farther away from mom.

“How is Mom trouble?” I finally managed to ask after Dad settled on the couch with another beer and blasted the TV at full volume. I sat on the floor, staring at the cover of one of my picture books. I was learning how to write in school, and the books really helped. Mom would read them to me every night. I hoped she would still.

He grunted. “Just always nagging. She can be worthless at times. When you’re older, Leo, consider who you make your wife. You don’t want to be stuck with someone who tries to boss you around every day. Trust me.” He took another swig of his beer before falling silent, his eyes watching the TV intently.

I got up and found my mom in my room, curled onto my bed, crying. I didn’t know what to do.

So, I went back into the living room with my father.

I SHAKE MY HEAD, trying to dispel these memories. Why now?
After all this time?

I have no fucking clue. But I’m not about to psycho-analyze myself. I have more important things to think about.

Like seducing Francesca.

I turn my car back on, pull out into traffic, and head home.

CHAPTER 6

Francesca

I set the box that Leo gave me on my bed and stare at it, too afraid to open it. Anything could be inside. A pretty dress, a personal item from Leo, or even a decapitated head. I take a deep breath. Ok, I doubt it's a decapitated head. So, then, why am I nervous?

With a burst of bravery, I lift off the top of the box to see ... fabric. It's clothing. That's a relief.

Then I get a better look at it.

It's lingerie.

A babydoll dress with a built-in bra. I pick it up gingerly and inspect it, noticing the lace and the sheer see-through-ness of it. I drop it back into the box and back away.

Why did Leo gift me lingerie? He showed such consideration when gifting me the lilies that I found myself opening up to him. Why would he ruin that by giving me *this*? It's brazen. Does he expect me to wear it? Why? It's not as if he's going to see me in it.

Then I pause. Unless ... he wants to see me in it. But I barely know Leo, and I'm so inexperienced; it's almost painful. Maybe he gifted this to me in the hopes of giving me a headache because that's what I'm experiencing right now. A headache and sheer panic.

No one has ever shown me the attention Leo has. It's flattering but also scary because I have no clue what to do with it. I'm in LA because I'm supposed to find a husband. I'm not

supposed to be getting distracted by Marco's second in command, whom Emilia absolutely despises.

A knock on my door makes me squeak as I quickly close the lid on the box, the lingerie disappearing from view. Emilia pokes her head in. "Hey, I wanted to ask if you want to go check out a museum? You've been cooped up since you arrived, and I thought it might cheer you up."

"Thanks. Uh, yeah. That actually sounds great."

"Great." Her eyes slide to the chocolates, lilies, and the box with the secret lingerie inside on my bed. "What are those?"

I step in front of it all, though I'm not sure why I don't want Emilia knowing Leo gave them to me.

Her eyes narrow as she walks into the room, her hands splayed on her lower back. "Where did you get all of ... that?"

No use hiding. I sigh, my shoulders slumping. "Uh ... Leo gave me this."

Emilia's head whips in my direction. "I've told you Leo is no good. He treats women horribly. He shouldn't be giving you anything."

"But he got me lilies." I hold them up. "They're my favorite."

She sighs and sits on the bed, looking at me with pity. For the first time in a long time, I feel annoyed by my older sister. "I don't know what Leo is up to, but I don't trust him. I don't know why he's giving you these things, but if he comes back and tries again, tell him no next time."

Normally, I'd nod and stay quiet, but for some reason, I don't feel like it today. "Why?"

"What?" Emilia looks startled.

"Why is it hard to believe someone could like me? That maybe Leo is giving me these things because he likes me."

"Oh, Franny." She grabs my hand and squeezes. "Because Marco told me what kind of man Leo is when it comes to

women. He's no good. It's not that I find it hard to believe someone could like you. I just find it hard that Leo is capable of liking any women beyond sex."

My eyes flit to the lingerie box. "Do you think I'm weird?" I ask it before I can stop myself.

"What? Of course not."

"Then why did you ask Marco that I am?"

Emilia pauses, opening and closing her mouth, before she sighs and ducks her head. "You heard."

"I did. And I wasn't going to say anything. You know that's hard for me."

"I do."

"But ... I can't keep it in any longer. Leo is the first person since Dad died who has really given me attention. It feels nice. But it hurts if you think I'm some weirdo who could never attract the attention of a man."

"Oh, Franny." She pulls me down next to her, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. "I give you attention."

"You're my sister. It's not the same."

"You're right." Her words surprise me. "It's not the same. But you can do so much better than Leo, trust me. You're not a weirdo, and I never should have said you were. Any man would be lucky to have you. You came here so I could help you find a suitable match, and that's what I'm going to do. But first, let's go to a museum and get our minds off it. Have a fun sister day. Just you and me. It'll be like old times."

"Like when Dad was still alive."

"Yeah." Her smile is sad.

"He always told me to stand up for myself. You did, too. I'm not very good at it."

She squeezes my shoulder, pressing her head against mine. "I think you're going a good job at it. Now, which museum do you want to go to?" My sister's effort makes me smile.

MY DAD really tried to get me to be my own advocate, but whenever I was around someone who made me nervous, I'd clam up.

Like the day I worked up the courage to ask my mom to read a short story I'd written when I was twelve. I first showed it to my dad, who read all of the ten hand-written pages and looked at me with pride.

"This is lovely, honey," he said. It was one of his rare nights off from work. "You have a talent."

I beamed under his praise. "Thanks, Dad."

"You should go show it to your mom."

I instantly shook my head. "She won't want to read it."

"You won't know unless you ask her. So, go." He nudged me toward the kitchen. With a deep breath, I entered the room and found my mom at the table, helping Gemma with her homework.

"I don't understand this," Gemma muttered, tossing her pencil down.

"Gemma," Mom scolded. She did that a lot to Gemma. "This is basic math. You can do this."

"If it's so easy, then you do it." Gemma threw the pencil at Mom, who had to duck out of the way.

"Gemma!"

"What! I don't understand this stupid math homework. What's the point? It's all just stupid numbers that don't make any sense. Why do I need to learn this?"

"Because ... because ..."

"Because what?" Gemma pointed at her. "See? Even you don't know."

Mom slammed her hand onto the table, picking the pencil up and handing it to Gemma. “Not everything needs a point in life. You just do it. Now, you are going to get this. You have to work at it.”

Emilia came into the kitchen, smiling at me before wandering over to Gemma. “Need help?”

“Where’s Mia?” Mom asked.

“I read her to sleep,” Emilia said as she grabbed Gemma’s homework and looked it over. “I remember how to do this. I can help.”

Mom’s shoulders slumped in relief. “Thank you, honey.” She kissed Emilia on the head and Gemma a quick frown before turning to me. She jumped, holding her hand over her heart. “Oh, Francesca. I didn’t see you there. You scared me. I’ll have to put a bell around your neck, I swear.”

I thrust the pages in my hands towards her. “I wrote a short story.”

“Oh.” Her voice was filled with mild curiosity mixed with exhaustion and resignation.

She still hadn’t touched the papers.

“Do you ... want to read it?”

She looked between the pages and me before taking them from me. Hopeful, I watched as she skimmed through the pages at lightning speed. I never knew someone could read that fast. Once she was done, she handed back. “It was great.”

“What was your favorite part?”

She sighed. “What?”

“Your favorite part.”

“Oh, I didn’t have a favorite part. It was all great.” She walked past me, but I stopped her by saying, “Mom.”

She slowly looked back at me. “Yes, Fran?”

“You didn’t really read it, did you?”

A flash of guilt spread across her eyes before it disappeared. “No. I did. I just ...” She slumped. “Honey, I’m tired. It’s been a long day. I just don’t have time to read something you wrote. There are more important things. I need to go see how Antonio is getting on with his homework.” And with that, she left the room.

I stared down at my carefully hand-written pages until a wet stain appeared, making the ink blur. I was crying. Before Emilia or Gemma could notice, I fled to my room, crying the entire way there.

EMILIA and I go to the Museum of Contemporary Art, which is filled with paintings I’ve never seen before and painters I’ve never heard of before. It’s filled with everything from impressionist paintings to abstract to surrealism.

I’m in heaven.

Every time I see a painting I like, I gasp and hurry over to it. Emilia follows, breathing heavily but not complaining.

“Do you need to sit down?” I ask her, nodding at a bench.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry. I want be here. And besides, it’s good for me to walk around. Helps get circulation to my ankles.”

“Are you sure you’re ok with this?”

“Fran.” Emilia gives me a pointed look. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be. Besides, I want to see you happy. So, look at however many paintings you want. If I need to sit down, I will.”

Ten minutes later, she sits down, motioning me to go on ahead and enjoy all the art. I spend some time looking at a cubist painting when a man comes to stand beside me. With a quick look at him, I can tell he’s handsome. Tan skin, dark hair, blinding white teeth when he smiles at me, catching me looking at him.

I firmly cement my eyes to the painting.

“I’m Henry,” he says, holding out his hand. “I don’t mean to be forward, but I know who you are.”

I freeze. “Uh ...”

Realization dawns in his eyes. “Oh! Sorry. I work for your brother-in-law. Henry Wilson.”

“Oh, ok. I’m Francesca.” He still has his hand out, so I shake it.

“What are the chances we’d both be here?”

“I don’t know.” I frown, realizing I don’t know how he’d recognize me. We’ve ever met before. “How did you know who I was?”

“I’ve been to Marco’s house. I’ve seen your family pictures on the wall. I would recognize a Moretti sibling anywhere.”

“Well, it was nice meeting you.”

I start to walk away from him when he asks, “What’s your favorite art style? Mine is abstract.”

I turn back to him, hope flaring in my chest. “I love all art styles, but I have a soft spot for paintings that capture real people. Normal mundane things.”

“How come?” He has his hands in his pockets and a soft smile on his lips. His stance and energy make it easy to talk to him.

“I love seeing something that’s normal painted in a way that brings out its beauty. It reminds me that there’s beauty in everything if you know where to look.”

“I think that’s wonderful. I’ve never looked at art in that way. You learn something new every day, huh?”

“I guess you do.” We look at each other for a moment. Henry isn’t as handsome as Leo, but there’s an easiness to him that isn’t there with Leo. With Leo, it’s like I want to argue, prove him wrong. With Henry, it’s like talking to an old friend.

“This might seem like a random question, but ... do you have a favorite flower?”

“I have a soft spot for lilies.”

I almost gasp. What are the chances?

Before I can ask more, Emilia waddles over. “Fran, I’m getting a little tired.”

“Ok. We can go.” I try to hide my disappointment. I turn to Henry. “It was nice talking to you.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around,” he says before giving me a little wave and walking away.

“Who was that?” Emilia asks.

“Henry. He told me he works for Marco.”

Emilia frowns. “I’ll have to ask Marco. I’ve never met him before.”

I pause, my heart beating wildly. “So, he’s never been over to the house before?”

“Not to my knowledge. But then, Marco will have his men come over sometimes, and I tend to stay clear of it, so you never know. I’ll ask him.”

“Ok, thanks.” So, maybe Henry wasn’t lying to me, but if he had been, I would be incredibly upset. I don’t take too well to people lying to me.

After Emilia and I return home, I stare at the box with the lingerie inside. It’s toying with me, tempting me to open it again. I desperately want to ask Leo why he gave it to me, but I know I’ll never ask, not even in a million years. The embarrassment of it would surely kill me.

I can’t take it anymore.

I open the box again and pick up the lingerie set. Clearly, Leo gave it to me to try on. I’ve never worn anything like it before.

Maybe now’s the time ...

I do sometimes get tired of being so shy and not taking chances in life. You only live once.

With shaky fingers, I take off my dress and slip the lingerie on. The dress is see-through, so I can see my stomach and pubic mound. The sight of my body makes me blush. Sure, I've seen myself naked before, but never in anything like this. In the box, I notice a pair of underwear. Slipping it on, it goes with the set and helps me feel a little less self-conscious.

I make myself look into the full-length mirror. The longer I look, the more I get used to the sight of myself in lingerie. It's not as awkward as I thought it would be.

In fact, it's quite ... empowering.

It's like my long-buried womanhood is rising to the surface.

Somone knocks on my door. I run over to it right as the door opens and slam it shut. Emilia gasps on the other side. "Fran?"

"Sorry! I just ... I'm changing."

"Oh. Sorry. That's what I get for not knocking. I just wanted to let you know dinner will be ready soon if you want to come down."

"Thanks." I press my palms and forehead to the door, listening as Emilia walks away. If she had a bad reaction to the flowers, then I definitely don't want to know what her reaction would be to seeing me in *lingerie* Leo bought for me.

Feeling like a fool, I change back into my dress and hurry downstairs. Emilia looks at me funny as I enter the dining room.

"You look flushed," she says.

"What? No, I'm fine. Just hungry." My words don't appease her because she looks at me strangely the entire meal, even when Marco has a conversation with her and even when Hannah clears away the plates.

"I'm off to bed," I tell her before she can ask too many questions.

After being in my room for about an hour and trying and failing to read—when am I ever too distracted not to read? — Hannah knocks on my door. “Leo is here to see you.”

My heart almost shoots out of my chest. I thank her and hurry downstairs to find Leo waiting in the doorway as usual. Also, as usual, we’re alone. Emilia and Marco went off to bed.

“HI,” I say, telling myself to not blush.

He gives me a knowing look. “Did you like my gift?”

“It was ... very forward.”

“I know. And I’m sorry about that. I just thought it would be fun.” He leans in close to me, giving me a good whiff of his aftershave. “So, was it fun?”

“Oh, um.” I clear my throat. “I’m not talking about those things with you. It’s personal. I still barely know you.”

“You’re right, but I want to change that. I really want to get to know you, Fran.” He’s already calling me by a nickname. “Don’t you want to get to know me?”

I shouldn’t.

And yet ...

I only live once. Maybe it’s time I try being bolder. Less shy. “Honestly, the gift shocked me.”

“I can imagine.” He leans against the doorframe with that easy smile on his lips. Why does he have to be so handsome? Emilia told me to not to trust him, and I believe her, but when talking to Leo, it’s so easy to get caught up in his charm.

“But I did ... try it on,” I whisper.

His eyes gleam. “Yeah? Did you also touch yourself with it on?”

I gasp, taking a step back. “Why would you ask me that?”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “I know you’re a good Catholic girl. But I wanted to put that out there. Next time you’re wearing it, touch yourself.”

“I—I,” I stutter. “I wouldn’t even know ...” Oh my goodness. This is so embarrassing.

Leo gently grabs my hand, his touch electrifying on mine and entwines our fingers together. “It’s easy. You just take this hand and bring it ... here.” He hovers it over my lower body. I can’t even move. “Then you see what feels good.”

It’s like everything is in slow motion. My breath. My heartbeat. The goosebumps on my skin. Leo is a mystery to me. I always thought I just wanted intellectual conversation, and while I do want that, I’m starting to think I might want ... more.

I can’t move, even when Leo lets go of my hand and takes a step back. “And think of me when you do it.” He winks before walking away. Without even thinking, I shut the door and go back to my room as if in a daze.

Leo *is* trouble; that’s a fact.

But the question remains—am I powerless to stop him?

Or will I fall victim to him?

CHAPTER 7

Francesca

The lingerie set taunts me on my bed. I pace around the room, my fingers twitching and my eyes burning a hole into the fabric. Leo wants me to wear it and touch myself. I don't know how he's able to be so confident and bold with his words. I practically stumble over everything I say. I could never suggest to someone I barely knew to *touch* themselves and think about me while doing it.

Only Leo, I guess.

He's still a stranger to me in so many ways, and yet, he's bringing out a side of me I've never explored before. Do I want to explore it? Deep down, I think yes.

With a huff, I grab the lingerie and slip into it. The bra cups make my breast look bigger, and the lacey fabric helps me feel even more feminine. I've always been an awkward person, but wearing this ... I feel like a grown woman for the first time.

I lay down on the bed, my heart beating so fast it hurts. Can I do this? Only one way to know.

I place my hands on my stomach and rest them, unsure how to proceed. I know the basics, of course, but I've never really had the desire to do this before. Closing my eyes, I think of Leo's handsome face and charming words and finally slide my hand down between my legs.

I feel around, trying to find a spot that feels good. When my fingers find my sensitive nub, I gasp. Ok. That felt good. I

spend time running my finger over it with my eyes closed and Leo's face in my mind.

After a while and no progress, my hand starts to cramp. I huff and drop my hand to my side, feeling defeated. I know this is supposed to result in an orgasm, but I didn't feel anything of the sort. Just frustration and guilt.

In my household, I was taught to never do anything like this. It's sinful. I'm supposed to wait to experience pleasure with my husband on my wedding night. Except, here's Leo, trying to get me to do something else. And I fell for it.

I tried. But the results? Disappointing.

I quickly change back into my normal pajamas and slip under the covers, trying to put the whole experiment behind me.

EMILIA CHECKS in on me the next morning. I love my sister, but she seems to need to constantly make sure I'm ok. While I appreciate her attention, it's slightly overbearing. I'm an introvert after all. Solitude is my resting place.

I haven't even gotten dressed for the day when she comes in and makes herself comfy on the bed next to me. "I thought we could spend another day together."

"Yeah, sure. But ... aren't you supposed to be finding me a husband? That's what Mom did for you and Gemma."

"I know. And I've been thinking over some prospects. Some of Marco's men who I know are good men. I was just waiting for you to let me know when you were ready. I didn't want to be pushy."

"That's nice. Thank you. Do you ... have anyone in mind?"

She rubs her hand over her belly. "I did ask Marco about Henry because it seemed like you were having a nice conversation with him yesterday." My mind flashes to the

handsome man I met at the museum. “He’s come over before. I’ve never seen him myself, but Marco says Henry is a good man as far as he’s aware. Marco’s never had any issues with him, so that’s promising. Maybe we could invite him over, and you could get to know him better.” She loops her arm through mine. This closeness isn’t something I normally do with my siblings, even Emilia. “There’s no need to rush into this. Since I’ve made a good marriage match with Marco, that’s really helped our family, so you don’t need to worry about the pressure.”

“Does no one care if I even get married? Mom hasn’t even called me since I’ve been here. None of our siblings have. Does it even matter?”

Emilia sighs, resting her head on my shoulder. “Mom cares. She just struggles to show it.”

I think back to that night Franco hit our mom across the face. I open my mouth to tell Emilia, but something stops me.

Instead, I say, “Mom always forgets about me. I’m used to it by now.”

“Doesn’t make it ok. But Mom does love you. She loves all of us. The lengths she’s gone to protect us ... It makes her braver than I think she gets credit for.”

“How so?”

“Have you ever noticed Franco being rough with her?” I freeze and can’t respond. Emilia continues. “He hurts her, but she puts up with it because she doesn’t want him to hurt anyone else. The only way to get Franco out of that house is Antonio taking over. But that won’t be for at least another month or so. Not until he turns eighteen and claims his rightful place as boss of the family business.”

“I never knew,” I whisper.

“She doesn’t really want anyone to know. He’s hurt her in unimaginable ways.”

I snuggle in closer to Emilia, seeking her comfort. “How?”

Emilia is silent for a moment before saying, “The twins might be his children.”

I lift my head. “But I thought they were Dad’s. Before he passed away, Mom got pregnant.”

“There was a pretty short turn around from when Dad died and Franco moved in, and Mom was pregnant just a little while later. She denies it, but it’s because she knows the truth. Lucia and Luca are Franco’s kids, not our dad’s.”

All the air leaves my body. It never occurred to me to even think about it. To consider it. I’m usually in my own world, alone in my room. I never tried to help my mom, but then again, I didn’t know she needed help.

And the sad reality is, if I had known, would she have even accepted my help? She blamed me for making Dad sicker on his last day when he took me to Coney Island. I’m probably the last person she wants comforting her.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” I whisper.

Emilia looks me straight in the eye and nods. “He raped her, Fran.”

I gasp and look away, unable to look in my sister’s eyes. “That’s horrible.”

“I know. And I’d do anything to get her out of that situation, but my hands are tied. So are Marco’s. Franco has too much power to just get rid of. I’ve been waiting for the day Antonio turns eighteen and takes over. Hopefully, after that, he can toss Franco out, and Mom will be ok. And so will the rest of our siblings.”

“I should call her,” I say, grabbing my phone. “I should see if she’s ok.”

“She’ll like that, I’m sure.” Emilia rubs my back. “I’ll be waiting downstairs when you’re done. I know this was a lot to take in, so if you don’t want to go out today, it’s fine.”

“No. I want to.” For the first time, I feel antsy at the thought of being cooped up in my room all day.

I dial my mom's number after Emilia leaves. She picks up on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"It's me, Mom."

"Who?"

I frown, trying to not let the sting in my heart make me cry. "Francesca."

"Right! Francesca. How have you been? Settling in all right?"

"Why haven't you called? I've been here for a week now, and I haven't heard a word from you."

"You left in the morning before anyone could say goodbye," she says in a way that sounds like she's trying to blame me.

"Did you want to say goodbye?"

"Of course. You were leaving for LA. I wanted to say goodbye."

"Then how come you forgot to let Emilia know I was even coming?"

She's silent on the other end for so long I have to check to make sure she hasn't hung up. "I don't recall forgetting," she finally says.

Well, you did. I want to snap. Instead, I say, "It's fine. I'm fine."

"Well, that's good. Listen, I have to go. The twins are fighting with each other." She hangs up before I get the chance to say anything else.

I wanted to make sure she was ok, but she didn't even give me the chance to ask.

I find Emilia downstairs and tell her I'm ready. I need a day out to make myself forget about how my mom treats me.

We decide to get pedicures because Emilia can't handle another day of intense walking around a museum again. "I

can't even see my feet now," she says as the pedicurist starts filing at her toenails.

"Only a few more weeks," I say as my own pedicurist gets working on my feet.

"Can't come soon enough." She turns to me. "So, I asked Marco to invite Henry over tonight for dinner. Sounds like a good idea?"

"Sure." But I don't think it's Henry I want to see at dinner. It's another, more infuriatingly charming man I'd prefer to see.

We spend the day talking about lighthearted things that don't include our mother or Franco or an impending marriage. Once we're done, Emilia and I walk back to the car, both of us admiring our newly painted toenails.

"I love it," she says, heading toward the passenger door. "I hope Marco likes—oh!" Her gasp makes me run over. Emilia hunches over, gripping her stomach.

"Are you ok?" I hover at her side. "Do you need me to take you to the hospital?"

Emilia sucks in a deep breath and stands up, smiling. "No. Just the baby kicking. It hurt more than usual. I'm all right, Fran."

"Good. Good. I wouldn't even know how to help if you went into labor."

"You're stronger than you give yourself credit for. But here, feel the baby kicking." She grabs my hand and places it on her belly. After a moment, I feel a little kick against my hand.

"That's amazing."

Emilia gives me a knowing look. "It really is."

HENRY ARRIVES RIGHT at seven for dinner. Emilia makes a big show of welcoming him inside. It's so different from her

reaction to Leo.

“I brought you these,” he says, handing me a bouquet of lilies.

“Thank you. How did you know?”

“You told me.” I remember asking him what his favorite flower was, but I never told him mine were lilies.

I frown but don't say anything.

Emilia, with Marco at her side, usher Henry into the dining room, where a feast has been laid out. “I hope you enjoy,” she says to him.

“I'm not a picky eater.” Henry sits beside me and starts digging into the food. Compared to Leo, I'm not as aware of Henry's presence beside me. With Leo, it's electric. With Henry, it feels more subdued. But he's sweet enough, so I'll give him a chance.

“Emilia tells me,” Marco says, cutting into his steak, “that you and Francesca met at a museum the other day.”

Henry flashes me his mega-watt smile. “We did. She was admiring a painting, and I was admiring her.” I flush and duck my head.

Emilia smiles warmly at him, compared to her usual glare for Leo. “So, Henry, you know Francesca is open and ready to make a good marriage match. Why do you think you'll be a good fit for our family?”

I almost choke on my food while Marco gives Emilia a confused look. “Moving fast there, honey,” he tells her.

“Never too fast,” she responds.

“No, it's ok,” Henry says before taking a sip of wine. “I understand that's how this works for you. You need someone appropriate for your sister, someone who can bolster your family's influence.” He turns to me and takes my hand. I don't pull away, but I don't feel that spark I felt when Leo grabbed my hand last night. “Well, you can trust me when I say I only have the utmost respect for women, including Francesca. And

you know I'm in good standing with Marco. I'd make a good addition to your family. I believe that."

When Henry doesn't let go of my hand, I gently pull it away. Emilia is beaming at Henry. "That's good to hear. Marco speaks highly of you."

Henry nods at Marco who nods back. "I appreciate that."

"I want someone who wants to get to know me," I blurt out before I can stop myself. Everyone at the table looks at me with surprise. With a deep breath, I continue. "I understand I have to get married someday. But I want to marry someone who likes me for me and not just what my family has to offer."

"As you should," Emilia says when Henry doesn't respond.

"I like you for you," he finally says.

"How? You don't even know me yet."

That draws him up short. The rest of the dinner passes by in an awkward, tense state. Once it's done, I'm relieved. These types of things exhaust me.

But the night isn't over yet.

Because as we're all standing up, Leo shows up. He freezes when he spots Henry, and his gaze narrows. "What's going on here?" he asks.

Marco walks over to him. "What are you doing here, Leo?"

"I had some news. Jerry might have spotted someone you should take a look at it." His words are meaningless to me.

"Good. We can go into my office."

"Just—hold on." Leo holds up a hand, observing the room. "Why was Henry invited to dinner and I wasn't?"

"Because Henry is a potential match for Francesca," Emilia explains. "You didn't need to be here because you're never going to be a match for my sister."

Leo turns to me, flat out ignoring Emilia. “Can I talk Francesca for a moment?” When Marco hesitates, Leo says, “Just a moment. There’s something I need to tell her.”

“Anything you have to tell her,” Emilia says, crossing her arms, “you can say in front of all of us.”

Leo shrugs. “Fine. Fran, you don’t want marry that guy. Henry isn’t trustworthy.”

I stand up straighter. I want to ask what he means by that, but Marco is already pushing him out of the room. “That’s enough, Leo,” he says.

“How?” I call out. Leo turns back to me with a smirk as Henry says, “You believe him?”

I ignore Henry, my eyes only on Leo. “How?”

“Uh ... he just isn’t, ok?”

“A great argument,” Henry mutters sarcastically.

“Don’t you trust me?” Leo asks me.

I don’t know what to think. Marco finally manages to get Leo out of the room, leaving behind Henry, Emilia, and me.

I turn to Henry. “Do you know what he could have meant?”

“No idea.” He looks at me straight on with a sincere expression. Is Leo just jealous, or is he telling the truth, and he knows something I don’t?

Emilia waddles over to Henry. “Don’t mind Leo. He’s just annoying all of the time.”

Henry chuckles. “I don’t. I’ve spent time with Leo in the past, so I know how he can be. Especially when it comes to women.”

That makes me look up, “What do you mean?”

“He likes to use them for his own benefit and then toss them to the side.”

Is that what Leo is doing to me? Trying to make me like him, only for him to hurt me in the end? But he’s seemed so

charming. Maybe that's exactly it—he uses his charm to hurt women.

And yet ... there's something about Henry that I don't quite trust. I know he lied about the lilies. I never told him they were my favorite. He told me lilies were his favorite flower, which could explain why he gifted them to me. It still seems strange, though, that he'd say I told him something I know I never did.

“Exactly,” Emilia exclaims, looking exceptionally pleased. “I always knew Leo couldn't be trusted.”

I turn away from them, my stomach in knots. Emilia notices and places a hand on my back. “Are you ok, Fran?”

“I'm just tired.”

Emilia looks at me with knowing eyes. “Ok. Let's call it an evening. Nice meeting you, Henry.” She shakes his hand.

“You, too. May I talk to Francesca in private for a moment?”

“Only if my sister wants to.”

“Ok,” I agree, and Emilia leaves the room. “What is it?”

He grabs my hand again, his skin smooth compared to Leo's. Almost as if he's never gotten his hands dirty before. “I just wanted to let you know I'm looking forward to doing this again. I really like you, Francesca.”

My lips part. How is it that after being ignored most of my life, I'm suddenly caught between two incredibly handsome men? Maybe it's LA. Maybe it's me. Maybe it's something else altogether.

Either way, I don't know how to handle it.

I give Henry a pinched smile before extracting myself from him. “I like you, too. Have a good night.” I hurry out of the room before Henry can say anything else.

Leo and Marco are leaving Marco's office as I rush up the stairs. The last thing I see is Leo's gaze on me, watching me with an intensity I can't quite understand.

CHAPTER 8

Leo

I find Henry on his usual barstool at the dive bar we frequent, looking like a smug asshole. “What are you doing?” I ask.

He takes his time with a huge swig of his beer, making me tap my foot and resist the urge to punch him, before he finally turns to me and smiles. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You having dinner with Francesca. Why?”

“Because Emilia invited me.” He shrugs. “I don’t know what to tell you, man. It just happened. I got the phone call and went over. Free dinner, so sue me.”

I slam my hand on the table, making the bartender glance over. “Bullshit. Francesca is my bet, Henry. You’re trying to ruin my chances of winning.”

“I would never do such a thing.”

I stare at him until he starts to squirm. He sighs. “Fine. Maybe I thought it would be fun to sweeten the stakes by giving Francesca another man to look at. I have to make it hard for you.”

“You’re getting in my way. The bet was for me to seduce Francesca within two months. You’re changing the rules.”

He smiles as he drinks his beer. “We never said I *couldn’t* do this.”

“And I never said you could. So, stop the bullshit. Stop interfering.”

Henry makes a show of setting his beer down and smiling at me. “If I’m invited over again, then I’ll go. It would be bad manners. An invitation from Marco’s own wife?” He whistles. “No one could say no to that. If you have a problem with me swooping in on your girl, then I suggest you make her your girl before I get a taste of her. If I’m the one to take her virginity, then you lose. And I get your job. Plain and simple.”

I lean in close to him, so close I can see the tiny hairs between his eyebrows and the pores on his nose. “Or I could take you out back and make you wish you never messed with me. How does that sound?”

Henry gulps. “Doesn’t sound fun.”

“I didn’t think so.” I step back and pat the bar. “I’ll be on my way. Don’t get in my way, Henry. This is my challenge. Francesca is mine.”

As I’m walking away, Henry calls out. “How can she be yours if you haven’t fucked her yet?” A few of the other patrons shoot Henry surprised looks. Some look curious and others look disgusted. A couple guys raise their beers in cheers.

I shove the door open and storm out into the night, trying to figure out the best course of action. I need to make Francesca mine before Henry takes her from me. The problem is Francesca is shy and slow to respond to my advances. I’m going to have to turn things up a notch.

And I know just how to do it.

OVER THE YEARS, I got used to how my father treated my mother. After seeing him hit her that first time, I tried protecting her, but it was no use. My father was always stronger than both of us.

The first time I tried stepping in his path, I was eight. Still just a kid, but I had bravado, and I thought I could take on the world.

He came home, drunk as usual. It always seemed to happen when he smelled like alcohol. Mom and I were watching a movie together. I don't remember what it was, but I know we were laughing.

And I remember that laughter drying up the moment my dad stormed into the apartment.

Mom pulled me against her. "You're home late, Tom."

He grunted as he opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. "Always nagging. Can't you just leave a guy in peace, woman?"

"Why do you drink?" I asked. Mom shushed me, but I didn't understand why. I didn't think it was wrong to know.

Dad sauntered over, his eyes were bloodshot, and the wrinkles on his head seemed more pronounced. He pointed his beer at me. A little bit sloshed over the edge and landed on my arm. "I drink because I can't stand to listen to your mom when I come home. That's why."

"Then don't come home," I said. It made sense to me. If he wasn't happy there, he should just leave.

Mom didn't like what I said. She pulled me even tighter against her and shushed me again. "He didn't mean that, Tom. He's just a kid."

Dad slumped into a chair and took a swig of his drink. "Maybe the kid makes sense. I could just not come home. You would like that, wouldn't you?"

Mom shook her head. "No. I love having you here. Leo is just eight. He's curious about the world."

"Then you need to make him uncurious." He looked at the TV and sneered. "What the fuck is this?" He ripped the remote out of Mom's hands and changed the channel to a football game. "None of that stupid kid shit."

"I was watching that," I said, reaching over to grab the remote, but Dad held it just out of reach.

"I'm the man of this house. I get to choose what we watch. Now, be quiet."

I probably should have listened to him, but I was tired of him always bossing me around. So, I stood up and stared him down. “No.”

Dad huffed, looking at me with amusement and something darker simmering behind his eyes. “What did you say to me?”

“I said—”

“Nothing,” Mom cut me off, grabbing my hand. “He said nothing, Tom. I’m going to take him to bed.”

“But I’m not tired,” I muttered.

“Yes, you are,” she said, already dragging me down the hallway.

“Mom, what’s going on?” I asked once we were in my bedroom. She pulled out pajamas and tossed them at me.

“Nothing, honey. Just ... go to bed, ok?” It was in that moment I saw how tired she was.

I wrapped my arms around her waist. After a moment, she hugged me back. In these quiet moments between us, I believed everything would be all right.

That was ... until my mom left me in my room to go back out to the living room with my dad. Everything was quiet for a while. The only sound the murmuring of the TV.

Then I heard a crash.

I ran back into the living room to see my mom lying on the ground where the glass coffee table used to be. The rim of the coffee table was still there, but the glass was shattered. Mom had a ton of tiny cuts all over her face and arms.

“Mom!” I screamed, rushing over to her.

She blinked up at me. “Leo, you should be in bed.” Her voice was strained and rough. I tried helping her up, but she wasn’t moving.

I turned to my dad, who was watching everything with a small smile on his face. I wanted to hurt him. So, I shoved my hands as hard as I could in his stomach. He didn’t move an inch.

“You think you’re a tough guy?” he asked, shoving me back. I stumbled. “Go on. Help her, then. Not that she deserves it.”

“Why do you have to be so mean?” I screamed, tears streaming down my face.

His eyes flashed. “Why does she have to be such a bitch? Always bossing me around. Nagging. Telling me what to do. You want to help her? Help her.” He scoffed and settled back into his chair.

Mom was struggling to get up, so I used as much of my strength as I possessed to help her stand. Together, we limped to the bathroom, where she tended to her cuts. None of the larger glass shards had hurt her.

“Are you ok?” I whispered as she bandaged her cuts, wincing along the way.

Her eyes met mine through the mirror. “I’ll be ok. You were there to help me.” Her gaze darkened as she looked away. “Though, you shouldn’t have been. You should never have been in that position in the first place. I’m sorry.” Her voice came out as a sob as her shoulders began shaking.

“It’s ok, Mom.” I hugged her from behind.

“No, it’s not.”

A creak behind in the hallway made us both gasp and turn around. My father was looking at my mother, concern in his eyes. Tears were beginning to well his eyes as well before they spilled over.

“I’m sorry, Kate,” he sobbed, pulling her into a rough hug. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

She tensed. I expected her to pull back, but after a moment, she sunk into my father’s arms. I watched in shock as she began to comfort *him*. “It’s ok. I’m ok.”

He cried into her shoulder, and she rubbed his back. I didn’t get it. He hurt her. But then he acted like he didn’t. And she forgave him.

It was all so confusing for eight-year-old me. My dad did a horrible thing to my mom, and she forgave him. After that day, I began to see my father's actions in a different light. Maybe they weren't so bad, not if he could be forgiven. Maybe my mother wasn't the good person I thought she was. My father sure seemed to think she was a problem.

My life was never the same after that.

I SHOVE the memory away as I drive to Marco's house. The image of my father's face leaves me conflicted, and the image of my mother's face makes me feel a twinge of guilt.

No. I can't go getting soft now. I have a mission to accomplish.

Francesca.

I need to fuck her before Henry does.

So, that's why I'm going to sneak into her room tonight. Sure, it's a little juvenile, but I think it'll get the job done.

The only problem is that Marco has a shit ton of camera's posted around the house. Fortunately, I know where the blind spots are. At the side of the house, there's a trellis that lease to the second floor. No cameras are back there. I can go right up without being discovered.

I don't park in his driveway. Instead, I leave my car at the end of it and walk up to the house, keeping to the shadows until I reach the side of the house. The climb is so easy, it's almost disappointing. I land in a hallway that's eerily quiet. Marco's mansion is a fucking maze sometimes. It takes me a few tries before I find which room Francesca is staying in.

Her sleeping form is one of peace. Too bad I'm about to change her life forever.

"Knock, knock," I say, actually knocking on the door.

Francesca jerks awake as I shut the door behind me, plunging us both into darkness. She flicks the light on, and her

eyes widen when she sees me. “Leo?” She clutches the blanket to her chest, the picture of modesty. That needs to change.

“Hey, Fran. Thought I’d pay you a nighttime visit.” I rake my eyes over her. “Too bad you’re not wearing the gift I gave you.”

She watches me like a deer watches a hunter in the woods. “I’m more comfortable in my PJs.”

“They’re cute.” I nod at the bed. “Mind if I sit down?”

“I don’t think you should be in here.”

I pause. “You’re probably right. I shouldn’t be. But then, where would the fun be in that? So, can I sit down?” Francesca needs to feel like she’s in control of this moment. My plan won’t work otherwise. I can’t just take her. I need to seduce her.

After a moment, she nods. “I guess. But, Leo, what are you doing here?”

“I wanted to come see you.” I sit down, holding her gaze with mine. “I’ve missed you.”

“You’ve seen me a lot of times.”

“Not enough, if you ask me.”

She flushes, ducking her head and looking very cute. “You should probably go. I don’t think Emilia would like you being here.”

“What Emilia doesn’t know, won’t hurt her.”

“Are you dangerous?” she asks, meeting my gaze again.

“What makes you ask that?” Beyond me sneaking into her room at night.

She shakes her head. “Never mind. Just ... I need to know something.” She inhales deeply. “Why do you like me?”

I shrug. “What’s not to like?”

A flash of disappointment filters through her eyes. “Oh.”

She really wants to know. This isn’t a game for her like it is for me. In my short time knowing Francesca, it’s clear she’s

shy and insecure. Of course, I can't tell her about the bet. But ... there's something intriguing about her that goes beyond my bet with Henry. Something about her makes me feel possessive in a way I've never felt about any other girl I've been with.

"I like you because you fascinate me," I admit. It's the truth. "A lot of women like me instantly. But you ... you haven't fallen at my feet like I was expecting."

"You think highly of yourself," she says, a small smile on her lips.

"I do. I have good reason. If you got the attention I do ... Well, let's just say it can go to the head. I like the fact that you're making me work for you. I know you're Emilia's sister, which makes this impossible between us. But I can't stop thinking about you, Fran." Also the truth. "You fascinate me. I want to get to know you more." I pause, then ask, "Tell me something no one else knows about you."

She stares into my eyes for a long moment like she's weighing whether I'm speaking the truth or not before she nods. "Something no one else knows about me ..." Her eyes darken. "My mom blames me for my father's death."

For once, I'm speechless. I never expected her to admit something that personal. "Fran ..."

"It's ok. You don't have to respond. I don't know why I told you that." She turns away from me. "Maybe you should go, Leo."

"I don't want to go." I touch her hand, which makes her gasp and turn back to me. "I'm tired of having talks at the front door, waiting for your sister to catch us. I just want to do ... this." I grab her face and lower my lips to hers.

She gasps against my lips and tenses for a second before relaxing into kiss. Tentatively, she kisses me back. I was prepared for her to push me away and slap me. I didn't expect her to actually kiss me back.

This is good news. This means Francesca is seducible. I might still be able to win this bet.

I kiss her harder while wrapping my arms around her. Francesca leans in, resting her hands gently on my chest. Her hands are right above my heart.

I'm about to lay her onto her back and see how far I can take things when the door swings open ...

... and Emilia, in all her heavily pregnant state, is staring at us in shock.

Francesca is the one to pull back right away, her face turning so red, it matches her top. "Emilia? What ..."

"Am I doing in your room at one in the morning?" she asks flatly. "I got up to pee, and I heard voices coming from your room. I wanted to make sure you were ok, but instead, I saw ... this." She turns to me. "What are you doing here, Leo?"

No use denying it now. "Kissing Francesca."

Emilia scoffs. "I can see that. But why? I don't ... What's going on? Fran?"

Francesca lets out a small squeak when all eyes turn on her. "I'm not sure."

"Did he force himself on you?"

"I did not," I state, but Emilia keeps her eyes on her sister.

"Did he?"

Francesca shakes her head no.

Emilia looks lost for words. "Then why?"

"Because he likes me," she finally says.

Ok, I feel a little shitty for making my bet with Henry. But I'm too in it now. I have to see it through to the end. I'm just not sure how now that we've been caught.

"I'm going to get Marco," is Emilia's response.

Francesca turns to me after Emilia leaves the room. "Should ... are you going to get in trouble?"

I scratch the back of my head. "Fran, I'm already in trouble." How to get out of this situation? I don't fucking

know.

Emilia comes back with Marco in tow, and the two of them glare at me. “This is a predicament,” Marco says. “If this gets out ... it could ruin Francesca’s reputation.”

“What?” Francesca whispers.

“Leo will tell everyone he tried sleeping with my sister,” Emilia says, pointing at me. “I know it.”

I cross my arms. “And how do you know it?”

“Because I know you,” she snaps back. “You like to hurt women. You’re going to hurt my sister by ruining her reputation. She needs to make a good marriage match, and you’ve just ruined it for her! Not many Mafia men want to marry a woman who’s been with another man.”

“We only kissed,” I remind her.

“That doesn’t matter. No one will see it that way.” Emilia rubs a hand over her face. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. Francesca came here so I could take care of her, and look what happened!” She turns to Marco. “You should have kept him away from her.”

“There’s only so much I can do,” he says to his wife. “I’m sorry, Emilia. I can’t control everything Leo does. But I can control what happens next.”

“What will happen next?” Francesca asks, fear in her voice as she clutches the blanket to her chest.

Marco sighs deeply. “You two need to get married.”

CHAPTER 9

Francesca

Marco's words don't make sense to me at first. It isn't until Leo stands up and says, "Slow down a minute. Let's talk this over," that it dawns on me.

Marco just suggested Leo and I get married.

Leo and me? The thought is absurd. We barely know each other. We can't *marry* each other. Then again, Emilia hadn't met Marco before they got married, and now, they have a great relationship. And my mom did send me here to make sure I got married.

This would solve all my problems. I'd appease my mom and Franco by getting married, and I could feel less like a burden to my family.

Then again, it's Leo. The man Emilia has constantly warned me about ever since I arrived. I'm drawn to him, yes, but I also don't trust him. He's *too* charming. Though I believed him when he told me he found me fascinating. There was a sincerity in his voice.

However, Emilia's warnings have been too consistent for me to ignore.

"There's nothing to talk about," Marco responds to Leo. "This is the obvious course of action. You're in Francesca's room, alone. This will get out if you tell anyone. The only way to protect Francesca is by you marrying her."

"Then I won't tell anyone." Leo paces the room. "I promise. This will be a secret between all of us."

“You tried seducing my sister!” Emilia says, coming over to me. I haven’t moved since Marco made his announcement. “It’s either marry her or leave her alone forever. And since I don’t trust you to not hurt her reputation, it seems ...” She inhales deeply. “Damnit. Marriage might be the only good option.”

“Oh, so now you want me to marry Francesca?” Leo looks frantically between the married couple. “Just a moment ago, you were looking at me like you wanted to kill me. Now you’re ok with me becoming your brother-in-law?”

“No,” Emilia replies flatly. “Not at all. I don’t want Francesca stuck to you forever. I don’t trust you.”

Leo rolls his eyes. “What’s new?”

“But.” Emilia slips her arm around my shoulders. “If this is the only way to save Francesca from you, then ...”

“It has to be done,” Marco finishes. “You can’t be trusted to not tell other people about this.”

“I’m your second in command.”

“I know. But when it comes to women ...” Marco’s eyes flit to me before turning back to Leo. “You have a bad reputation. This is your opportunity to step up. Change your ways. Francesca is in need of a husband, and who better in rank than my number two man?”

Leo groans, running his hand over his head. “Can we talk about this more? I’m not the marrying kind.”

“You are now,” Marco says.

This entire time, I’ve been sitting here, watching everything unfold around me. No one has even asked me my opinion.

The thought of Leo and me marrying is truly crazy. I always assumed I’d find a nice, quiet man. Someone like me, someone who loved books and museums as much as me, to be my husband. Not Leo—a man who has charisma and knows he’s all that. A man who makes me shiver in the best way

possible when he smiles at me. A man who has a bad reputation when it comes to women.

A man who is the complete opposite of me.

And just like that, I begin to laugh. It starts off small and soon becomes a hysterical fit. Emilia looks at me like I've grown two heads. I clutch my stomach as it begins to hurt from laughing so much. Marco frowns in my direction, and Leo smiles slightly at me, though he also looks incredibly confused.

I don't think anyone has ever heard me be this loud before. I don't even think *I've* heard myself be this loud before.

"Fran, are you ok?" Emilia rubs my back and tilts her head down to meet my gaze. "Fran?"

I can't stop laughing. So, this is how my life has turned out. I'm marrying a man I don't really trust but one I also want to kiss again. Our kiss ... it was like everything inside me woke up for the first time in my life. How can I want to be near someone while also want to be far away from them?

None of it makes any sense.

I assumed I'd come to LA, spend some time with Emilia, not find a husband, and return home to New York, where I'd have to deal with Mom ignoring me and Franco insisting I find a husband. I never expected any of this.

"Fran?" Emilia gently shakes me. Tears are creeping out of the corner of my eyes as I continue to laugh.

"It hurts," I gasp out, holding my stomach. "Oh, it hurts."

"That's because you're laughing like crazy," she replies. "Are you ok?"

My laughter slowly subsides, with only a few more giggles escaping me. But finally, release washes over me. I can breathe again.

"I'm ok," I tell her. "Laughing doesn't make me crazy, you know."

Emilia frowns and pulls back slightly. “I know. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” I say to get rid of the growing awkwardness in the air. “It’s just ... never mind.” Now that I’m back in my right mind, I look at everyone in the room. “Don’t I get a say in this?”

“Of course,” Emilia says. “But I just assumed since you two were kissing ...”

“That I’d want to marry him?”

Leo puts his hand over his heart. “Ouch. I’m hurt by that.”

“It’s not like you want to marry me either,” I say to him. “We barely know each other. It’s understandable.”

“Right.” Leo averts his gaze. “I like you, Fran, I just ... never expected to get married.”

Leo does like me. I still don’t quite understand why. He told me it was because he finds me fascinating because I don’t fawn over him, but I feel like there needs to be more. I know for me, when it comes to Leo, I like him because he actually shows me attention. He makes me feel seen like no one else has ever done. He’s captivating.

And I still don’t trust him.

Which is the real reason I don’t want to marry him. Leo is not the safe option, and besides, I don’t want him marrying me only because he’s forced into it. That’s not exactly confidence boosting.

I turn to Marco. “It was only a kiss, as Leo said.” My cheeks are on fire, but I continue to face Marco. “I’m sure my reputation will be fine.”

Emilia runs her hand over my hair, something she hasn’t done since I was little. “Fran, that’s not how these Mafia men work. They expect a woman to be completely pure. If Leo goes around town telling everyone he kissed you, speculation will start that you two did more than that. It will hurt your chances at a good marriage. No man with any kind of good reputation will want to marry you after that.”

“I don’t even want to get married!” I snap, standing up. Emilia looks so surprised, like I shocked her with a wire. I get why. I’ve never spoken to her like this before—heck, I’ve never spoken to anyone like this. “I never wanted to. I know it’s my duty, but it’s not something I want. Why can’t I just be left alone?” I cross my arms over my body, feeling my mind withdraw into myself.

Emilia lets out a huff as she stands, her hand on her lower back. “Because as you said, it’s your duty. It’s the duty of all of us to get married.” I know when she says “all of us,” she means our siblings. “It’s just the way it is. I don’t want Leo to marry you; that’s obvious. But this is the only option now. So, a marriage is happening.” She spins around to face Leo. “And you.” She pokes her finger into his chest, making Leo arch a brow. “If you so much as hurt her in any way, I’m going to make sure your life becomes a living hell. You got it?”

Marco steps forward, placing a hand on Emilia’s shoulder. “I’ll make sure he gets it. Leo, you and Francesca will marry. Even if neither of you is happy about this, it needs to be done.”

“But—” Leo starts to say when Marco cuts him off.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have snuck into Francesca’s room in the middle of the night to make out. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be in this predicament. Take this as a lesson to learn, Leo. Your actions have consequences. Now, come on.” He walks to the door, motioning for Leo to follow.

Leo turns to me. “Don’t I get the chance to talk to Francesca about this?”

Marco hesitates before nodding. “Fine. Make it quick. We’ll wait in the hall.”

“Wait,” Emilia objects, but Marco shakes his head and guides her out of the room.

Leo step toward me once we’re alone, then stops, like he’s unsure how to proceed. I’ve never seen Leo look this unsure about anything before. Granted, I’ve known him less than a week, and there’s a lot about him I don’t know. I guess I’ll learn about all of that once we’re married.

“Fran,” he says, “listen. I don’t want you to think I don’t like you. I do. I just never thought I’d get married.”

“I get it. I never thought I’d get married either. But what’s done is done.” I inhale, dropping my arms and raising my head. “So, we just have to make the most of it.”

Leo takes my hand, and as usual, it sends electricity shooting up my entire arm. “I guess if I had to marry anyone, though, you’re not so bad.”

I’m sure he meant it as a compliment, but I flinch at his words and pull back. I don’t want to be “not so bad.” I want to be the girl who’s chosen. And Leo didn’t choose me to marry. It’s dawning on me that he probably just wanted to use me for ... what? Sex? Why else sneak into my room to kiss me at night?

I have been told time and time again that Leo has a bad reputation when it comes to women. It’s time I finally listen.

“So, if you never intended to get married, then ... what were we doing together?” I ask. “You know I can’t be with a man until I’m married, so what were your intentions with me?”

He rakes a hand through his hair as he looks down. “You make it sound so old-fashioned.”

“Just tell me.”

He drops his hand and meets my gaze, not saying anything. It’s because he can’t. There’s no excuse. Leo just wanted me for sex, I’m guessing. He never intended to make an honest woman out of me. Which means my intuition to not trust him was correct.

Now, I’m stuck in an impending relationship with Leo, and it’s clear he doesn’t even want to be in one with me.

“Gotcha,” I say, stepping back.

“Fran—”

“No. It’s fine. What’s done is done. We’re getting married. I can tell you’re not happy about this, so I say we just stay apart until the wedding. I think it will be for the best.”

“But I don’t want to stay apart.”

“You also don’t want to marry me.”

“Neither do you!” He puts his hands on his hips, looking at me with wide eyes.

“I know. Because I never thought it was in the cards for me, and ... the truth is, Leo. I don’t trust you.” I’m in awe of myself for speaking the truth. I normally keep my innermost thoughts to myself. But something about Leo makes me brave enough to speak up. “And you don’t want this. Which means you were ok with ruining my reputation without marrying me. So, I think you should go.”

“Francesca, let me explain.”

“Just go,” I say, too tired to talk anymore. “I want to go back to bed.”

Leo sighs, and after giving me a long look, he joins Emilia and Marco in the hallway, leaving me alone.

THE WEDDING PLANNING begins the very next day.

I think Marco and Emilia are worried Leo will say something to someone about me, so they want to rush the wedding before he gets the chance to do so.

Which means I have to go wedding dress shopping, even though I’m still wrapping my head around everything.

The inside of the bridal shop is an explosion of white. The smell of warm vanilla fills my nostrils, and I instantly feel overwhelmed by all the people inside the store, all the dresses, and all the background chatter.

I stumble and have to press my hand into the wall to steady myself. Emilia looks at me with concern.

“You ok?”

I want to cry to her, tell her how insane all of this is, how everything is moving too fast. But I don’t. Instead, I straighten

and force a smile. “I’m fine.”

“Fran, I know you don’t want to do this. But it has to happen.”

“Why can’t Leo and I just elope?”

Emilia rubs her belly as she answers. “Because we need it to look official. You’re a Moretti. A grand wedding is expected. It’ll make things more legit. And if any rumors come out about you, a nice wedding will help nip it in the bud.”

“Gemma didn’t have a grand wedding.” When her husband, Viktor, kidnapped her four years ago, the two of them invaded a church and forced a priest to marry them at gunpoint. None of us were there to witness it. It’s only through Gemma’s recollections that I know about it. “And when it was your wedding, it was only our family and Leo present. Why do I need a grand wedding? I’ve always been the least likely to have a grand wedding.”

Emilia smiles as she loops her arm through mine. “It’s a little ironic, isn’t it? But it needs to be done. And don’t you want a nice wedding? I wanted one.”

“I’m not you, Emilia,” I say softly. The thought of hundreds of people staring at me as I walk down the aisle makes me want to hyperventilate.

Emilia looks hurt by my words but doesn’t say more.

A saleswoman named approaches us. Amanda is her name, according to her nametag. “What can I do for you ladies today?”

“My sister is getting married,” Emilia explains as I freeze up.

Amanda claps her hands together. “Great. What type of dress are you looking for?”

They both look at me. I shrug.

“Maybe we spend some time looking around,” Emilia offers.

“Wonderful. Just let me know if you need anything.” Amanda wanders off to help another soon-to-be-bride. One who’s probably a lot more excited to be here than I am.

Emilia and I spend some time looking at dresses. Everything starts to blend after a while, from all the lace to all the ruffles to all the fabric.

“What about this one?” Emilia shows me a princess style dress, and the sight of it makes me hyperventilate. It comes on so quick; I barely know it’s happening until I’m in the throes of it. I clutch at my chest and force myself to breath, but my chest is too tight. It’s like I’m dying.

Emilia quickly hangs up the dress and rushes over to me. “Fran? Fran?” She grabs my arms and tries to steady me, but I’m too far gone.

“I can’t,” I gasp out. “I can’t.”

Emilia looks around for a second before turning back to me. “Come on.” She leads me to the bathroom and helps me sit in the largest stall. “Just breathe, Fran. Just breathe.”

I suck in air, but it still hurts too much. “I can’t. I ...”

Emilia can’t really crouch in her pregnant state, so she plops onto the floor beside me, not looking worried at all about sitting on a dirty bathroom floor. That’s the thing I’ve always loved about my oldest sister—her tenacity to make sure I’m ok takes first place over anything else. “You can. Breathe for me, Fran. Like this.” She inhales and exhales slowly. I follow suit, and after a few moments, I’m breathing normally again.

“There you go.” She brushes a piece of my hair back like I’m ten years old again. “Better?”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“What are sisters for, right?”

“Is Leo a bad man?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Emilia hesitates. “You know my opinions of him. I don’t like him.”

“You said he doesn’t treat women very well, but what does that mean? How so?”

“I’d never let you marry a man who would abuse you. Reputation be damned. I’d never allow it. But Leo hurts women in other ways. I’m not exactly sure how. But from what Marco has mentioned, Leo likes to toy with women before breaking their hearts.”

“And you’re worried he’ll break mine.”

“I am.”

I shift on the floor, finding a comfier spot for my sit bones. “I don’t know how to feel about Leo. I’m drawn to him, but I definitely don’t trust him.”

“Be careful, ok? Being drawn to Leo is never a good thing.”

“He’ll be my husband soon, Emilia. It’s not like I can ignore him forever.”

“No, but guard your heart around him.”

“How can I when we’ll be married? Am I just never supposed to love my husband?”

Emilia sighs. “Not if you don’t want him hurting you. Leo will use you; I’m sure of it. He’s done it to countless other women. He’ll do it to you, too.”

I pull away from her, wrapping my arms around my knees. “Is it so hard to believe someone could like me for me?” I know Leo doesn’t love me. I know he’s being forced into this marriage like me. I just wish one person would believe I could be loved by another. Instead, I’m always made to feel like the loner destined to remain a spinster forever.

“Fran, any man would be lucky to have you. Leo is lucky to have you. But he’s not a good man. He’s not someone I would have chosen for you. I don’t even understand why he was in your room last night or why you were kissing him.”

“Because I like him!” I snap, my voice echoing through the restroom. Emilia jerks back. “He kissed me, and I kissed him back because ... I like him. I don’t trust him. But I do like

him. It doesn't make sense, but it's how I feel. Just for once, I'd love to have your support instead of you trying to control my life. Leo and I are getting married, which is something *you* and Marco enforced, remember? You don't get to tell me what to do with my heart after I'm married. It's not fair."

Emilia stares at me for a while. When she opens her mouth to speak, a group of women enter the bathroom, giggling. They stop when they see us on the floor. Then they share a look with each other and laugh more. I stand up and walk past them, only to turn back around and walk past the woman to help Emilia off the floor. We might be in the middle of an argument but, she's eight months pregnant. Getting off the floor is not an easy feat for her.

She nods her appreciation, but I'm already turning away and walking back into the shop. The only sound I hear is the giggle of the girls.

"Fran." Emilia calls out. "Wait. You're right." I look at her tentatively. "It's not fair of me to tell you what to do after you're married. I'm just trying to protect you. But I promise, I'll let you figure out your marriage to Leo." She squeezes my hand. "It's nice to see you standing up for yourself." I blush under her praise. I've been doing that a lot more lately.

I'm not sure if it's LA that's changed me. Maybe it's being away from my mom. Or it's a certain guy I'm engaged to who has made me be this way.

"Let's find you a dress."

And we do.

After a few hours, I'm standing in the full-length mirror, trying on the dress I know will be my wedding dress. It's sleeveless, with only thick straps on my shoulders that float over my body. The dress is closer to my body, but it isn't tight. There's enough give to make me comfortable. It ends with a subtle flare at the bottom. Nothing too extravagant. The entire gown is white. No lace. No frills. No decorations. Just white. It's simple, yet elegant. Understated, yet so me. I feel classy. I feel ... beautiful.

Emilia stands behind me, her hands on my shoulders. “What do you think?”

“It’s perfect.”

She fluffs my hair around my face and steps back. “You’re so beautiful, Fran. You don’t need to hide yourself away. Ever.” She sniffs and wipes at her eyes.

“Are you crying?”

“I’m pregnant. So, sue me.”

I wrap my arms around her in a fierce hug, which she reciprocates. “I really do love you, Emilia.”

“I love you, too.”

The group of women who were in the bathroom pass us by, still chatting and giggling. They’re all in their twenties, judging by their clothes and hairstyles. One of them, a pretty blonde, looks over at me. I’m prepared for her to make a snide comment because that’s what I’m used to, but instead, she says, “You look great. Love the dress.”

“Uh, thanks,” I say.

The other girls nod their approval. “It’s gorgeous on you,” a brunette says.

“Yeah,” the blonde replies. “Really great. Take care.” She waves as she and her friends walk away. I’m so startled that I don’t get the chance to wave back. I’m used to being ignored or picked on. Compliments are foreign to me.

They feel amazing. Those girls just made my day.

Emilia gives me a bright smile. “Maybe things are looking up.”

Maybe they are.

EMILIA and I leave the shop and head for the car when a man’s voice calls out to me. It’s Henry.

I don't know how to respond as he walks over with a huge grin. Emilia steps back to give us some space. "Hi," I finally say after standing there for a long moment.

"How have you been? I was hoping for another dinner get-together if you're down."

How do I tell him Leo and I are getting married, so there won't be any more get-togethers? "Leo and I getting married," I blurt out. I guess that's one way to do it.

He frowns and takes a step back. "Oh? When did this happen? We just had dinner last night."

"Last night," I whisper. All I want to do is get out of here. This is the most awkward conversation I've ever had.

His eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. "Last night?" He whistles. "Wow, Leo wasted no time."

"What do you mean by that?"

He pauses before saying, "Nothing. I just never knew Leo had it in him to get married." He squeezes my arm. "Happy for you two. I should get going."

I watch him walk away, uneasiness in my gut. I'm not sure why, though, so I push it to the side and join Emilia in the car.

"You ok?" she asks, starting the car. I suggested driving here myself, but Emilia told me she was pregnant, not dead.

"I'm fine."

My eyes land on the receipt in my hand. I bought the dress, but it won't be delivered until next week, which is when the wedding is taking place. In all the commotion of buying a dress, it only dawns on me now that my mom wasn't here to join me. She wasn't there for Gemma either, but that was because Gemma was kidnapped. With Emilia, she bought her a dress to marry Marco in. Yes, I had Emilia there with me, but I can't help but wonder what it would be like to have the kind of relationship with my mom where her helping me pick out a wedding dress doesn't feel like a chore. Where she doesn't always forget about me. Where she actually tries to be my mom instead of treating me like a burden.

A memory comes to me.

It was soon after the twins were born, a year after Dad died, and I was in the living room with a book about Michelangelo when Mom came into the room, carrying Lucia and Luca in each arm. She set them down on their playmats on the floor and spoke to them in a baby voice.

Antonio and Cecilia, who were thirteen and eleven at the time, came running through the house, laughing, when Antonio ran into a vase on the side table. It dropped to the ground, crashing into tiny pieces. The twins began wailing.

Mom looked up. “What are you two doing?” She hurried over to them. “What happened?”

Cecilia pointed at Antonio. “He did it.”

Mom sighed and ruffled Antonio’s hair. “Just be more careful next time.” Antonio never got into trouble like the rest of us, even though, I swear, he caused the most trouble after Gemma.

The two of them nodded and ran off. “I have to clean this up,” Mom muttered to herself. She looked back at the babies, and the sheer exhaustion on her face made me put my book down and ask her if she needed me to watch the babies for a moment.

Mom looked startled to see me, like she hadn’t noticed me sitting on the couch, even though I was there first. “Francesca. Uh, yes. That would be great.” She hurried into the kitchen to grab a broom.

I kneeled beside Lucia, who was still crying. Luca had calmed down by then. “You’re ok,” I told Lucia, picking her up and rocking her. She only cried harder in my arms. I was tense because I wasn’t used to carrying a baby around.

I wasn’t watching Luca as he scooted on his belly toward the wall socket.

“Luca!” Mom screamed as she came back into the room, dropping the broom and running over to him, lifting him up before he could stick his finger in the socket. “Oh my god.”

I turned toward them, feeling horribly guilty. “I’m sorry. I was trying to comfort Lucia.”

Mom shot me a glare that froze me. “How am I supposed to do anything around here when I can’t even trust you with the babies?” She set Luca in his playpen and snatched Lucia out of my arms. She instantly quieted down when she was in Mom’s arms.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, pushing back the urge to cry.

“Just go back to your book,” she muttered as she set Lucia in the playpen with Luca.

I started to sit down on the couch again when Mom looked at me. “Somewhere else,” she said, pointedly.

I hurried out of the room and went to my bedroom, where the tears truly began to fall.

“Fran?” Emilia’s voice snaps me back to the present.

I look up from the receipt. “Yeah?”

“We’re home.” She nods at Marco’s huge mansion in front of us. “You looked like you were zoning out.”

“Yeah.” I get out of the car without another word, pushing memories of my mom from my mind.

If she had joined Emilia and me dress shopping, she would have just found a way to make me feel bad about myself. It’s for the best that it was just Emilia and me.

That’s what I keep telling myself, anyways.

CHAPTER 10

Francesca

It's chaos in the foyer as my entire family shows up for the wedding. Family includes all my siblings, my mother, and Franco, as well as Viktor, who came with Gemma.

"Franny," Mia says, coming over to me. Mom is struggling with Lucia and Luca, who are running around her legs and playing tag. Antonio looks sullen. I thought he'd be happier because his eighteenth birthday is coming up. Cecilia is joined by her bodyguard Theo. He's the only guard who came with them, it seems. Cecilia can't keep her eyes off him, but he's focused on scanning the room, searching for any threat.

Emilia hugs Gemma and nods her welcome toward Viktor. Despite him being married into the family for four years now, Emilia still hasn't exactly warmed up to Viktor. She doesn't mess with the men who hurt her sisters; that's for sure.

Franco stays near the door, looking more annoyed than anything else. I wish he hadn't come. Staring at him reminds me of him smacking my mom across the face. Now that I know more the abuse Mom endures at his hands, I hate the sight of him.

"Franny, look." Mia holds out her phone. An image of a concert ticket takes up the photo. "Mom got me tickets to see BTS. Isn't that great?"

"Who?" I ask her.

She gives me a look only fourteen-year-old girls can give. "Only the best boy band ever."

“That’s great.” I give her a half hug, but she’s already distracted by a text on her phone as she wanders off.

Cecilia approaches me next. At sixteen, she’s looking more and more mature every day. In a few short years, it’ll be her turn to marry. I wonder if she’ll handle it better than me. My eyes flit to the cross around her neck. I think Cecilia will take marriage more seriously than any one of us. “Francesca,” she greets. “How have you been? You’ve been gone just over a week, and you’re already getting married. That’s amazing.”

“Thanks. It happened so fast, but—”

She turns away from me, grabbing her suitcase. “I’m going to head to my room. Ok?” She looks at Marco, who’s staying in the living room archway, out of the way of all my siblings. Smart man. “I can choose any room, right?”

“Of course. Just not mine or Emilia’s room. Or Francesca’s.”

“Great.” She turns to Theo. “Help me carry my bags up?”

He nods and, without a word, grabs her bag, his muscular arms bulging as he walks up the stairs. Cecilia looks like she might faint as she follows him.

“Stop, you two,” Mom hisses at Lucia and Luca, who are now hitting each other. “Behave.”

“I got it,” Emilia says, walking over to the twins. “Do you two want some ice cream?”

“Yeah!” they exclaim. Emilia smiles and shakes her head as she takes them out of the foyer and toward the kitchen.

Antonio nods at me as he brushes past me, heading upstairs. We don’t often talk, so I appreciate the nod. It’s more than usual.

“Getting married already,” Gemma says as she comes over. “Wow. That was fast. Emilia is a good match-maker, huh?” She leans in close to me. “Maybe even better than Mom.”

That makes me smile. “It’s ... complicated.”

“Uh-oh. That doesn’t sound good. Tell me all the juicy gossip.”

I look over at Mom and Franco, who are talking with Viktor and Marco. Gemma follows my gaze and nods, taking my arm with hers. “Let’s chat somewhere else.” We head into the dining room where it’s blissfully quiet. I didn’t realize how loud my family could be now that I’ve been away from them for a week.

“So, tell me everything.” Gemma settles into one of the chairs. I remain standing.

“What’s there to tell? I’m getting married.”

“Yeah. To Leo, Marco’s second. I’m amazed Marco—no, I’m amazed *Emilia*—allowed that. She’s told me before how much she hates the guy.”

“It’s a smart move, though. It helps cement the power between our family and Marco even more.”

Gemma grunts. “Yeah, it is smart. I’m still shocked it happened.”

I duck my head, unable to stop the burning in my cheeks. “Leo and I ... kissed,” I whisper.

“Shut the fuck up,” she says, swatting my arm. “You? Little Miss Prude herself.”

I shoot her a look. “Don’t be mean,”

She raises her hands in surrender “I’m just teasing. I just didn’t think you had it in you. How did that even happen?”

“He ... came into my room, and we ... kissed.”

Gemma practically falls off her chair, laughing so hard. “Oh my god. This is amazing! I’ve been cooped up with Viktor too long. I’m missing all the drama.”

“I’m glad I can amuse you.”

“Oh, I’m just messing with you, Fran.” She stands up and pulls me into a hug, surprising me. Gemma wasn’t always touchy-feely. I guess married life really has changed her. I wonder how much it will change me? “But, seriously,” she

says, pulling back. “Leo? That man is a womanizer. He couldn’t even keep his paws off you. And I’m sure Emilia and Marco made it clear to him you’re off limits.”

I shrug. “Not anymore, I guess.”

Gemma squints at me. “Are you happy, Fran? Is this something you want? Because I know what it’s like to not want to be married. Emilia, for how amazing she is, can never understand that. She always accepted and knew she’d be married one day.”

I want to tell Gemma I’m not ok. That I’m marrying a man because he was forced into it to protect me. That I don’t really trust him. That I don’t even trust myself. I still haven’t told any of my siblings about what I saw happen between Mom and Franco. I’ve been too scared. I’m still just a coward.

“I’m fine,” I tell her instead. “I just want to get tomorrow over with.”

“Stealing my wife, are you?” Viktor asks as he strolls into the room. He throws his arm around Gemma’s shoulders, and she leans into him with ease. No awkwardness at all. I wonder what that feels like. “Hey, Francesca.”

“Viktor.”

“I’m gonna take Gemma away now.” He checks his watch. “It’s been a few hours since we last fuc—” He grunts as Gemma elbows him in the side.

“What my husband is trying to say is that the flight was long, and we’re tired. We’re gonna go to our room.” They share a secretive smile as they walk away.

As I return to the foyer, I brace myself to see my mom and Franco. But when I reenter, it’s only Franco. My mom must have gone to find a room, and Marco is probably with Emilia.

“I’m proud of you,” he says to me, looking up from his phone. “Finding a man to marry right away. I didn’t know you had it in you. I thought you were going to be single forever, and that’s just never a good look for a woman.”

In Franco's presence, I always go speechless. Today is no exception.

"Cat got your tongue?" He smirks. "It'll be good to have you out of the house. One less mouth to feed. It's your husband's job now. Make sure he's taken care of. That's what a good wife does." With a nod, he leaves me standing there as he heads upstairs.

It's only when I can't see him anymore that I slump against the wall and focus on controlling my breathing, so I don't have another panic attack like at the bridal shop.

Tomorrow is going to be a long day.

MY WEDDING DRESS FITS PERFECTLY. I never knew I could look so pretty. The woman staring back at me in the mirror is the woman I've always wanted to be. Someone confident and elegant.

Inside, though, I'm screaming.

Emilia is pinning my hair into a wavy up-do. We're still at her house, only heading to the church once we're done getting ready. I haven't seen Leo in a week, not since Marco announced we'd be getting married. I kind of miss him.

"There." She pins one last hair in place. "Perfect. You're ready to go."

"I can't believe I'm getting married." Goosebumps rise on my skin. "It doesn't feel real."

"It didn't for me either. But I got through it, and so will you."

I want to remind Emilia she's so much braver than I am. Just because she got through it, doesn't mean I will.

Emilia and I loop arms as we walk downstairs, where the rest of my family is waiting on us. Antonio is tugging on his neckline, looking uncomfortable in his suit. Mom tells him to stop fussing and that he looks great. Cecilia doesn't even look

in my direction because her eyes are firmly set on Theo. She'll need to get over her crush before it's too late. Mia's acne has been covered up with makeup, and she already looks more confident than before.

Mom finally glances up and sees me, her eyes widening. "Francesca." She never even greeted me yesterday, and I haven't been down until today, what with my wedding nerves taking up all my attention.

"Mom." I wave my hands over my dress. "Do you like it?"

"I do. It's very ... you."

It's quiet in the room until Viktor clears his throat. "Everybody ready to go to a wedding?"

Mom turns away from me, her attention on the twins as she nudges them toward the door. Emilia squeezes my hand and gives me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about her. Today is your day."

That's what I'm worried about.

WE ARRIVE at a grand Catholic church with stained glass windows and huge arches. It almost looks like a movie set. I don't feel like I'm in my own skin. It's like I'm watching this happen to someone else.

Emilia guides me into a room off to the side of the main chapel where we'll wait for more guests to arrive. "You got this," she tells me. She winces and touches her stomach. "Baby is kicking. Ugh. I have to pee. I'll be right back, ok?"

I try to sit down, but the urge to pace is too strong, so I end up pacing the room as I wait for Emilia to return. When there's a knock on the door, I open it, expecting to see my oldest sister's face, but instead, it's my mom.

The shock of it almost makes me faint.

"Can I come in?" she asks, brushing past me before I can even say yes. "You're really getting married." Her eyes shine

as she shakes her head. “I never thought it would happen.”

“Why? You expect all your kids to marry one day.”

“True. I just never thought I’d get you to look up from your books long enough to actually meet a guy. I was going to do another arranged marriage, but I lost track of the time with the twins.” She pauses. “Francesca, I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help plan your wedding. Or make you a match. I should have been.”

Her words draw me up short. “Oh,” is all I can say.

“And I just want to say you look beautiful. Especially because you don’t quite have Emilia or Gemma’s looks.” I flinch. “So, I wanted you to know you’re still beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, turning away from her. How does my mom manage to give a compliment full of bite?

“I’ve got to head back out. See you in a little bit.” When the door clicks shut behind her, I let the tears come.

I always knew I was in Emilia and Gemma’s shadows, but to have my own mom say that to me hurts in a way I’ve never been hurt before.

The door opens again, but I keep my back to it. “I’m ok, Emilia,” I force out, trying to push down my tears.

“It’s not Emilia.” It’s definitely not because it’s Leo.

I spin around to face him, rapidly wiping my cheeks. “What are you doing in here? You’re not supposed to see the bride before the wedding.”

He shrugs, looking exceptionally handsome in a navy suit. “You know me. I like to break the rules. We haven’t had the chance to talk, and I wanted to before we got married.” He squints at me and seems to notice my tears for the first time. “Are you ok?”

“Do I look ok?” I snap before I can help myself.

Leo raises an eyebrow, letting out a low whistle. “Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.”

“What do you want, Leo?” I ask, feeling tired all of a sudden.

“Can’t a man check up on his soon-to-be-wife?”

“I didn’t think you cared.”

“Why wouldn’t I care?”

“Because you never wanted to get married!” I almost shout. Where is all this anger coming from?

“That’s right. And neither did you. Why are you upset?”

“Don’t act like you care. If you actually cared about me, you wouldn’t have snuck into my room, kissed me, and put us in this position in the first place.”

Leo takes two long strides to reach me. “Don’t act like you didn’t like our kiss. You kissed me back if I recall.”

I don’t have a response to that.

“I think you liked my attention,” he says in a low voice, sending shivers down my body. “I think you liked the kiss. Now that we’ll be husband and wife, we can kiss all we want. That doesn’t sound too bad if you ask me.”

“Is that all you think about? Kissing?”

“Well, a bit more than just kissing.” He gives me a charming smirk.

I shake my head and step away from him. “A marriage is about commitment. It’s not about lust. How do I know you’ll be faithful to me?”

“What makes you think I won’t be?”

“Because everyone has told me you’re bad news. That you’re a womanizer. I don’t trust you, Leo.” My skin feels hot, and my heart is racing. Blackness hits the edge of my vision.

“You don’t trust me? Fine. I’ll earn it, then. But trust this.” He grabs my face and presses his lips to mine. It startles me. Leo kisses me like he’s a dying man in search of water. I kiss him back before he pulls away. “Lust isn’t such a bad thing.”

I stumble away from him. “I just ... I need to think, ok? Just ...” God, it’s hot in here. I can barely breathe.

“I’ll see you out there.” With those words, he leaves the room.

Bending over, I place my hands on my knees, trying to control my breathing. I’m feeling more lightheaded by the moment.

It doesn’t help when there’s another knock at the door, and this time ... it’s *Henry* who walks in. What in the world?

“You need to know something before you marry him,” he says.

“What?” I gasp out. “What are you talking about?” I rest my hand on my chest, hoping something will get rid of this tightness. Nothing does.

“Leo. There’s something you need to know about him. He and I—we—we made this be—” He stops when Emilia comes back into the room.

“What’s going on?” she asks, looking between Henry and me. At the sight of my sister, I let everything go.

Which means I slump to the ground.

Emilia rushes over to me, pushing Henry out of the way, which is impressive because I know she’s been struggling to walk with her pregnancy. “Fran? Oh my god. Are you ok?” She tilts my head up, looking into my eyes. “Are you ok?”

“What’s going on?” Henry asks.

“Get help,” she says to him, not taking her eyes off me. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.

Henry runs out of the room, and that’s the last thing I see before darkness covers my vision.

THE MOST PAINFUL thing about getting married is that my father won’t be there to walk me down the aisle. He wasn’t

there for Emilia or Gemm, and he won't be there for any of our other siblings' weddings. He died a few days before Emilia got married to Marco back when I was only fourteen.

I remember his funeral vividly.

He looked so strange in his coffin. The makeup on his face was to give him life, but I knew he was gone for good. That he'd never open his eyes again. My siblings and I waited in a line to view our father. Mom was crying non-stop, and despite what she said to me—about how I was partly to blame for his death—I only felt pity for her. She lost the love of her life and had to take care of six kids. It was before the twins were born. Mom didn't find out she was pregnant with them until a month or so after Dad's funeral. The timeline was close enough for her to convince all of us that they were Dad's kids.

But now that Emilia told me the truth—that they're Franco's kids—it all makes so much sense.

Emilia didn't cry as she stared down at our dad. She had to be strong for the rest of us because between Cecilia, Mia, and Mom, there was no end to the intense crying. Even Gemma was shedding tears. Antonio kept a brave face, even though it was obvious he was fighting back tears.

As for me, I kept my tears hidden, using my hair as a barrier between myself and the rest of the attendees. There were so many of Dad's men I didn't know. It seemed strange how he had this entire other life with his job that none of us kids were a part of. These people were strangers, and yet, they knew my dad.

His funeral service passed by with Franco and Emilia giving eulogies for Dad. This was before Franco moved in, before he started abusing my mom, before he changed the dynamic of all our lives. He used his brother's death as a way to gain power. I always thought that was disgusting.

At the reception, which was held in a community center across the street, I kept to myself. I watched as Emilia comforted a crying Mia. Watched as Gemma and Antonio got into a fight over some spider. Mom, as always, took Antonio's side over Gemma. Cecilia remained by herself as well,

praying. I didn't share the same level of faith as her, so I didn't even have God to turn to.

A woman I didn't know sat down at the table with me. She was middle-aged with graying hair and laugh lines around her eyes. "How did you know Riccardo?" she asked, taking a bite of cheese from the plate in her hands.

I stared at her.

"My husband worked for him," she explains, pointing at a burly guy laughing in a corner with more of my dad's employees I'd never met. "Riccardo was good boss. How did you know him, dear?"

"He was my dad," I whispered, barely able to get the words out.

She placed her hand behind her ear. "What was that?"

I cleared my throat and tried again. "He was my dad."

"I'm sorry. I still couldn't hear you." She scooted closer to me. "What did you say?"

"He was my dad!" I screamed. She blanched. The room went quiet as everyone looked at me. Even Mom looked at me, a frown on her face. The woman seemed so affronted that I screamed at her that it just made me hate her. I'd never hated anyone before, but I hated her in that moment.

I pushed my chair back and walked to the restroom, shutting the door behind me. Through it, I could hear the chatter resume.

I went into a stall, sat on a toilet, and bawled my eyes out. I lost my father. He'd never make me smile again or comfort me or walk me down the aisle someday. He was gone.

I stayed in that bathroom for the rest of the reception.

Not even Emilia came to check in on me.

CHAPTER 11

Leo

“C ongratulations.”

Henry is standing outside my house after I open the door. The bastard, despite his words, looks annoyed with me.

I motion for him to come inside. His black shoes look stark against the white tile of my foyer. “It’s congratulations, now, is it?” I right my tie and smooth down my navy jacket.

“You’re on your way to your wedding,” he says. “I thought it was fitting. And I wanted to say congratulations because marrying Francesca means you’ve won the bet. You’ve officially seduced her.”

I wish I could rub it in Henry’s face, but I’m an honest man when it comes to the bets I make. “I haven’t actually seduced Francesca yet. She’s still a virgin.”

His lascivious grin Henry makes me want to punch him. “Not after tonight, I’m sure.”

“True. But she has to be willing. Only then can I win the bet.” I pat his arm. “So, there’s still a chance for you to win yet.”

That cheers Henry up. “Good to know. I just assumed that if you two were getting married, you’d succeeded in seducing her.”

“I still have time. And now that we’ll be married, Francesca will warm up to me in no time.”

“You do that. I’m heading to the church. See you there.”
Henry saunters toward his car.

Even though Francesca and I will be married, Henry’s words are a reminder I still have work to do. I was against marrying her because I’m not the marrying kind, but maybe this is for the best. It will make seducing Francesca easier.

And I still have a bet to win.

MARCO INTERCEPTS me when I arrive at the church. Guests are milling about, but the bride has not yet arrived. “Leo,” he says, stopping me from entering. “I need to say this before you go in there.”

“Ok ...”

“Don’t fuck this up.”

I blink, then laugh. “I’m not a complete idiot, Marco. I know you’ll have my head if I hurt Francesca.” And it’s true. My job is on the line if I mess up with her. Another reason I didn’t want to get married. It also means I won’t be able to continue my escapades with other women. If Marco found out I was cheating on Francesca, he really would kill me. Though I haven’t even looked at another woman since starting my challenge with Francesca. She’s taking up enough space in my mind; I haven’t even noticed other women.

“No,” Marco says. “I won’t have your head. Emilia will. And she’s the one you need to fear. She’s like a lioness when it comes to her siblings. As I said”—he leans in close to my ear—“don’t fuck this up.”

“I promise,” I say in a more serious tone. “I won’t let you down.” Which means I need to win this bet; otherwise, Henry will have my job.

The church is already packed with people when I enter. Emilia leaves a room off to the side of the church, which tells me exactly where Francesca is. So, I decide to go to her.

Judging by her reaction when she opens the door, she was not expecting me. I know it's taboo to see the bride before the wedding but I couldn't resist, and Francesca looks truly stunning in her wedding dress. I can't wait to peel it off her tonight and make her mine. But I need her to come to my bed of her volition and not out of a duty. That's key.

I thought kissing her would help things, but when she pushes me away and tells me to go, I'm confused. I thought most women would be ecstatic to marry me. Francesca, once again, proves how different she is.

After I leave, I see Henry sneak off toward Francesca's room. Why does he want to see her? I'm about to go after him when Emilia steps into my path.

"Leo," she says, eyeing me over critically.

"Emilia," I repeat in her same tone. "Don't worry. Marco already gave me the talk. Don't fuck up. I know, I know. I will treat Francesca well to the best of my abilities."

"Nope. Not good enough." She steps out of the way as two of Marco's employees walk past and take a seat in one of the pews. "Not to the best of your abilities. Just treat her right. You're going to regret it if you don't."

"I can't wait till you're my sister-in-law." I give her a hug. She tenses within my hold, but I don't let go right away. She pushes me back and tells me she's going to check in on Francesca.

I watch her go. When I look over at the dais where the priest is getting ready for the ceremony, it truly dawns on me. I'm getting married today. No more conniving plans to hurt women. It's just Francesca and me from now on until ... forever. Shit. I don't know how I'm going to do this. My plan was just to have sex with her—not marry her. I don't think married life will be that easy for me.

Then I hear Emilia screaming for help.

I don't hesitate to run toward the room, where multiple people are congregating and trying to look in. I push past them

into the room. Francesca is on the floor, her eyes closed. Emilia is kneeling beside her, and I hurry to her side.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“She just passed out.”

My eyes flit to Henry, who’s in the room. I want to ask him what he was doing talking to Francesca, but now is not the time. I focus on my bride-to-be.

“Francesca.” I gently pat her cheek. “Fran?” After checking her pulse, I relax a little. “What made her pass out?”

Emilia shakes her head. “I’m not sure. It just happened.”

“Fran.” I pull her head into my lap and shake her.

“Be gentle,” Emilia snaps.

“I am.”

She turns to Henry. “Call 9-1-1.” He nods and grabs his phone. As if she knows the chaos she’s causing, Francesca opens her eyes. Emilia cries out. “Francesca? Are you ok?”

Francesca’s mom bursts into the room. Giulia is a force to be reckoned with I’ve noticed in the few times I’ve met her. She hurries over to us. “Is she ok?”

Francesca frowns when she looks up at me. “What’s going on?”

“You passed out,” Emilia explains.

I help Fran sit up slowly. “What happened?” She shakes her head and keeps her eyes down.

“I just felt lightheaded, then ...”

“Grab some water,” Emilia orders her mom. Giulia nods, grabs the nearest water glass, and holds it to Francesca’s mouth. Fran takes a small sip before sitting back.

“I’m ok,” she says. “Really,” she emphasizes when we all give her a dubious look. “I feel better now.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have the wedding,” I say. Emilia shoots me a glare.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Hey. I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant ... maybe Francesca isn’t up for getting married today.”

“Well, maybe we should ask Francesca.”

We both turn to her, and she flinches. “I’m ... ok. I just want to get it over with.”

“Tell me how you really feel,” I tease. She smiles slightly as I help her stand. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?” I ask murmur so only she can hear.

She meets my gaze and holds it for a moment before nodding. “I’ll be fine. Thank you for ... helping me.”

“What are husbands for?”

“Not my husband yet.”

I squeeze her hands. “Well, in just a few minutes, I will be.” Even though the thought terrifies me.

Francesca steps away from me, turning to the group of people. “I’m fine. Truly.” There’s a collective sigh of relief. Emilia pulls her into a hug while their mom watches on. I stand there, feeling awkward. I’m never awkward. It’s a strange sensation.

“I’ll meet you out there,” I tell Fran.

“Actually.” She pulls away from her sister. “I don’t have my dad to walk me down the aisle. Marco was going to do it for me. But ... do you think we could walk down together?” I don’t know what to say. “I know it’s not conventional, but ...”

I give Fran a sincere smile. “I’d like that.” And that’s the truth.

I HOLD my arm out for Francesca to take, and she does with a small smile. The music swells. Everyone turns to look at us.

And then we start walking.

I can see the confused frowns and smiles as our guests watch us walk down the aisle together. Giulia looks like she wants to snatch me away from her daughter and make her walk on her own. I need to get Francesca's trust if I'm ever going to succeed at sleeping with her.

And I don't know ... there was something unsettling about seeing Francesca on the ground, passed out. A feeling in my chest I wasn't used to—fear.

I don't have feelings for Francesca. I can't. When it comes to the things I do to women, it's easier to just turn my feelings off. So, I have no clue why Francesca is instilling things within me. It's not normal.

We reach the priest and let go of each other to stand opposite one another. I try to let go of Francesca's hand, but she grips my fingers tighter. She shoots a nervous look at the guests, and it dawns on me—she's nervous. Being in front of a large crowd like this is probably not high on Francesca's bucket list.

"You're ok," I whisper to her, and it seems to ease her. Huh. Interesting.

The priest begins the ceremony. Francesca keeps her eyes glued to mine and her fingers locked with mine, not looking away or letting go once.

"Do you, Leo Benetti," the priest says, breaking me out of my trance, "take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

I pause. I need to say yet, but to say yes means my life will change forever. Marco clears his throat from the pew. I look over at him, and he nods at me, silently telling me to say something.

Francesca's hopeful gaze becomes confused as she waits for me to speak.

With a deep breath, I say, "I do." It surprises me how easy it was to say given how much I never wanted this to begin with.

The priest turns to Francesca. “And do you, Francesca Moretti, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do,” she whispers. It’s so quiet, even I can barely hear her, and I’m right in front of her.

“What was that?” the priest asks gently.

Francesca flushes. “I do,” she says in a slightly louder voice.

The priest smiles. “And I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

I cup Francesca’s face and lower my lips to hers, giving her a simple, lingering kiss. When I pull back, Francesca looks relieved.

She’s silent as we walk back down the aisle, everyone cheering around us, and out to the car that will take us to the reception. Francesca lets out a deep sigh when we get into the car. The loudness of the crowd is instantly muted once I shut the door behind us. The driver takes off.

“I guess that’s it,” I say, settling into my seat beside her. “We’re married.”

“We’re married.”

Neither one of us look at each other. And we don’t until we reach the venue.

I want to ask Francesca how she’s feeling, but I figure, because neither of us exactly asked for this, that I can reckon a guess. We’re just gonna have to make the most of this.

Francesca holds onto my arm as we walk into the reception, which is being held in the ballroom of one of the best hotels in the city. The moment we walk through the doors and the guests cheer for us, Francesca flinches and tightens her hand on my arm. I slip my own hand over hers, reminding her she’s not in this alone.

The singer of the band announces our first dance, and I lead Francesca onto the dance floor. The room is decorated in fine white and crystals. It’s like stepping into wonderland.

Francesca is tense as I place my hands on her hips, and we begin to sway. “Everything all right?” I ask.

“Everyone is watching us,” she whispers, nodding to the guests mingling around the dance floor.

“That’s kind of the point.”

“I know, but I hate it. It makes me feel like an animal in the zoo.”

I grip her hips tighter. “I have an idea. Place your head against my chest and close your eyes. You can forget all these people are here. It’ll be just you and me.”

Francesca eyes me warily for a moment before doing as I suggest. Her hair smells like flowers, and I lean in to get an even better whiff. Her arms tighten around my shoulders. We continue to sway together.

Looking down at Francesca’s closed eyes, I’m struck by how beautiful she is. And she’s all mine. I never thought I’d be excited to deflower a woman, but with Francesca, I look forward to making her all mine and winning the bet.

The bet.

The slightest twinge of guilt washes over me at the reminder.

When I look up from Francesca, my eyes catch Henry at the edge of the crowd. What is he planning, I wonder?

The song finishes, and Francesca opens her eyes, looking up at me as we stop swaying. “It’s over?”

“It’s over. Did that help?”

“It did, actually. Thank you,” she says like she’s surprised to be saying it. I honestly can’t blame her. Everyone keeps telling her to be wary around me. It makes sense she doesn’t trust me.

I guide Fran over to the main table, where her mom, Emilia, and Marco are. The rest of her siblings are gathered around another table, and Franco is off by himself.

“That was a lovely dance,” Giulia says as we take our seats. “I didn’t know you could dance, Leo.”

“I didn’t either.” That makes her laugh.

“I’m honestly surprised Francesca got up there with you. She’s so shy.”

Fran sits lower in her seat. I grab her hand under the table and squeeze. It seems to reassure her, given she flashes me a quick, grateful smile.

“Mom,” Emilia cuts in, “Fran doesn’t like to be reminded of her shyness.” Even though Emilia is trying to help, it’s clear it only makes Francesca more uncomfortable.

Giulia blinks in surprise. “I don’t think I said anything wrong.”

Everyone goes quiet at the table. I catch Henry’s eye as he walks past. Standing up, I give Fran a squeeze on the shoulder before letting her know I’ll be right back.

“Ok,” she says in a disappointed tone. I hesitate. Should I stay and comfort her? I sort of want to, but I need to ask Henry what he was doing talking to Francesca before our wedding.

After a beat, I nod and head after Henry. Emilia watches me go with a glare on her face. I find Henry by the buffet of food, grabbing one dinner roll after another.

“What were you doing talking to Fran before the wedding?”

Henry lifts an eyebrow. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I resist the urge to slam him into the food. “I saw you in the room with her. I know you’re trying to ruin my chances before I can complete the bet. So, what did you say to her?”

“Worry not.” He grabs another roll and contemplates setting it on his plate before putting it back. “I was about to tell her about the bet, but then her sister came in, and Francesca fainted, and that was the end of it. Happy?” He starts to walk away, but I stop him.

“No, not happy. You’re not supposed to tell Francesca about the bet. That goes against the rules. From now on, you’re never to talk to her again. Understood?”

“Don’t worry, Leo. You married the girl. If you can’t seduce her within a month after that, then all hope is lost for the rest of us sore losers.” I watch him go, carrying his plate filled so high, the food is in danger of falling off.

I head back to Francesca, who looks miserable as she listens to her mom talk about all the times Francesca was too shy to do something.

“There was this one time,” Giulia says, “where she was supposed to perform at her dance recital, but she froze. I told her that if she wouldn’t dance, she’d have to stop the classes. So, she stopped the class. I always found that interesting.”

“Mom,” Emilia says in a tired voice. “Let’s talk about something else. The baby has been kicking a lot more the closer I get to my due date. Isn’t that cool?”

Giulia’s eyes light up as she turns her attention to Emilia. Francesca looks relieved.

“Want to get out of here?” I ask her softly.

“But the party won’t end for another few hours.”

I shrug. “So? We have a private suite we can go to. Let’s get out of here. Just the two of us. Get away from the madness.” I nod at all the people dancing and drinking and eating and talking.

“All right,” she says after a moment.

“Great.” I grab her hand and take her away. Emilia watches us go but doesn’t say anything.

Francesca looks relieved when we leave the party behind and head up to the suite I booked for the night. She’s so quiet; it’s almost easy to forget she’s standing next to me. That relieved look on her face disappears once we enter the room, worry replacing it.

This is it. The time to make Francesca mine. But even marriage isn’t enough unless she comes to me willingly.

Francesca turns away from the king-sized bed, her face flushed. “So ...”

“So ...” I go over to her, taking her hand in mine. “Ready for tonight?” God, I am.

She nods hesitantly, and my hope rises until she quickly shakes her head, dashing them. “I know it’s my duty to do this. We’re married after all. But ... I still don’t really know you that well. I don’t feel comfortable having sex. But if you want to, I ... I guess I’ll do it.”

And there it is again. That damn guilt.

I sigh. “No. We don’t have to do it. if you’re not ready, then ... that’s it.” And the bet will have to wait another day to be completed.

She lets out a rough breath, giving me a smile. “Thank you, Leo. That means a lot.” She looks back at the bed. “So ... what are we going to do, then?”

“Talk?”

She laughs. “You sound like you don’t know what to do. You don’t talk to women much, do you?”

“No. I normally prefer kissing to talking.” And other things, but I’m not about to freak Francesca out.

Fran flushes and pulls away from me, going over to the bed and sitting down tentatively. “What do we want to talk about?”

I take off my jacket and sit down next to her. “Honestly? I have no idea.”

She grabs my hand. “I guess we’ll figure it out together.”

And that’s exactly what we do for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 12

Francesca

“**W**ait. That really happened?” I ask Leo.

He shifts on the bed, his suit wrinkled. “It did. I peed in front of the entire class. I was so embarrassed. And Mr. Karn didn’t let me forget it. Every time I asked to go to the bathroom after that, he’d say, ‘Why not just go in your pants? That’s what you did last time’.” Leo says it in a stuffy, old man’s voice. “I never lived it down. The rest of the year, I was known as Pee Pants.”

“An original nickname.”

He slants his eyes at me, a smile on his lips. “To a class full of ten-year-olds? Yes, it was.” He rubs a hand over his face. “God, it killed me. I told my mom I couldn’t ever go back to school again.”

I scoot closer to him. My wedding dress is digging into my back, but I don’t care. Leo and are actually talking with each other, and it’s so much better than I thought it could be. “What did she say?”

“She took pity on me and let me have a sick day ... until my dad found out and forced me to go to school.”

“That’s no fun.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t. Remind me to never give a presentation on the geography of Europe ever again.”

I laugh softly as I lean back against the pillows. “What was it about the geography of Europe that made you so nervous?”

“There was so much to remember!” He shakes his head and smiles ruefully. “It haunted me throughout the rest of elementary school. When middle school came around, I was determined to be a new man.”

“A twelve-year-old man,” I tease.

“You laugh, but I was seriously determined. Until I realized most of my classmates from elementary school came with me. So, that was great.”

“Oh, no. How long did the nickname stick?”

He pauses. “Till I was sixteen in high school and my dad moved us to a different city.” His eyes darken for a moment before he turns to me. “So, any embarrassing stories I need to know about you if we’re going to make this marriage work?”

“Hmm.” I lay down, resting my hands on my stomach. Who knew I could ever feel so at ease with someone? Before today, I was dreading marrying Leo because I didn’t trust him. But now, we’ve been talking for the past hour, and it’s been wonderful. It’s been ... fun. Maybe I shouldn’t trust it. Leo is incredibly charming, after all. He could still find a way to hurt my heart.

But so far, he hasn’t seemed anything other than sincere. It makes it hard to know what to believe.

“One embarrassing story from my childhood ... My family and I went to Coney Island when I was twelve. Mom just bought me my first bra.” Leo quirks an eyebrow, and I have to look away to keep myself from blushing. “And I felt embarrassed about it, but Emilia reassured me and told me it was perfectly fine. So, anyway, we get to the theme park, and all my siblings want to go on the rollercoaster. I didn’t want to. I found them terrifying, honestly. But I went anyway. And I discovered it was a lot of fun. I felt ... free, riding it.” I turn back to him, rolling onto my side. “It was some of the most fun I ever had as a kid.” I pause. “Until I got off the ride.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?” He shifts onto his side as well, so we’re eye to eye. Being this close to Leo makes my stomach flutter.

“My shirt had slid down, exposing my bra. And, of course, my brother, Antonio noticed and pointed at me, laughing and saying, ‘Francesca has boobs.’” I sigh. “He was ten and immature.”

Leo chuckles. “Honestly, I probably would’ve said the same thing when I was his age. I wasn’t known for being the most mature.”

“And if that wasn’t embarrassing enough, there was this man who came off the ride behind us. A grown man. He heard my brother make his comment and looked at me. The way he ... the way he smiled when he saw me sent chills over me. It was scary.”

A darkness enters Leo’s eyes as he frowns and grabs my hand. “He was a creep?”

“Yeah. I quickly pulled my shirt up, but the man’s eyes lingered on me after that. It was incredibly embarrassing. What made it even worse was my mom didn’t even call Antonio out for his comment. She just shook her head at him as if ‘boys will be boys.’ And then she told me to be careful about what shirts I wear in the future.”

“Was your dad there with you? If that were my daughter, I’d clock the guy who looked at her like that.”

“This coming from the man who never even wanted to be married?” I ask. “I didn’t think you’d want to be a dad.”

He shrugs, not meeting my eyes. “I’m just saying ...”

“Yeah, my dad was there, but he was off buying cotton candy for Mia. She was too young to go on the ride. When he came back, no one told him what happened. I didn’t ... even though I wanted to.”

“How come you didn’t say anything?”

“Because,” I say, clearing my throat, “I struggle to stand up for myself. It’s not something I’m good at.”

“You stand up to me well enough. You told me you didn’t want to have sex tonight. You told me you didn’t trust me. You told me exactly how you felt about roses.” This makes me

smile. “See? You’re not afraid to tell me what’s on your mind, even if I don’t want to hear it. Other than Marco and your sister, no one has ever really done that before. Most women I meet tell me what I like to hear.”

“And what is it you like to hear?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He stretches his arms over head, giving me a small glimpse of his lower stomach as his shirt rides up. The sight makes me feel lightheaded. “How handsome I am?” Leo flashes me that disarmingly charming smile. “How amazing I am?”

“You have a big ego, you know that?”

“So, I’ve been told.” His smile turns to a frown. I want to reach out to him and smooth it away, but I resist the urge. “I know we haven’t known each other long, Fran. And I know neither of us wanted this marriage. But you ... make me feel things I haven’t ever felt before.”

I roll onto my back, keeping my eyes glued to the ceiling. “You’re just saying that.”

“No. It’s true.” He grabs my hand and laces our fingers together. There’s that electricity again. “We’re stuck together now, whether we want to be or not. You’re not like—”

I groan. “Do not say ‘I’m not like other girls.’”

His eyes widen. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Because it’s not true. I’m nothing special. I’m not spectacular or a genius or a supermodel. I’m a girl who likes going to museums and study art. Plenty of other women are like that.”

“But you were the one who told me you loved lilies over roses because they were more unique.”

“Yes, but that wasn’t meant to be symbolic. I just prefer lilies to roses.”

He stares at me with a slight smile on his lips. I look at him, then look away before looking back to see him still staring at me.

“What?” I ask.

“You don’t want to hear it, but you really are unlike any woman I’ve ever met.”

“How so?”

He traces his fingertips along my arm, sending goosebumps along my skin. I’m so distracted by it that it’s almost hard to pay attention to what he says. “All the women I’ve met before were quick to want to sleep with me.” I frown. I don’t really want to imagine Leo with other women. “But you ... you’ve made me work for your affection. I’m not used to it.”

“How do you know those women were so different from me? They might have just gotten caught up in your charms.” *I know I am, and I’m trying not to.* “Did you ever have conversations with them?”

Leo pauses before saying, “Uh, not really.” He has the decency to look sheepish.

“See? There you go. If you had, you probably wouldn’t be saying I’m so different.” I look at him more closely. “Do you respect women, Leo?”

Something flashes behind his eyes. “Of course.”

“Really?”

He sighs deeply and looks away from me. “I’m trying to. I respected your decision tonight.”

“You did. And I’m appreciative of that. But you don’t exactly get brownie points for not forcing me to have sex with you.”

“Not even one?”

Despite my efforts, I smile at his charming expression. “No. Not even one. If you want me to trust you, you need to show me you can respect me *and* other women.”

“But,” he says, leaning in close to me and making me breathless, “you’re my wife. You’re the only woman I care about now.”

I gulp and pull my eyes away from his lips. “And that’s the problem. Emilia told me you’re not good with women. The only reason we’re married is because you were forced into it. You can’t just respect me. It has to be all women. Only then can I see our marriage working.”

“You really know how to test a man.” He huffs, rubbing a hand over his face. “Ok, fine. I’ll try to be better. Deal?” He holds out his hand to me.

“Don’t try. Do it. Deal?” I hold my hand out. I can’t believe how bold I’m being with Leo, but it feels right. For some reason, around him, I don’t feel as shy as I normally am.

What I like is that Leo doesn’t immediately grab my hand. He thinks about what I just said before reaching out and clasping it.

“Deal.”

WE SPEND the next few hours talking and laughing together, sharing more embarrassing childhood stories. I end up falling asleep in my wedding dress.

Waking up next to Leo is a surreal experience. This handsome, charming, slightly dangerous man is my husband. I’ve made my family proud and grown their influence with this union. I’ve also found someone I enjoy talking to, and that means the most to me.

Leo jerks awake, startling me. He looks wildly around like he doesn’t know where he is before settling his eyes on me and relaxing. “Oh.”

“Are you ok?” I ask, gently touching his arm.

“Sorry.” He rubs a hand over his face and into his hair, making it messy. “I just ... forgot where I was for a moment.”

“Bad dream?”

“More like a nightmare.”

I want to ask him about it, but he looks so unsettled that I don't. "It's morning," I say instead.

He turns to the window, where a shaft of light is coming in. "Uh. Look at that." He clears his throat and stands up. "I should change before we leave for the day. This suit is rubbing me in places in I don't really want rubbed." He flashes me that charming smile before dashing into the bathroom. That was weird. I've never seen Leo look anything other than confident. I wonder what kind of nightmare he had.

My dress is feeling suffocating all of a sudden, too, so I strip out of it as fast as I can before Leo can come back out. But before I can slip my leggings and top on, Leo steps into the room and freezes when he sees me in nothing but my bra and underwear.

I freeze, too. Leo's mouth drops open before he snaps it shut. It would be funny if I wasn't standing before him, almost naked. I cover my body with my bundle of clothes.

Leo rakes his eyes over me before averting his gaze. "Uh. Hmm. Ok." Is he ... nervous? I never expected that. "Sorry. I'll just ..." He points at his phone on the nightstand before grabbing it and keeping his back to me. "Just pretend I'm not even here."

I quickly put my top and pants on. "Ok." The heat in my cheeks refuses to go away, even after I'm clothed.

Leo turns back around, his eyes giving off an intensity that makes me both want to run away and kiss him again. "So ..."

"So ..."

We both laugh, diffusing the tension.

"Right." Leo holds up his phone. "We should probably head out. I don't think the hotel staff will appreciate us staying past eleven."

"I guess I'm moving in with you now?" We never had the chance to talk before the wedding about these things.

"Yeah. I mean, I assumed so. I doubt Emilia wants me moving in with her and Marco."

“Of course.” We both look at each other, neither saying anything.

It’s Leo who breaks the awkwardness. “Shall we?” He holds his hand out toward the door.

“We shall.” Internally, I wince, feeling like a dork.

Leo and I are silent as he drives us to his house. The huge Spanish mansions in his neighborhood are almost too large to comprehend. As we pass a large fig tree, I realize I never thought LA had anything but palm trees. It’s a gorgeous area, almost more than the one I grew up in. New York is so different from this place; they could be two different worlds. I thought I’d be more homesick for New York, but I’m starting to realize maybe LA is the right place for me.

Leo pulls into a huge circular driveway. His house is a legitimate mega-mansion, and my eyes practically bug-out at the sight of it. “Welcome home,” he says.

“Is that weird for you to say?”

He shuts the car off. “Honestly? Yeah, a little. I never thought I’d live with a woman, so ...”

Leo takes me inside and shows me around. The house isn’t quite as large as Marco’s, and its layout is simpler, but I still get a little lost as Leo shows me room after room. The final room he takes me to is clearly the master bedroom. It’s decorated in all dark and moody colors, black and dark red. I don’t know how Leo sleeps in here. It’s more like a dungeon than a bedroom.

“Do you like it?” he asks. “I’ve never had any other women complain—” He stops himself, wincing. “Sorry. Shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’ve brought other women here?” Why wouldn’t he?

Leo shrugs, not giving me a clear answer, which makes the answer all the more clear.

I turn to him, pushing the thought of him with other women from my mind and ask, “Are you open to redecorating?”

MY FAMILY COMES over to say goodbye before heading back to New York. Franco isn't with them, for which I'm grateful.

Antonio whistles when he steps foot through the door. "Nice place."

"Don't even think about moving to LA," Mom says, ruffling his hair, which he tries to duck away from. "You belong in New York."

"When I take over after I turn eighteen, I know, I know. I was just saying it's a nice place."

Leo chuckles and shakes his hand. "Thanks. Bought it with blood money, but who's asking." It takes everyone a moment to realize he's joking.

Mia gives me a half-hug. "I'll miss you." Though I doubt it because she doesn't even look up from her phone.

After giving the rest of my siblings a goodbye hug—which is just as awkward for me as it is for them—I turn to my mom.

"I guess this is it," I say. "I probably won't be coming back to New York for a while."

She pulls me into a deep hug, one I didn't expect. "I do love you, Francesca."

Her words make my eyes sting as I hold back tears.

"I'm proud of you." She steps back, smiling at me. "You did good, marrying someone with a high rank like Leo. It's what any mother would want."

I want to ask her why she ignored me so much if she's always loved me, but the words don't come. They never seem to when it comes to my mom.

"Come on, Lucia." She grabs the five-year-old's hand. "Luca." He snaps his head toward her, then runs over. "We have our flight to catch." Mom takes a moment to look at me—really look at me—before turning away.

I wave goodbye to my family and watch them go.

My mom always sends complicated emotions through me. Bitterness over her behavior toward me, desperation for her to show me love, and the love I have for her as my mother.

Watching her wrangle the twins into the car reminds me of my high school graduation.

I was waiting in the backstage area where they kept all the kids before they took their seats in the arena. My phone rang, and I saw it was Emilia.

“I’m here,” she said. “I can’t wait to see you come out and accept your diploma.”

“Are you with Marco?” I asked.

“Yep. He made the effort to come, which was nice.”

I ask the question I didn’t want to know but needed to. “Is Mom there yet?”

“Uh ... I don’t see her.”

Disappointment dashed my heart in two. “The twins had a karate presentation tonight, but she said she’d make it.”

“I’m sure she’ll come.” Always the good sister. Reassuring me even when we both knew Mom probably wasn’t coming.

When the time came for me to walk on stage and get my diploma, I scanned the audience and found Emilia and Marco with Gemma and Viktor. My younger siblings weren’t there because it was a school night, and they had homework.

No sign of my mom.

I kept the smile on my face, took the diploma, and scurried off the stage. After receiving hugs from my sisters and congratulations from my brothers-in-law, I drove myself home and found my mom in the living room.

She was sipping a glass of wine with her feet up on the coffee table. Franco was nowhere in sight, and she looked more comfortable than I’d seen her since my dad’s death.

“When did the twins’ karate thing end?” I asked, stepping into the room in my graduation gown.

Her eyes widened when she saw me, her feet dropping to the ground. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Because it was my graduation, Mom, and you weren’t there.”

“But I had the twins—”

“I know. But when did it end?”

She looked at the clock on the wall. “Two hours ago.”

So, long enough for her to see me graduate, and she didn’t even make the effort. “Ok,” I whispered and walked away.

“Fran, wait.” She followed me. “I’m sorry. I should have been there, but—”

“It’s fine.” What I really wanted to say was “no buts.” There was no excuse for her to miss my graduation. “I just want to go to bed.” I left her there, looking guilty, and I felt glad. She should feel guilty for not being there. That was some consolation, at least.

I’m snapped back to the present when Leo says my name. I blink and look at him, taking my gaze off the car my family’s rental car as they get farther and farther away.

“Yes?”

His lips form a sneaky smile. “You want to get out of here?”

“And do what?”

“Have a day of fun.”

I smile back at him. “That sounds amazing.”

WHICH IS how we end up at Knott’s Berry Farm, a theme park about an hour away from where Leo lives. “A theme park?” I ask. “After the story I told you last night?”

“That’s exactly why I think we should go. You should have some new memories when it comes to rollercoasters. Happier ones. Come on.” He grabs my hand, and we walk toward the gate to buy tickets.

Once inside, Leo takes me toward the first rollercoaster he sees. It’s a huge wooden one, and I hear people’s screams as they zip by on the tracks. The smell of popcorn is in the air, and laughter and shouts of fear and excitement can be heard no matter where I turn. People are smiling as they walk past, holding popcorn or eating hotdogs. There’s something magical about the pure excitement on everyone’s faces as they go from ride to ride.

“I’m not sure,” I tell Leo as we get in line for the coaster. “What if something bad happens again?”

“Nothing bad will happen this time. I promise.” He holds out his hand to me. “Trust me?”

At this moment? “Yes,” I say, taking his hand, and together, we get onto the rollercoaster. I’m shaking as I get strapped in, but Leo grabs my hand and squeezes it.

“You got this,” he tells me. I want to believe him.

The rollercoaster starts and heads up, up, up, until we’re at the drop point. “Oh my god,” I mutter. Then the coaster takes a nosedive, and we’re off. Wind whips my hair around. The falling sensation sends me straight to screaming. Leo laughs beside me and throws his hands into the air.

As the coaster continues its journey, I start to get more comfortable, and I join Leo in throwing my arms up and screaming for joy. This feeling ... it’s pure freedom. It’s happiness. It’s the sense that everything will be all right for a few short minutes.

Leo and I share a glance as we scream and laugh. For the first time since meeting him, I can see myself falling in love with him.

And that’s a terrifying thought.

The rollercoaster ends with a sudden jerk as we’re brought back to the station. Leo holds my hand as we get off and

stumble our way back into the main part of the park.

“Well?” he asks me, grinning like a madman.

“Nothing embarrassing happened.”

“Good.” He looks so beautiful with his messy hair and wide grin, which, for once, isn’t sexual in nature or hiding a secret. It’s a pure, happy grin, plain and simple.

Before I can stop myself, I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him. It’s the first time I’ve ever initiated a kiss with him—or anyone—and it feels ... right. Leo doesn’t hesitate to kiss me back as he wraps his arms around my waist. It’s glorious, this kiss. It’s the taste of happiness.

Until some kid runs past us, bumping into me, and we break apart.

Leo’s eyes soften as he looks down at me. “What was that for?”

“For making an effort with me.”

“I’ll just have to do that more often.”

Together, we hold hands as we walk deeper into the park.

CHAPTER 13

Leo

“Leo, where are you taking me?” Francesca asks. Despite it being dark out, traffic is still a bitch as we drive on the highway. That’s LA for you.

“It’s a surprise,” I tell her. I can’t stop thinking about our kiss yesterday, how Fran took the initiative. She’s been slow to open up, but I’ve noticed she responds well to deep conversation. Fran is an intellectual. She connects through a mental connection, not a physical one. I’ve had to change my strategy because of it.

The thing is, though, the more I *talk* to Fran, the more I start to like her. Truly like her. She’s becoming less and less of a bet to me and more of a human being.

More of a wife.

The more I think about the bet, the guiltier I feel over it. Of course, I hope to have sex with Francesca one day. She’s absolutely beautiful. But now, it’s less about the bet and more because I want to be with her.

I pull into a parking garage and stop the car. “I think you’re going to like this.” I came up with the idea after Fran told me how much she loved museums on our wedding night and how she hadn’t had the chance to go to too many yet.

I’ve realized I want to do something nice for her. Not just to win her over, but because I like to see her smile. There’s a fragileness to Fran that makes me want to protect her. I want to see her happy. It’s a strange sensation.

We hold hands as we walk down the street. “Seriously, where are we going?” she asks, craning her head to look around. Cars whiz by, even in the dark of night.

“I called and paid a hefty donation to have the place all to ourselves tonight.”

“What are you talking about?”

We finally reach it—The Natural History Museum. With its arched columns and red and sandy brick, it’s a sight to behold.

Fran gasps. “We’re going here?”

“Yep. We have all the whole place just for us. We’re spending the night.”

Her eyes widen comically as she looks from me to the museum and back to me again. “We’re actually spending the night in the museum?”

“Don’t make a joke of it,” I tease.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she says, breathless. Without warning, she throws her arms around me in a fierce hug. “Thank you, Leo. This means a lot.” She pulls back, eyeing me warily. “What’s the catch?”

“There is no catch. I wanted to do something nice for you. I also just thought it would be cool to spend the night in a museum.”

“How much did it cost to do this?” she asks as we approach the front doors.

“Money doesn’t matter.” I open the door for her and motion her inside. “But if you want to know how much—a lot.” As she looks around in awe, I know it was worth every penny I spent to do this.

A T-rex greets us in the museum’s entryway. Its large size is impressive. Fran immediately goes up to it, marveling at the sight of it.

“Never seen a dinosaur before?” I ask, as I join her side.

She shoots me a teasing look. “Of course. At the Natural History Museum in New York.”

“Well, I have it on good authority this one here is much better.”

“Do you, now?”

“I do.” I wrap my arms around her from behind, and for once, Fran doesn’t tense up. In fact, she leans back against mine. Progress. I’ll take it.

“Do you think you could take it?” She nods up at the T-rex. “Something tells me you have just the right amount of ego to think you could take on a T-rex.”

“Are you teasing me, Mrs. Bennetti?”

She frowns. “Huh. It’s weird to know I have a different last name now. I’m not used to it. I’m still a Moretti at heart.”

“I’ll make a Bennetti out of you yet.” I plant a kiss on her neck, making her shiver and gasp.

Fran clears her throat and pulls away from me slightly. I have to do things on her terms, I remind myself. “You didn’t answer my question.”

I study the T-rex for a moment, taking in its long legs and huge body and ginormous teeth. “If it were coming for you right now, I’d protect you. I’d wrestle it to the ground to keep it from eating you.”

“Then you’d just be eaten yourself.”

“Ah. True. But you’d be alive, and that would be worth it.” Shit. That’s true. When the hell did I start feeling this way? What’s happening to me?

“I guess I’d throw myself in front of a T-rex for you, too.”

“Oh, you guess, huh?” I squeeze her waist, and she leans against me again. “I love the confidence.”

Fran lets out a crystal-clear laugh that makes me smile. She really does have a nice laugh, but she’s so shy most of the time, I rarely hear it. “No, I would. I wouldn’t let anyone get eaten by a T-rex, yourself included.”

“Come on,” I say, rubbing her shoulders. “Let’s go see what else this museum has to offer.”

The night guard walks by, nodding at us. I ignore him as Fran and I move deeper into the museum. When I called to set this up, I was given a lengthy talk about the dos and don’ts of what we could do. Mostly, no touching the exhibits and no causing any destruction.

We end up in a hall full of dioramas filled with African animals. Fran approaches the lion exhibit. “I love lions, you know. Well, mostly the lionesses. They do all the work. They hunt. They care for each other’s young. They remain sisters even through the toughest of times.”

“What about the male lions? Not good enough for you, huh?” I nudge her, giving her a teasing smile.

Fran blushes slightly. “No, they’re fine. I just think they’re a little lazy and don’t respect their lionesses well enough.” She shoots me a teasing look before turning to the next diorama. I can only shake my head and smile.

“You know that my name literally means lion, right? Leo the lion.”

“I know.” When she turns on her heels, I get a good look at her backside. God, I want to be with Francesca so fucking badly. But I have to hold it together.

Once we’re through the African exhibits, we find ourselves in the gem and mineral hall. Gems ranging from stark white to soft pink to harsh black fill my vision.

“Don’t tell me you’re also an expert at freaking minerals,” I mutter.

She laughs. “No. I mostly love art. I don’t know much about the natural world. But they sure are pretty to look at. You know, Leo, it’s really nice that you’re making the effort with me. I don’t have many people I can just talk to, you know? I appreciate that you make it easy for me.”

I push a piece of her hair behind her ear, making her blush. “You’re easy to talk to, too.”

“I doubt you have issues talking to anybody.”

My father’s face flashes through my mind, and I push it away instantly. “You’d be surprised,” I say, turning on my charm. “I wasn’t always this way growing up.”

“Other than peeing your pants in elementary school, what were you like growing up?”

I shrug as I stare intently at a turquoise gemstone. “Reserved.”

“What changed?”

“Getting away from my dad,” I admit. She remains silent, letting me have the chance to speak. “He wasn’t a good man,” I explain as we leave the gemstone hall. “He ... abused my mom.”

Fran gasps, her hand covering her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, so ... it wasn’t good, and I withdrew into myself. But when I got older and was able to leave him, I focused on becoming the man I am today.”

“One who has a reputation with women?”

“Oh, no,” I say, raising my hands. “Don’t psychoanalyze me, Fran. I know what you’re going to say. Because my dad was an ass to my mom, I’m now an ass to women?”

“I didn’t say it.”

Shit. She’s right. I did.

“Enough about me. What about you? Any dark secrets in your closet?”

A frown crosses her face as her eyes darken. “No,” she whispers. I don’t think she’s telling me the truth, but I don’t push it.

We end up finding a tent with cots laid out for us inside. I told them we’d need a place to sleep, and this is what they came up with.

“We’re sleeping in that?” she asks, poking her head inside the tent.

“Yeah, we’re really roughing it out here.” She laughs as she enters the tent and sits on one of the cots.

“Comfy,” she says.

“Mind if I join you?”

Fran hesitates for a moment before scooting over to let me sit beside her. We’re both silent as we gaze into each other’s eyes.

And then we’re kissing.

I’m not sure who kissed who first, but it doesn’t really matter. What matters is the feel of Fran’s warm body pressed against mine, her soft lips, her hair tickling my cheek, and her skin touching mine.

The kiss grows more passionate than anything we’ve ever shared before. I lower Fran onto her back and kiss the fuck out of her. She responds in kind, with an eagerness that speaks to her inexperience. I don’t push things further as I’m afraid I might scare her off. Francesca needs to lead the way here if we’re ever going to have sex one day.

My hands roam down to her hips, and I squeeze them. Fran gasps into my mouth, parting her lips and allowing me the chance to touch my tongue to hers. Normally, I’d be fucking a girl by now. The women I tend to go for are aggressive and have their clothes off before I can blink and my cock in them before I can think.

Francesca is the opposite of that. She’s like an easily startled deer. You have to be gentle and go slow; otherwise, she’ll run from you.

I hold still as Fran wraps her arms around my shoulders. Our lips continue to tangle together in a sweet kiss. I never thought I’d kiss someone *sweetly*, but here I am.

Things are slowly getting more frantic between us. Fran grips my shoulders, and I tighten my hands around her waist. I can’t remember the last time I’ve just made out with someone. It’s quite nice.

It's also making hard, which is a problem. I'm sure Francesca isn't ready to have sex yet, especially inside a museum on a tiny cot where the security guard could walk by at any time.

Fran leans into me, kissing me harder, surprising me. I return in kind, pressing my body against hers. Big mistake. Francesca gasps when my cock brushes against her leg, and she tenses up.

I ease off her. "Are you ok?"

She looks so flushed and cute with her lips red and swollen and her hair slightly messy. "I'm fine. I just think ... that might be enough for tonight."

"Ok." I hide my disappointment as I head to the other cot. "I'd say goodnight, but I'm not sure I can sleep after that."

Fran doesn't respond. She just rolls onto her side, her back to me, and doesn't say anything for the rest of the night.

IN THE MORNING, Francesca is silent on the drive back to our house. Our house. Huh. I'll have to get used to that. I'm desperate to ask her what's on her mind, but I doubt she'd tell me. Did I push her too far last night?

After we get home, I let her know I need to head out. Marco wants me to check back in with Jerry, the manager of the Velvet Lounge. Someone is still skimming off the top, and we haven't been able to figure out who.

Francesca just nods and walks away as if in a daze. I open my mouth to call out to her, then stop myself. Now isn't the time.

I check in with Jerry, but there's no news yet, so I settle in at the bar to keep an eye on any of the comings and goings. A smack on my shoulder makes me turn to see who it is.

It's Henry. Of course, it is. He's the last person I want to see after my night with Francesca. He's a breathing, walking

reminder of my bet. The bet to take Francesca's virginity for sport.

"How's it going?" he asks, sideling onto the barstool next to me.

"If you're asking about Francesca—"

"I am."

"—then you can just shut it," I finish.

Henry laughs and claps me on the back again. "Have you really not fucked her yet? I keep waiting for you to come for my car, yet you haven't."

"You're also supposed to make yourself look like a fucking fool in front of Marco. Don't forget that." I flag the bartender down and ask for a beer. She gives me a seductive smile I don't return. Normally, I'd love fucking a hot bartender, but I'm a married man now. Marco—and more importantly, Emilia—would have my balls if I touched another woman.

And honestly? I don't really feel the desire to. I just want to go back to Francesca and pick up where we left last night.

"We still have a bet, man," Henry reminds me. "If you don't fuck Francesca soon, I get your job. Don't forget that."

I turn to him, invading his personal space, which I can tell intimidates him. "And if I refuse to hand over my job to you?"

Henry shrugs. "Then I'll just tell Francesca about our little bet and see how she feels about it. I don't think you'll ever get to fuck your wife, then. Which means you'll never get to fuck anyone ever again."

I clench my hands around the bottle, resisting the urge to land a solid hit to his jaw.

"Can I get you anything?" the bartender asks Henry.

He flashes her his blindingly white smile, which doesn't seem to faze her. "Yeah, a scotch on the rocks. And make it quick, hon. I'm in a bit of a hurry." She rolls her eyes but gets

him his drink anyway. She'll probably spit in it, which amuses me.

I've never really noticed how Henry talks to women before. Mostly because I treated women even worse. But after Francesca made me make a new deal with her, about treating women with more respect, I have to do something about this.

"Ignore him," I tell the bartender. "He's just stupid."

She hands Henry his drink and turns to me. "Yeah? Are you stupid, too? Or are you smarter than your friend here?"

"Oh, no. I can be pretty stupid, too."

She leans in closer to me. "Not too stupid to get out of here? My shift is almost over."

This would be the moment—the moment I went and fucked her and found a way to hurt her later. A few nude picks here, a call to the parents to embarrass her there. Man, I was a fucking asshole. *Am* still a fucking asshole.

"I can't," I tell her, making her frown in surprise. "I'm married." I wave my wedding band at her.

"Shame." She turns to help another customer.

"Damn." Henry whistles. "I didn't think you had it in you to turn a woman down."

"Maybe people can change."

Henry chortles as he gulps down his drink. Once done, he stands up, giving me one more clap to the man that makes me grit my teeth. "You, my good friend, can never change." He walks away, leaving me to contemplate everything as I stare down into my beer.

ON THE DRIVE HOME, I'm confronted by the memory of the day I officially broke my mother's heart.

I was sixteen, so close to getting out. I'd been watching my father beat my mother for most of my life and had become

desensitized to it.

And then that day happened.

It was my dad's birthday, and as usual, he came home drunk. My mom made him a birthday cake. I didn't bother to help, even though she asked me to. I was busy with homework and texting this girl I had a crush on.

When Dad came home, he saw the cake Mom made, took one look, and sneered. "Fucking vanilla? Who likes vanilla? I asked for chocolate."

I was at the kitchen table, watching everything unfold. Long gone were the days I stood up to my dad. By the time I was sixteen, I just stayed out of it and watched. He was my mom's problem. Not mine.

Mom looked on the verge of tears. Dad had worn her down over the years until she barely resembled the woman I loved as a child. "I'm sorry. We could only afford the vanilla one. Chocolate was too expensive."

"So, you're blaming this on me?" He slammed his hand down on the counter, making her jump.

"No, no. I'm just explaining why—"

"I don't fucking care why!" He shouted so loud it hurt my eardrums. I looked up from my textbook. "I just wanted to come home to a nice birthday dinner, and instead, you mess it up like you always do. What the fuck, Kate? Why can't you just be good to me?"

"I'm sorry." I hated hearing her say that. I hated how he'd hurt her and then play nice to her, and she'd fall for it, every time. She'd always say how he's changed. But my mom never seemed to realize I lived in the same house as her. I saw my dad every day.

And he never changed.

"You're sorry? Make me a chocolate cake." He lifted up the one she made and tossed it on the ground. When she bent down to clean it up, he kneed her in the face. Her cries barely

affected me anymore. He scoffed at the sight of her, glared at me, then stormed off into the living room to watch TV.

Mom cradled her face in her hands, whimpering. “Leo,” she whispered. “Come help me, please.”

I stared at her in all her pathetic glory. “You should have made him a chocolate cake,” I said, turning away from her.

I’d never heard her let out such a gut-wrenching cry before. It almost made me feel guilty.

When I struck up the nerve to glance at her, she was curled into a ball on the floor, looking half-way to death.

I SLAM on my breaks when I reach my driveway. The more I get to know Francesca, the more memories of my parents hit me. Especially the guilt over not helping my mom when I had the chance. I just left her there and didn’t do anything.

And I thought she was the pathetic one.

I trudge inside, feeling the weight of all my actions hitting me at once. I’m just ready to see Francesca. I want to forget about my past and focus on the future. Though, the future is still filled with guilt, too. I’m not sure how I’m going to get out of this bet.

The only option is to fuck Francesca soon. I only have one more month to do it. If I don’t, Henry gets my job. And if I refuse, he’ll tell Francesca about the bet, which means I could lose the one good thing I’ve got going for me.

When I don’t find Francesca in other parts of the house, I head for the master bedroom. Everything is so quiet, it’s almost disturbing.

When I step inside my room, I freeze at what I see.

It’s Francesca. She stands up when I enter, her hands dangling nervously at her sides.

What has me frozen is what she’s wearing.

She's wearing the lingerie I got for her.

CHAPTER 14

Francesca

The week after my dad died, I went to my mom for comfort. It wasn't something I'd normally do, but it wasn't a normal time.

For once, she was alone in her bedroom—no other siblings around. All of us were dealing with the loss of our father in different ways. Gemma sulked in her room. Cecilia prayed. Antonio fought. Mia watched happy films to keep her mind off it, even though she kept crying throughout the movies. Emilia was already in LA by then. And Franco had settled himself into our house as if he'd bought it—which he hadn't.

I was normally fine with being alone and spending my days with a book or at museums when I wasn't in school. But I was still only fourteen, and I needed my mother, even more so since my dad had died.

Mom looked like a zombie when I entered her room. She wasn't even moving.

"Mom?" I asked, approaching her. I kept repeating her name until I touched her arm, and she blinked, finally looking at me.

"Francesca? What are you doing in here?"

"I ..." I wanted a hug. I wanted my mom to hold me. The words got stuck in my throat however, and I couldn't force them out.

She sighed, looking disappointed with me. "I'm tired. I need to rest. Go to Emilia if you need something."

“Emilia’s in LA, remember?”

“That’s right.” Her shoulders slumped, and tears began spilling down her face. “I miss her so much.”

“Me, too,” I whispered. I reached out a hand toward her, then stopped when she sucked in a breath and looked up at me with a frown.

“Did you need something?”

“Are you mad at me?”

Mom looked at me for so long I thought she’d never answer. “Why would I be mad at you?”

“Because ...” *Because you blame me for Dad dying.* I blamed myself. He took me to Coney Island the day before he died, and it was too much on his system.

“Because what? Fran, I’m tired. I can’t deal with this right now. I just need to rest.”

“Ok.” I hurried out of the room, unable to handle the force it required to talk to my mother.

When I looked back, she was curled into a ball. She probably needed a hug, too, but neither one of us knew how to ask for it.

THIS IS A CRAZY IDEA.

I pull open the drawer where I stuffed the lingerie Leo gave me. I haven’t been able to get rid of it, and I haven’t wanted to. It was a gift from him—an inappropriate one—but one I’m starting to see in a different light.

Leo and I have made a lot of progress within a few days. All the time we’ve spent talking and having fun, from theme parks to museums, has really helped me feel closer to him. He went out of his way to make me happy with the museum date. I just can’t believe a man who has a bad reputation with women could do that.

Maybe Leo is turning over a new leaf. Maybe he's giving our marriage a chance.

Which means I need to as well. Maybe it's time I start to go outside my comfort zone.

The night we kissed at the museum awoke something within me. I've never really been concerned with feelings of arousal, but with Leo, it's like my body is awake for the first time in my life. I feel every touch he gives me, every glance, every smile. My skin turns to fire every time his fingers graze my arm or his lips touch mine.

I want to explore more.

I just don't know how to tell him that. Doing so would require a lot of confidence from me, and that's something I've sorely lacked for most of my life.

Staring down at the lingerie, I'm emboldened. If I slip it on, maybe I'll work up the courage to tell Leo I want to take things further than we did on our date. I want to feel his hands all over me. It's both terrifying and exhilarating.

With a large inhale, I grab the lingerie and slip it on. Staring at myself in the mirror, I feel instantly more confident. I feel ... sexy. I tried touching myself before, but I didn't really feel anything, so I'm hoping Leo's touch will be different.

I take the time to run my hands down my body, over my stomach and breasts, my upper thighs and arms, imagining Leo's hands instead. He's my husband now. I don't need to feel shame for this. I'm allowed to enjoy it.

Emilia's words come back to me—*be careful with him*. I know she just wants me to be ok, but if Leo and I are ever going to have a good marriage, I need to put in the effort. Leo is. Now it's my turn.

The door opens, startling me. I drop my hands and turn to see Leo looking at me, wide-eyed, mouth open as he takes in my appearance.

Neither of us says anything as we stare at each other.

“Uh, hi,” I finally say, snapping Leo out of his daze.

“Fran, you ... you’re wearing it.”

“I am.” I pick at the ends of the fabric. “Do ... do you like it?” God, this is so embarrassing. I put it on to help me gain confidence. I didn’t expect Leo to walk in on me wearing it.

“Do I like it? You’re gorgeous.” He approaches me but doesn’t touch me. “But why are you wearing it? Not that I’m complaining because I am *not* complaining.”

I blush under his compliment. “I just wanted to put it on.”

“Good. That was a good decision.” His fingertips trace the edges of my hips. “Is there a particular reason? Other than just wanting to wear it?”

I know what he’s asking, but I don’t have the confidence to tell him the truth. “Leo, I ... I can’t.”

He frowns, his hands pausing on my waist. “Can’t what?”

“I can’t tell you the real reason because it’s embarrassing.”

“It’s not embarrassing for me. You don’t need to feel that way. You can tell me anything, Fran.”

Oh, here goes nothing. “I put it on because I ... I think I want to be with you.”

“Be with me?”

“*Be* with you,” I say pointedly.

His eyebrows raise. “Ah. Be with me.” I flush, ducking my head. He slips his finger under my chin, bringing my gaze back up. “Hey, listen. You don’t have to be embarrassed about that at all. Trust me. You think I haven’t wanted to be with you from the moment I met you? Of course, I did. I do.”

“I don’t really know what to do,” I admit. “I mean, I know the basics, but I don’t know where to go from here.”

“Just follow my lead.” He cups my face and brings his lips to mine. It’s an explosion of electricity. I gasp and wrap my arms around his shoulders while Leo wraps his arms around my back, drawing me in closer. His entire body is pressed

against mine. It's like nothing I've ever felt before. This type of physical connection is foreign to me, yet it feels just right.

Leo walks me back to the bed. My legs hit the edge, and I fall back, bringing him down with me. He never stops kissing me. The only sound in the room is our heavy breathing. Leo roams his hands up and down my body, sending chills over me. I let myself relax into it and focus on the feeling.

My legs part slightly as Leo settles himself between them. I can't believe this is really happening. I truly always thought I'd be alone forever, so to be experiencing this, it's on a whole different level. Leo is consuming my lips with his, making it hard for me to breathe.

Leo shifts against me, sending a spike of pleasure over my body. I gasp. Leo tenses and pulls back.

The frown on his face makes me jerk back. "What's wrong?" I ask.

"I can't do this," he mutters.

"What?" Did I hear him right. "Leo ..."

He scrambles off me, rubbing his hand over his face as he paces. "This isn't right," he says more to himself. "I can't do this. I'm doing it for the wrong reasons."

"Leo?" I reach out for him, but he walks away. "What's going on? Do ... do you not want me?" Of course, he wouldn't. No one has ever wanted me. My own mother has never wanted me. Why would Leo even want to talk to me, let alone touch me? I've never been anything special.

He blows out rough air. "I want you," he says gruffly. "I just ... can't." There's a pain in his eyes that confuses me. When he turns for the door, I follow him.

"Why are you doing this? I thought you wanted this?"

"I do!" He spins back around to face me, anguish written on his face. "I do."

"Then why are you stopping this?"

“Because ...” He drops his head. “Because I just can’t. It’s not fair to you.”

“What isn’t fair?”

“I can’t explain, ok. Just trust me.”

“I’m trying to trust you, but I don’t even understand you, Leo.” I grab his hand, forcing him to look back at me. “I put myself out there for you. You said you wanted this. What changed? You owe me that, at least.”

“I can’t say. I don’t want to hurt you, Fran. But if we have sex, I will be hurting you.”

“Do you mean physically?” He starts walking down the hallway, and I follow him. “I know there can be some pain, but I’m sure it’ll be fine. Leo?” I grab his arm, stopping him. Normally, I’d let him walk away. I wouldn’t put up a fight.

But I’m ready for a fight.

I’m ready to say what’s on my mind.

“Leo, just talk to me.”

He stops but doesn’t turn to face me. “Just trust me, Fran. It’s better this way. At least for a little while.”

“You don’t get to make that decision for me. If you don’t want to be with me, then just tell me that. Don’t put it back on me and act as if I don’t want this when I just told you I did.”

I wait for him to reply. When he does, it crushes me. “I just ... can’t.” I watch him walk away.

Numbly, I return to our bedroom and shut the door, wondering what just happened. Leo has been pursuing me ever since I arrived in LA. And when I finally tell him I’m ready to progress things, he backs away. Why the sudden change of heart? What am I missing?

The lingerie suddenly feels suffocating, and I tear it off. In the process, a piece of the fabric rips. The sight of something so pretty being ruined makes hot tears spill down from my eyes. Once they start coming out, I can’t stop them. I throw the lingerie across the room, not wanting to look at it. I put myself

out there, and Leo rejected me, and he won't even explain why.

I thought we were making so much progress with our dates and all the talking. I've learned a lot about him, like his dad being abusive, his most embarrassing childhood memories, and even his favorite ones. And now it feels like we just took a massive step back.

I put my normal clothes back on and slip under the covers to cry until I can't cry anymore.

THE SMELL of warm coffee fills my nostrils as I enter the cute, little café. Emilia is sitting near the front windows, a cup in her hands. She sets it down when she sees me enter and waves me over. "I ordered you a coffee," she says, nodding at the other cup on the table. "Mine is just herbal tea. No coffee for me until this little babe pops out." She nods at her stomach.

"Thanks." I wrap my hands around the warm mug. Even though it's LA, it's still winter, and there's a slight chill in the air.

"God, those people are crazy." She points to a man walking past the window, wearing only shorts. His naked torso gleams in the sunlight. The woman next to him is only wearing a bikini. "It's like they're on their way to the beach, but the beach is like a thirty-minute drive from here. I'd be shivering."

"Me, too."

Emilia smiles warmly at me. "You've always been a cool bug, even when we were kids. You'd have to wear the biggest coat, the best-quality boots, hats, gloves, the whole shebang whenever we'd go somewhere in the winter time."

"Those New York winters were no joke."

"Remember the time Mia ran outside in nothing but her diaper in the middle of a snowstorm? Mom about had a heart attack." Emilia laughs at the memory, taking a sip of her tea.

“I don’t remember that,” I muse.

“Maybe you were in your room and didn’t see it,” she says it nonchalantly, but I frown at her words. I’m still upset over Leo rejecting me yesterday, and the reminder that I missed out on family time because I kept to myself hurts even more.

“Maybe.”

“So.” She grabs my hand. “How has it been with Leo? I’ve been worried. You don’t look happy right now.”

“I’m fine.” I pull away from her, but she persists.

“Tell me, Fran. You’re not fine. You don’t look it. What has Leo done now?”

“Nothing,” I snap, making her sit back. “Nothing,” I repeat in a quieter voice. “That’s just it. He hasn’t done anything to me. He ... rejected me last night.”

“Rejected you?”

I give her a look, and she nods, understanding. “He didn’t want to be with me. I don’t understand why. He seemed like he wanted to before.”

“That’s strange. Leo is horny for all women.”

“Thanks,” I say dryly. “Then there must be something wrong with me.”

Emilia sighs, scooting her chair in closer to the table. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Fran. I didn’t mean to make you feel that way. Did you ask him why he did that?”

“I tried. He just told me that it wouldn’t be fair to me if were ... intimate,” I whisper the last word.

The look Emilia makes is almost comical. “Did he? What does that even mean? Do you need me to talk to him?”

That’s the last thing I need—my older sister confronting my husband about why he doesn’t want to sleep with me. “No, I’m good,” I say instead. “But thanks.”

“Well, I can still talk to him. Remind him to be good to you. I’ll call him right now.” She digs through her purse,

pulling out her phone. “He doesn’t get to make my sister sad.”

“Emilia, it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” She dials Leo’s number, and I watch in horror as she talks to him after he picks up. “Leo, it’s Emilia.” She puts the phone on speaker and sets it down.

“Oh? What do I owe for this surprise?” he asks. His warm voice, normally so soothing, makes me cringe at the memory of his rejection.

“You made my sister sad. Fix it.”

He’s quiet on the other end.

“Leo?” Emilia picks up the phone, speaking directly into it. “Answer me.”

“What goes on between my wife and me is none of your concern,” he finally says.

“When it comes to my sister, it does. You’ve made her unhappy, and I don’t know exactly why, but one piece of advice I can give is that a good relationship requires good communication. So, work on it.” She hangs up before he can answer.

“Wow,” I say after a beat.

She smiles sheepishly, putting her phone away. “What? I can get protective when it comes to my siblings. You know that.”

“Did you mean that? About good communication?”

“Of course.” She squeezes my hands. Two people enter the café, the bell above the door ringing, and their chattering makes us pause until they continue past us. “You need to talk to Leo again, and hopefully, next time, he’ll talk to you. He needs to get his head out of his ass so he can see you for what you really are.”

“And what am I really?”

“Worth it, Fran. You are worth more than any man combined in this world. Never forget it. All of our sisters are.”

Don't let him walk all over you. Get answers. You'll be much happier, trust me."

"I tried standing up for myself, but Leo didn't give me much to work with."

"Then you try again," she says, sitting back in her seat and rubbing her stomach. "I had to keep trying with Marco until he finally opened up with me. It wasn't easy, but it was so worth it, trust me. Now, Marco and I have never been happier. I don't like Leo. That's not a secret. But he is your husband, and you need to try with him. Tell him he has to talk with you; otherwise, your relationship is doomed."

I wince. "Wow. Isn't that a little dramatic?"

"Not at all. You don't want to be miserable for the rest of your life. Get to the bottom of this. Stand up for yourself."

I take a deep breath and nod, realizing she's right. I can't keep sulking all day over Leo. That's not who I am.

I need to go after my husband and get answers.

I give Emilia a half-hug and head out, determined to talk to Leo, even if it takes everything out of me.

CHAPTER 15

Leo

I can't believe I didn't have sex with Francesca. She was ready to finally go there, and I backed out, all because I felt guilty.

Fucking guilty.

The bet I made with Henry weighs on my shoulders now that I'm married to Fran. Now that I *care* for her.

She's the only person I've told about my abusive father. She's the only person who has made me truly, genuinely smile in a long time. She's the only person I can see myself falling in love with.

And I desperately want to have sex with her, but I also feel like an utter jackass about it. She deserves more than a man like me, yet she's stuck with me. Maybe I shouldn't have pushed her away, but I couldn't look into her innocent eyes and know I was taking her virginity all because this started with a bet.

I've been working up to talk to her again when she comes back home, interrupting my thought process. I stop pacing around the living room. "Fran?"

She walks right up to me, a fierceness I've never seen in her eyes. "Why did you push me away? I need to know, Leo. You don't get to just give me some vague answer when I know you want to be with me. Was it all just a game to you? And now that we're married, you want nothing to do with me? What is it?"

I stare at her, open-mouthed. She's not completely wrong. It started off as a game for me, but now it's developed into something more. But ... "You're wrong," I tell her. "Being married doesn't make me want you any less."

Her hands flap to her sides as she huffs. "Then what is it?"

I want to tell her the truth. It would end my guilt.

It would also make Fran hate me and destroy the trust I've built with her.

"What is it, Leo?" she asks, her voice rising. "Tell me? Do you want to be with me?"

"Yes!" I shout, startling her. "Yes, I want to be with you. It's all I want." I grab her face and slam my lips against hers. Fran gasps, tensing for a moment before sinking into the kiss. Kissing Fran is the most intimate experience I've ever had with a woman. Sure, I've fucked countless ones before, but it was always for physical pleasure. It always ended in me hurting them. With Fran, a kiss is much more than physical. It's emotional and mental and all-consuming.

It's because I care for her. I never thought I could care for a woman, and yet, here I am.

Fran grips my shoulders, gently tugging me closer. She wants this, maybe just as much as I do. I could just give in and have my way with her. I want that more than anything.

So, that's why I decide to not stop it this time. There's no use in feeling guilty. Fran wants to be with me; I want to be with her. I can deal with everything later.

I pick her up and carry her to our bedroom, kissing her all the way. If it were anybody else, I wouldn't have hesitated to have sex on the living room floor, but with Fran, she deserves her first time to be in a bed.

Laying her down on the mattress, I gaze at her, taking in her beauty. "Fran," I murmur, tracing my fingers down her cheek. She blushes. "Are you sure?"

"I am."

That's all I need.

I kiss her again, this time more urgently as my hands roam her body. She gasps when I palm her breast. Hearing her sounds as I touch her makes me harder than I've ever been. Why did I stop earlier? I guess I wasn't thinking clearly.

Sitting back, I finger the straps of her dress. "I want to see you naked." She flushes deeply but nods. I slip her dress off her, taking my sweet time. I've been waiting a while to have sex with Fran. I don't want to rush this moment.

Her bra and panties are a light pink, contrasting prettily with her dark hair. "Fuck," I say, gazing down at her. Fran squirms. "You don't need to be embarrassed," I tell her. "You're beautiful, Fran. I want to touch you ..." I trace my fingertips over the side of her body, making her shiver. "I want to kiss you ..." I lean down and plant a simple kiss to her throat. Fran sighs, her body trembling. I can feel it under my hands. "I want to make you mine."

She cups my face. "Then make me yours," she whispers. I'm so proud of her for speaking her mind. I just wish I could do the same.

As I stand, she frowns until the realization dawns in her eyes as I slip my shirt off. "Like what you see?" I tease as I push my pants down. My cock presses against my underwear. Even from here, I can see Fran gulp. "I'm going to make you feel so good." I kneel on the bed and part her legs, the smell of her arousal wafting up to my nostrils. All I can think about is how much I've wanted to go down on her since the first time we kissed. Hell, before that even.

"Do you trust me?" I ask. Her legs tremble under my hands.

Fran takes a moment before nodding. "I do." God, that makes me feel even more like an asshole. She trusts me now, but I haven't been fully honest with her. The guilt isn't enough to make me back away like I did earlier. Seeing Fran before me in nothing but her bra and panties is an irresistible sight. Nothing can pull me away.

I lean down and kiss her stomach, making her inhale deeply. I smile. Fran shivers, goosebumps rising on her skin as

I kiss down her body to her upper thigh. “Do you know what I’m going to do to you?”

“I have an idea,” she says, breathless.

“Good.” Then I rip her panties down. Her pussy is a thing to marvel at. I can’t wait for a moment longer.

While keeping my gaze locked with hers, I part her legs, lean in, and put my mouth on her. Fran’s face is so red, she looks even cuter than usual. The innocence in her eyes is doing something to me. Knowing I’m the one who’s going to give her this experience makes my cock grow harder. I lick over her folds. Fran gasps, not quite crying out. I wonder if she’ll become more vocal as the night goes on.

She tastes amazing, like honey mixed with earthy flowers. I could lap at her all day and night and never get enough. Fran’s hips lift when I lick over her nub. When I raise my gaze back to her face, I can see her lips are parted, but no sound is coming out. I kiss and lick her harder, my hands gripping her thighs to keep her in place. Fran looks like her world is opening up right before her. It makes me smile.

I kiss her for some time, getting her body warmed up. Fran is fighting her release, I can tell. She’s been so shy for so long; she doesn’t know how to just let go. Well, I’m going to make sure she does.

“Mmm,” I growl against her skin as I continue to go down on her. Fran gasps loudly when I pay special attention to her nub. She needs this. *I* need this.

She just needs a little push over the edge. So, I lean back and slip my finger gently inside of her, not too far, just enough to reach that pleasurable spot. Her eyes widen as her breath comes out in fast pants.

“Come for me,” I tell her, pressing down with my finger.

And that’s it.

Fran gasps as her entire body shudders, her legs clamping down around my hand, her eyes closing, and her breath slowing down.

Gently, I take out my finger, then remove her bra. I kiss each of her breasts, spending attention on her nipples. Fran sighs, relaxing into the mattress. “Leo,” she says. “I ...”

“What do you need?” I kiss up to her neck, speaking into her ear. “Tell me.”

“I think I ...”

“No thinking. What do you need?” I swipe my hand across her stomach. “I can’t give it to you if you don’t tell me.”

“I need you,” she finally says.

Perfect.

I sit up and slip off my underwear. Fran’s eyes widen slightly when she sees my cock, which only serves to make me smile. “Ready, baby?” I settle on top of her, placing her legs on either side of my hips, my cock so close to her entrance.

“Be gentle,” she says.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Shit. I’m starting to see how true that is. I really don’t want Fran to hurt because of me.

“I’m ready, Leo. I want this.” Her hands tentatively grab my shoulders while she looks up at me with those big, innocent eyes.

I wrap my arms around her before shifting my hips forward and entering her. Fran winces at first, but I take it slow, letting her get adjusted. Slowly, I slip deeper into her. Fran gasps and grasps my shoulder blades, her nails digging in. “I got you,” I tell her. “I got you.”

Once I’m fully seated inside her, I hold still. Fran is breathing heavily, strain on her face. “It’s ok,” I say, kissing her cheek and neck. “You’re ok.” Comforting Fran is becoming more natural for me. It all started when she passed out right before our wedding. I knew in that moment I wanted to comfort her forever.

“I’m ok,” she says, nodding. “You can move now.”

I start my movements slow and gentle. Fran soon begins to respond to it, shifting her hips in return and matching my pace.

Our foreheads press together as our bodies begin to move as one. She's so tight around me, it's hard to focus, but I keep my gaze locked with hers, remembering to focus on her pleasure. I want Fran to enjoy this—not just for my own ego but because I want her to enjoy it. No rhyme or reason for it.

My pace increases. Fran holds onto me tighter, looking up at me with her beautiful eyes. There's so much trust in her gaze right now, I have to push the guilt away. I'm not doing anything wrong. Fran and I are married now; it was inevitable we'd have sex. This has nothing to do with the bet and everything to do with how I feel.

I lean back, grip her legs, and really begin to thrust into her. "Do you like this?" I ask, grinding my hips against hers. Fran gasps and nods. "Good." I truly begin to fuck her like I've always wanted. Fran responds in kind by digging her knees into my side body.

"Let go for me," I tell her. "Come for me, Fran."

And she does what I tell her.

Fran gasps as her orgasm washes over her. No moaning or crying out or calling out my name. Not yet, anyway. We can get there one day.

My own orgasm comes next, and I groan out her name as I come. Once I'm done, I stay on top of her, holding her close. We're both breathing hard, and we're sweaty and smell like sex. It's honestly fucking perfect.

After a while, I roll off her and pull her into my arms, stroking my fingertips over her back. "How do you feel?"

"I feel ... special," she answers. "You make me feel special, Leo."

There's that fucking guilt again. No. After this, I'll tell Henry the bet is off. I have no desire for it anymore. Having sex with Fran today had nothing to do with the bet but how I feel for her. And I feel like I'm falling in love with her.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

“Me?” I chuckle, bringing her in closer. “I’m not the one who had sex for the first time.”

“That’s not what I mean. You didn’t want to do this at first, and then you changed your mind. I just wanted to know how you felt about it.”

“Trust me, Fran. I always wanted to be with you. That was never in question. The truth ...” I inhale deeply and stare at the ceiling. “The truth is you don’t deserve a man like me, and it made me back away. But I changed my mind because I could see you wanted me just as much as I wanted you.”

She props herself up on her arm, looking down at me with a frown. “Who else can say what I deserve except for me? I don’t think you’re as bad a man as everyone makes you out to be. You’ve been nothing but kind to me ever since we got married. How does that make you a bad man?”

Maybe she’s right. But she also doesn’t know the full story.

WAKING up next to Fran is the happiest I’ve been ... ever. She’s such a peaceful sleeper. I take a moment to watch her sleep before stroking her face, slowly waking her up. Fran blinks her sleepy eyes at me and smiles slightly, blushing like usual.

“Hi,” she whispers.

“Morning.” When I slide my hand over her hip, Fran takes in a shuddering breath.

“So, what’s the plan for today? Do you have to go into work?”

“Nope. No work today. As for the plan for today ... Well, I had some ideas.” I lean into her neck and pepper kisses all along her skin. Fran melts into me. “If you’re not too sore, I was thinking we could go for round two.”

“I could maybe go for it again.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Maybe?”

“Ok, maybe more than maybe.”

I roll onto my back, bringing her with me. “I’ve created a monster, ladies and gentlemen. My wife maybe wants to have sex!” Fran laughs, snuggling against my side.

“I said more than maybe.”

“Right.” This time, I roll her onto her back, settling myself on top of her. “Well, if you’re ready for more than maybe ...” I bring my hand down between her legs, feeling the wetness there that grows the more I touch her. Fran arches into my touch.

“I am,” she gasps.

“Good.” I play with her nub, rolling it around with my thumb, getting her ready for me. Fran’s legs part, giving me a good look at her beautiful pussy. “Then if you’re ready, I’m more than ready.” I pull my hand away and lay on my side, bringing Fran’s back to my chest.

“What are you doing?” she asks, looking over her shoulder.

“I thought we could try a new position, if you’re ok with that.”

“Ok.” She looks uncertain but puts on a brave face. I slide her thigh up around my hip, then sink into her. I groan while Fran inhales quickly. In this new position, I can reach depths I couldn’t before.

Fran rests her head against my shoulder as I gently thrust into her, gripping her leg and wrapping my other arm around her waist. After a moment, she reaches back, lacing her fingers through my hair. Together, we move as one, with me shifting my hips forward and Fran shifting hers backward. This lazy morning fuck is the best way to wake up.

Francesca is all mine. Even though I sort of hate Henry, he was right about one thing—being a woman’s first time is great for the ego. But unlike Henry, who thinks that because a girl is a virgin means he can bad in bed, I like to pleasure the women I sleep with, Francesca being no exception. In fact, Francesca

is more than exception. She's my wife now. I want her to enjoy our bedroom activities together. I want her to like ... me.

I've never cared if a woman truly likes me before. It was all just sex. Now, with Francesca, everything is becoming more.

It doesn't take long before Fran's breaths are coming out in shallow pants. I grip her tighter, fucking her faster. She drops her head back, her eyes closing, letting the pleasure wash over her.

Soon, her back is arching, and she's gasping her release. I follow after, clinging tightly to her.

I don't immediately let her go. "You know, you can be more vocal if you want."

Fran tenses. "What do you mean?"

"I just mean ... if you want to call out my name when you come, you can."

She blushes, pulling away from me and rolling onto her side. "Ok. I'll take your advice."

"Hey." I rest my hand on her back. "I'm not saying you have to. I just want you to know that it's ok if you want to."

Fran looks over her shoulder at me. "Ok. I'm just so used to people telling me I always need to speak up. It gets exhausting after a while."

"Well, you don't have to speak up if you don't want to. I just wanted you to know you could in case you were embarrassed not to."

"I appreciate that." She relaxes back into my touch, and we spend the rest of the morning lying in bed, holding each other in our arms.

I FIND Henry at the Velvet Lounge, sipping on a fruity looking drink. I nod to Jerry as I pass him by, and he flees to his office,

probably not wanting to deal with me and more of my questions about who could be stealing from the club.

“What the fuck are you drinking?” I ask him.

“What? It’s a pina colada, man. What’s wrong with pina coladas?”

“It has a fucking umbrella in it,” I say, grabbing it out of the drink and flicking it at him. He swats it away.

“So, have you finally come here to tell me you’ve fucked your wife?” He sips his drink like the cat that ate the canary.

“No. In fact, I’ve come here to say the bet is off.”

Henry almost spits out his drink. He manages to keep it down but ends up in a coughing fit. The bartender, a twenties-something looking guy, looks over in concern. “The bet can’t be off. One of us has to win it.”

“Hey, you tried telling Francesca about the bet, remember? You were willing to change the rules. Well, so am I. And I say the bet is off.”

“You can’t just call it quits. If you’re having trouble getting Francesca to fuck you, then that’s on you, man. I’m not making myself look like a fool in front of Marco because you refuse to finish the bet. And I know if you call it off, I’ll have no shot at your job. So, no.” He laughs, taking another sip of his goddam pina colada. “You are not calling the bet off.”

I grab him by the shirt and slam him into the bar. His drink drops to the ground, spilling white liquid all over the place. “The bet is off. If I say it, then that makes it so. No more discussing this. Both our lives will remain unchanged. You get to keep your car and your job, and I get to keep mine. We’re even.” I let him go and turn to walk away when he calls back out.

“This isn’t over, Leo!”

Well, if I say it is, then it is.

I bump into a blonde woman on my way out the door.

“Ouch. Watch where you’re going,” she grumbles. I recognize her voice. It’s Cindy, the girl whose nudes I posted online. When she looks up and sees me, her face drains of color. “You!”

Shit. Cindy was my most recent conquest before setting my eyes on Francesca. And I did her dirty. Like really fucking dirty.

“I know,” I say before she can start screaming at me. “I shouldn’t have done what I did.” The words sort of surprise me, but they most definitely surprise her. “I was an asshole. You didn’t deserve that. You were a nice girl, and I used you.”

“Yeah, you did.” She hooks her purse around her shoulders. “You put my naked photos online. Oh, and you slept with my mom. Now my reputation is ruined.”

That was what Emilia and Marco warned me to not do to Francesca. I already ruined a lot of other women’s reputation. I did make a deal with Fran to treat other women with more respect, and I guess it’s time I step up and really do it. “I’m ... sorry,” I say, making her eyes widen. “I shouldn’t have done either. Here, I have a guy who can wipe someone’s record clean. He’ll remove any naked photos of you from online. He’ll scrub it so well that no one will be able to see any naked photos of yourself ever again.”

“You ... you can do that?” she whispers, not quite believing me, and why should she? I literally ruined her life. All because I thought it would be funny.

“I can. By tonight, all naked photos of you will be removed from the internet. I know you have no reason to believe me, but what other choice do you have?”

She frowns, realizing I’m right.

“I hope you take care, Cindy.”

“What made you change your mind?” she calls out before I can leave.

I glance at her over my shoulder. “The love of a woman.”

She snorts. “Whatever.” With an eye roll, she walks away. I’ll probably never see her again, which I’m sure Cindy will be very happy about. I smile as I leave the club, knowing I did one good thing, at least.

BY THE TIME I get home, I know I need to tell Fran about the bet with Henry. Even though I just called it off, she deserves to know the truth. She deserves to know the man she’s married to.

“Leo?” She comes running into the foyer as I walk into the house.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I ask.

She stops, frowns, and then smiles. “Sorry. No. I’m ok. I was just excited to share that the LACMA has a new exhibition I really wanted to go check out, and I just had to tell you about it.”

“Oh. Right.” I chuckle slightly. Fran immediately goes into detail about this new exhibition and how we have to go soon because she doesn’t think she can wait another day to see it. It’s at this moment I lose my nerve to tell her about the bet. She’s just so happy right now that I can’t ruin that. We’re making progress in our relationship. I can see myself actually being happy as a married man. I don’t want to ruin that.

So, I keep my mouth shut and let Fran gush about this new art exhibition we have to check out this weekend.

I WAS seventeen the day my mom died. Almost an adult. I was ready to get out of that damn apartment and leave my parents’ messed up relationship behind. My mom had tried to come to me for help in the past, but I couldn’t do it. I kept turning away from her. If she refused to leave my dad, there wasn’t anything I could do. But whenever my dad hurt my mom, he

would always apologize, and they'd make up, and things would go back to normal until he hit her again and rinse and repeat.

I became numb to it after a while.

Until the day I came home and saw my dad beating my mom. It wasn't just one hit. Or one kick. Or one punch. This was blow after blow to her face. At first, I didn't know why he was home early. And second, my first thought was what did my mom do to deserve such a bad reaction from him.

All I could do was watch in horror as he rained down punches on her. She wasn't even making a sound.

Finally, he stopped. He was breathing heavily as he pushed her away from him, and she slumped to the ground, not moving. Her face was a bloody mess. I could barely recognize the woman who raised me, the woman who shared secret smiles with me when Dad wasn't watching, who put herself between my dad and me.

He jerked back when he saw me standing in the doorway. "Leo." His hands were covered in blood. "What are you doing home?"

"What are *you* doing home?"

"I didn't have work today."

I dropped my backpack onto the floor. "What did Mom do this time?"

"Oh, that." He spared her a quick glance before looking back at me. "She washed my red shirt with my white one, and it turned the white one pink. I was angry."

"I can see that."

A flash of guilt went through his eyes before he composed his expression. "I'm going to take a shower." I watched him walk away, then I slowly approached my mom. She still hadn't moved.

I knelt down next to her, taking in her bloody, puffy face. It was a horrible sight, one that stuck with me for years after that day. "Mom?" She didn't answer. "Mom?" I shook

her shoulder. Her head flopped to the side. “Mom?” I became frantic and starting shaking her, trying to get her to wake up.

But she didn't.

I checked her pulse and found she had none.

My mom was dead.

All the years I spent mad at her for not getting us away from my dad vanished. I began CPR, telling her to wake up as tears spilled down my face. But she never woke up again.

It was after five minutes of CPR, listening to the water run while my dad took a shower, that I stopped. She wasn't alive. There was no bringing her back.

And it was my father who killed her.

My first instinct was to grab a knife from the kitchen and kill him while he was in the shower, *Psycho* style.

But instead, I just gave my mom a kiss on the head, stood up, picked up my backpack, and left.

I never returned again. I finally got my wish—my dad was a thing of the past, even though it meant my mom paid the ultimate price for it.

CHAPTER 16

Francesca

“My favorite painting is “Study of a Young Woman” by Johannes Vermeer,” I tell Leo as we lie in bed together after spending some time *exploring* each other. “I love how humble the girl is in the painting. It always gave me a sense of hope, you know?”

Leo traces his fingertips down my back, drawing goosebumps to the surface of my skin. “I’ve never really thought about art that way before. I’m not much of an expert on it.”

“I don’t think someone needs to be an expert. I know I’m not. I just like to study it. That painting is probably the one thing I miss the most about New York.”

“We’ll have to visit, so you can see it again.”

I smile up at him as he smiles back. “I’d love that.” Things have become a lot easier with Leo now that we’ve had sex. It’s like that barrier between us has been broken. For the first time, I can see myself falling in love with Leo. I know my heart flutters when I think about him.

“But is that all you miss about New York? The painting? What about your family?”

I snuggle into his side, resting my head on his chest, hearing his heartbeat. “I never had strong relationships with any of my family. I was closest to Emilia, and I have her here in LA. I’m not really homesick for them.”

“I remember you telling me you think your mom blames you for the death of your dad. What’s that about?”

I sigh. “She has a tendency to forget about me. We’ve never really been that close, so it’s not surprising she was mad at me after my dad.” A lump forms in my throat at the memory of him driving us to Coney Island. “My dad and I spent the day together, but my mom thought it was too strenuous for him. He died later that night.” I turn my head away from Leo, fighting back the tears.

“Hey.” He rubs my arm. His warm voice provides me with comfort and makes my heart flutter even more. “That doesn’t sound like your fault. He was sick?”

“He was. For a while. But he still managed to be there for us. For me.” I smile sadly. “He was always there for me in a way no one else was. He ... understood me. He didn’t think I was weird for being shy. He didn’t ... ignore me.”

“Like your mom does.”

“Like my mom does.”

Leo pulls me in closer to him, wrapping his arms around me. “That sucks. I’m sorry. It’s not fun to have a parent be mean to you.”

I lift my head to gaze down at him. “You mentioned before that your dad was abusive.” I trace patterns with my finger onto his chest.

Leo huffs. “He was. He beat my mom. He was such a bastard. I haven’t seen him in years. Well, since I was seventeen.”

“It’s good you got out. My mom ...” I bite my lip. “My mom is being abused by my uncle. Emilia told me. I feel horrible I never saw it. I don’t even know how to help because I don’t even know how to talk to her.”

“My mom never asked for help.” Leo rolls onto his side so we’re face to face. “She put up with the abuse my entire life. It killed her.”

I gasp, covering my mouth with my hand. “She died?”

“My dad killed her,” he says. “I saw it happen.” His gaze darkens. “The sad part is, she did ask for help, actually. Only

once when I was ... fuck. I can't even remember. But by then, I was numb to the abuse between my parents, and when she asked for my help ... I turned away from her." I can tell by Leo's face that it haunts him. It's probably haunted him for quite some time.

"You were just a kid. That wasn't your fault."

"So were you. How old were you exactly when your dad died?"

"Fourteen," I reply.

"Shit." He rubs a hand over his face. "You were fourteen when we first met. I feel a little sick at the thought."

"Hey, it was just for Emilia's wedding, and we didn't even speak. You never really knew me until now."

"And now you're an adult. Thank god; otherwise, I'd feel like a pervert."

I laugh as I gently swat at his chest. "You're not a pervert. You're actually ... a good man, Leo."

More darkness crosses his vision. I want to ask him about it, but he answers before I can. "I'm not a good man. I've done some bad shit to women."

"Like what exactly? No one has ever told me what why you have your reputation when it came to women. I just assumed you'd slept with them." I blush at the thought.

"I ... didn't just sleep with them," he says. "I ... hurt them in other ways."

"Like what?" I whisper, not liking where this is going.

"Like ... posting their nudes online without their permission."

I gasp and pull back from him. He doesn't reach out to me. Judging by his expression, he knows what he did was wrong. "How could you do that?"

"Because I thought it was fun. But, Fran, listen, I know it was wrong. Trust me. I've made sure the photos of any of the women have been taken down. You made me realize what it

means to respect women. I'm ashamed to say it's taken me this long to learn, but I have. I know what I did was horrible. I feel guilty about it. I don't want to be that man again. I don't want to be that man for you." He cups my cheek, staring down at me with sincerity in his eyes. "I want to be better. I'm making up for the wrongs I've committed. I don't plan on ever doing it again."

"That's good," I say, breathless. I knew Leo had a reputation with women, I just never realized it was something bad like that. "You've really learned your lesson? You're never going to do anything like that ever again?"

"I promise. I don't want to, anyway. All I want ... is you."

I suck in a quick breath. "You mean that?"

"I do. Fuck, do I ever. Fran, you've made me feel things I've never felt before. I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose you either." The minute the words are out of my mouth, I realize how true they are.

"Then how about we start with a clean slate? Just you and me, getting to know each other. Let's make this marriage work."

"That's all I want."

Leo is kissing me before I can even fully finish my sentence. With a growl, he rolls me onto my back. Feeling Leo's body on top of mine is such an overwhelming, all-consuming, powerful thing. Now that I've had sex—and with Leo, in particular—I know what it feels like to be loved physically. It's an amazing feeling, one I don't want to lose.

I believe Leo when he says he's a changed man. He's nothing like the man I met at the pool that very first day when he made a sexual comment to me. No, this man has taken me on museum dates, listened to me speak, and made me feel heard. Leo is trying with me, and that's all I can ask for.

Our kiss becomes more passionate as our hands roam each other's bodies. Leo's fingers brush my nipples, and it makes me gasp and arch into him. He kisses me deeper, growling low in the back of his throat, sending a spike of pleasure through

my body. I grip the backs of his shoulders, pulling him closer to me.

My arousal is already at full steam ahead. It's kind of amazing and ridiculous how much my body responds to Leo's touch.

He brings his hand between my legs, cupping me. I gasp out his name, which makes him smile and kiss me even harder. Leo spends time rubbing my sensitive nub until I'm aching for more.

"Please," I whisper. "Leo."

"What do you need, baby? Tell me?" He rubs me harder. I can barely take the sensation.

"I need to ..."

He nods, staring down at me with those intense blue eyes of his. "You need to come?"

"Yes," I gasp as his finger enters me.

He leans down, his lips close to my ear. "The come."

And I do.

I clutch Leo as my body shudders from his touch, my legs falling open without a care in the world, my heart pounding fast, and my brain feeling clear for the first time in ... ever.

He chuckles as he kisses over my neck to my chest and back up to my lips. "That was good, huh?"

"Yeah, it was."

"Ready for me?" He grips his growing erection and presses it against my entrance.

"Always."

Leo enters me with one thrust. My body has gotten more used to this sensation. Instead of it hurting, it's only pleasurable now. Leo still lets me get adjusted, though, which just warms my heart. Once I nod for him to continue, Leo begins to move his hips in a circle, his erection pressing into

all the crevices of my inner walls. I gasp, holding onto him tightly.

After a little bit, I start to match his pace, moving my hips around. Leo holds me like he's afraid he'll lose me. I want to tell him I don't plan on going anywhere.

"You feel so good around me," he murmurs into my ear. I clutch his back, my nails digging in.

He presses his head to mine, and together, we stare into each other's eyes as we move as one. With Leo, I feel respected when we have sex. I don't feel cheap or degraded. He makes sure to focus on my pleasure and whether I'm comfortable with something or not. He really is a changed man because I can't even believe that the man above me could be the same man who could post a woman's nude photos online.

Our breath mingles. Leo's pace space grows faster as we make love. I grip his hips with my knees, holding on tight. The sounds coming out of us are the only sounds in the room. I could listen to Leo growl in his deep voice for hours and never get tired of it.

His erection hits that perfect spot within me, and it's enough to send me over the edge.

But instead of staying quiet this time, I call out his name. Really call out. "Leo!"

Leo's eyes flash as he continues to thrust into me. "I love hearing you scream my name. Say it again."

"Leo." This time I say it in more quietly, but it still spurs Leo on.

"Oh, Fran. Fuck. You're amazing." He thrusts once, twice, three more times into me before groaning his own release. "Francesca." Leo buries his head into the crook of my neck. I take my time stroking the back of his hair, content to have him holding me. I plant a kiss on his shoulder. I just want to stay in this moment with him forever.

I don't see any reason why I can't.

HANNAH, Emilia and Marco's housekeeper, opens the door for us. "Come in. Dinner is almost ready." She hurries off the moment we step inside as Marco greets us.

"Welcome." He shakes Leo's hand and gives me a half-hug. "We're happy to have you guys over for a dinner party. Now that you're married, I think it's a good time to do it, especially before the baby comes."

"Don't remind me," Emilia says, coming down the stairs. Marco rushes over to her to help her the rest of the way down. "I'm fine," she says to him. "Remember, I'm not—"

"Dead yet," he finishes.

She flashes a smile at her husband. "Exactly." Emilia turns to us, giving me a large smile and Leo a nod. That's progress. She's not glaring at him for once. "Come on. Let's go sit down."

"Thanks for having us," I say as I take my seat at the dining table, Leo next to me. Emilia and Marco settle in across from us.

"I'm happy to," Emilia responds, running her hands over her stomach. "I wanted to spend some time with you before the baby comes. And Marco suggested Leo come, too."

Leo smiles cheekily. "Don't I feel special?"

Emilia sighs right as Hannah sets down a large pan filled with a roast chicken. "Marco thought it would be a good idea for us to get to know each other better because you're Fran's husband now. I still don't like, but so far, my sister has been happy, which leads me to believe you haven't royally screwed this up. Yet."

"Emilia," I say in a tired voice. "Can we just drop it? I want you two to get along."

"Fine. I'll drop it." She grabs her napkin and places it in her lap before pointing at Leo. "Just remember—"

“Don’t hurt your sister, or you’re coming after me,” Leo responds. “I got it, sis. Francesca and I have been good. You don’t need to worry. I’m a changed man.”

Emilia huffs but doesn’t say anything. Marco just watches Leo with a contemplative expression.

We all dig into the food, and for a while, it’s not *too* tense as we eat. The conversation is kept to lighter topics, like hobbies and the weather.

“Have you had the chance to check out any other museums?” Emilia asks me. “She loves museums by the way,” she says to Leo.

Leo smiles as he sets his wine glass down. “Oh, I know. We’ve been on a date to one.”

“Really?” Emilia sounds so surprised that I almost want to tell her to stop.

“Tell her,” Leo urges me.

All eyes turn to me, and I resist the urge to sink down into my seat. “We went to the Natural History Museum. We spent the night there, actually. It was ... pretty romantic.”

Leo puffs his chest out, looking incredibly pleased with himself. “I planned it all myself, just for Fran. I knew she’d appreciate it.” He gives me a smile meant only for me, and it makes me blush.

Emilia looks back and forth between us. “Well, that’s ... good, actually. I’m impressed, Leo. And surprised. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“I didn’t know either until Francesca entered my life.”

I smile to myself as I take a bite of broccoli.

Emilia settles down after that, becoming slightly warmer toward Leo. Slightly. There’s still an iciness when she looks at him, but it’s thawed somewhat. I’m glad to see it. I just want Emilia to see what I see in Leo. It’s taken me a little bit of time to get here, but I’m so glad I got to this point. Now, things between Leo and me are better than ever.

“I can’t believe Antonio’s birthday is today,” Emilia says, changing the topic. “I wanted to be there for it, but with the baby ...” She nods at her stomach. “It would have been too hard.”

“I get it,” I say. “He probably won’t even miss me. He’s eighteen now. It’s crazy to believe.”

“I know. Our little brother, all grown up. Soon, he’ll be taking over, and Franco will have to step down. It’s Antonio’s rightful place to take after our dad. He’s wearing Dad’s pendant, after all.” She turns to Marco. “You should help him get settled after the baby comes. I’m sure he’d appreciate the advice on how to be a leader.”

“Gladly,” Marco says.

“How soon will he take over?” I ask.

“Hopefully, soon,” Emilia says, taking a sip of her water. “I want Franco out of that house and away from our mom.” The memory of Franco hitting Mom flashes through my head again. I need to tell Emilia what I saw.

I open my mouth to speak when the doorbell rings. Marco frowns as Hannah walks by to answer the door.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone,” he says.

We all turn to see who it is as Hannah comes into the room followed by Henry.

“Henry, what are you doing here?” Marco asks.

“Yeah, Henry, what *are* you doing here?” Leo crosses his arms, sending daggers with his eyes toward Henry.

“She needs to know the truth,” Henry states. “If you’re going to call it off, then I have a right to intervene.”

“Henry,” Leo growls, standing up and slowly approaching him. “I’d think before you say anything more.”

“What’s he talking about?” Emilia asks. “What truth?”

“Leo made a bet with me to take Francesca’s virginity.”

The entire room goes silent.

Then, Leo slams his fist into Henry's face, knocking him backwards. "Shit," Marco mutters, running over to stop them.

Emilia looks outraged as she stares at Leo, while I ... Honestly, I don't know what my face looks like. I just feel numb.

"Stop this," Marco growls, pulling Leo away from Henry. "What's going on? What are you talking about? What bet?"

"It's just as I said. Leo and I made a bet he'd seduce Francesca, and then in turn, he'd get my car. If he didn't succeed, I'd get his job."

Leo looks dejected as he stumbles away from Henry. "Fran ..." He reaches out his hand to me, but I back away. Emilia comes over to me, standing in front of me and protecting me from Leo.

Marco turns to Leo. "Really? You just had to, didn't you?"

"I regretted it," Leo says, a fire in his eyes. "I ... I didn't know I'd end up married to Fran. I didn't know I'd end up falling ..." He turns to me. "Please, let me explain."

"I think you've done enough," Emilia says. "You're disgusting. So, that's why you were in Fran's room that night. You were trying to win your bet, but you got caught and had to marry her instead. Talk about karma. I don't want you anywhere near my sister ever again."

"Fran, please," Leo begs. "Let's just talk, ok? I can explain."

"Explain what?" I ask, stepping around my sister, even though Emilia looks like she wants to object.

"Explain that I changed. I told Henry it was over. That I wasn't going to do the bet any longer. I regretted it. I felt guilty. You have to believe me, Fran."

"So, you weren't just using me this entire time?" I whisper.

"No!"

I stare at Leo, taking in the sincerity in his voice. He may believe what he says to be true, but I don't believe him. This

entire time, was he just trying to seduce me to win his bet? The museum dates, the theme park dates, the way he made me feel special enough to want to have sex with him. It was all just a ploy to win a bet. He doesn't think I'm special. I'm just another woman on his list to hurt.

"Fran," Leo says, but I walk around him, leaving the room. I hear someone's phone ring behind me, but I don't slow down. Leo used me. He was using me this entire time, and for what? For a challenge? Because he could? Leo full on admitted that he did bad things to women, but he made me believe he'd never do that to me. Well, he's a liar because he did.

I hear Emilia's voice faintly as she talks to someone on the phone. I reach the stairs, intent to stay at Emilia's house for a while until I can figure out what to do about Leo. But I stop when Emilia calls out for me.

I turn back to Emilia hurrying over to me, her phone clutched in her hand. All the men follow. "Fran," she says. "Mom just called." Her voice is choked up and frantic.

"What is it?" I ask, a growing anxiety in my chest.

"She just told me Franco kicked Antonio out. That he took him somewhere to make sure Antonio couldn't be his competition any longer."

"What? What happened?"

"I don't know. Mom doesn't even know if Antonio is alive or dead. All she knows is he's gone."

CHAPTER 17

Francesca

“**W**hat do we do?” I ask Emilia.

“Mom just told me that tension was rising between Antonio and Franco as his birthday has come closer.” Emilia responds, holding up her phone. “I guess men showed up to the house today and took Antonio away. There wasn’t anything Mom or anyone else could do. I need to go there. I need to make sure Mom is all right. I need to find Antonio. I’m worried Franco might try to kill him.” Emilia turns to Marco. “Is there any way you can help?”

Marco frowns. “I’m sorry. If Franco is still in charge, I can’t risk putting the rest of your family in danger by going against him.”

“But Antonio is the rightful heir!”

“I know.” Marco gently takes Emilia’s arms, pulling her closer to him. “I know. But Franco is the one with power. All your father’s men follow him now. Antonio was only twelve when your father died. He wasn’t in the right position to take over, and now that’s coming back to bite him.”

“But him being twelve when our dad died wasn’t his fault.” Emilia jerks away from Marco. “How is any of this fair?”

“It’s not,” Marco replies. “But my hands are tied. If Antonio wants to gain power, he’ll have to do it himself.”

“If he’s even alive,” I whisper.

Marco nods at me. “Yes. If he’s even alive.”

“Don’t say that,” Emilia snaps, pointing at Marco. “Don’t say that. I’m going back home.” She turns toward the stairs when Marco rests his hand on her arm, stopping her.

“Emilia, you’re almost nine months pregnant. You’re due next week.”

“I don’t care. I need to be there for my family. I’m going.”

Marco sighs deeply, a pained expression on his face. “I can’t go with you right now. I have so much work to do.”

“It’s ok.” Emilia gives him a small smile. “It’s ok. But I’m going.” She turns to me. “You want to come with me?”

I look between her and Leo, who’s still giving me a pleading expression. How could Leo hurt my heart like this? Emilia warned me about him, and she was right. She’s always had my back.

I face her head on. “I’m coming with you.”

“Fran, wait.” Leo steps forward, reaching out for me but I step away. “We need to talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. You messed up, Leo. You promised me you were different!” I shout, surprising even myself. Emilia stops on the stairs, looking down at me with a pitying expression. “You promised me you’d changed!” Leo flinches. “But my sister was right about you. And she needs me right now. My ... family needs me right now.”

“But you said you didn’t even miss your family,” he says.

My breath gets caught in my throat for a moment. “I know,” I force myself to say. “But they need me.”

“Even if your mom doesn’t deserve your help?”

“What did you say?” That’s from Emilia. “Why would you say that?” She storms down the stairs and pokes Leo in the chest. “My mom deserves help. Her son could be dead!”

Leo crosses his arms, an annoyed expression on his face. “Have you ever asked your sister how your mom has made her feel?”

“I know she’s made Fran feel invisible, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t deserve help.”

“Oh, yeah?” A challenging look crosses Leo’s eyes. “What about the time she blamed Fran for your father’s death?”

Emilia flinches back. “What are you talking about?” She turns to me. “What is he talking about?”

“Nothing,” I whisper. “Let’s just go.”

Emilia nods, gives Leo one last glare, then heads upstairs to pack. I join her.

“What did he mean?” she asks as she grabs her suitcase out of the closet. “Did Mom really do that?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you never tell me?” She pulls me into a hug. “I would have been there for you.”

“I know. I just didn’t know how to talk to you about it. I still don’t.”

Emilia gives me an exasperated look before throwing clothes into her suitcase. “You can talk to me, Fran. You know that.”

“It’s just hard sometimes when I feel like you judge me.”

She stops. “When have I ever judged you?”

“With Leo.”

She opens her mouth to speak, then firmly plants it shut. “Fine. Maybe I did. But see? He hurt you. I said he would.”

“I know.” I cross my arms and duck my head, unable to take her looking at me. “Can we just go?”

“Don’t you need to pack?”

“I can’t go back to Leo’s. Not right now.”

“Ok.” She sighs deeply, zipping up her suitcase. “You can borrow some of mine. We can use Marco’s private jet to go to New York. Let’s go home.”

THE FLIGHT back to New York is full of silence. Both Emilia and I are stuck in our own heads, and besides, I don't really feel like talking. Too much has happened tonight, and all in the span of a few minutes. I know I need to deal with Leo, but I don't even know what to say to him. How could he do that to me? How could he not tell me?

I was really beginning to trust Leo, and now all of that is dashed. And I don't think we can ever recover. How can I forgive the man who tried seducing me for a bet? But I'm married to him, and there's no getting away from that.

We land in New York after a few hours. The snowy city is windy today, and my hair keeps flying in my face, making it hard to see as we walk to the taxi. Emilia is struggling to walk in this weather, but she perseveres. I hope I can be as strong as her someday.

It takes about an hour for us to reach our house. The snow and traffic keep us backed up for a while. But once we reach our childhood home, all the memories I've had of my mom come flooding back. Will she even want me here?

Emilia knocks on the door, and Mom answers. She's a ragged mess, with hair going off in different directions and dark circles under her eyes. "Emilia?" She cries out as she hugs her. "What are you doing here? Come in. It's cold out." She ushers us inside.

"We're here to help you with Antonio."

She grips Emilia's arms. "Do you know where he is?"

"No." Emilia gently untangles herself from Mom. "But we're here to find out."

"We?" Mom finally sets her eyes on me and looks shocked. "Francesca? Why did you come?"

"Uh, same reason as Emilia. I want to help," I add lamely.

“Oh. Ok.” She eyes me over for a moment. I swear, it’s the longest she’s ever looked at me. Then she promptly turns back to Emilia. “Well, I don’t know where Franco took him. He could be anywhere. He could be hurt.” She sobs. “He could be dead.”

“It’s ok, Mom. We’re here.” She wraps her arms around Mom, who only cries harder. Watching Emilia soothe our mom makes me realize how at home Emilia looks doing it.

It makes me realize that this was never my home, not with how my mom treated me. But Leo’s home isn’t mine either. Not after what just happened between us.

So, the question is, do I even have a home to belong to?

CECILIA IS the first of our siblings to greet us. It’s clear she’s been crying, given her puffy red eyes. She’s clutching the cross around her neck. “He’s gone,” she sobs, immediately running into Emilia’s arms. Mom backs away to give us some space.

“He’s not gone,” Emilia comforts her. “When Franco gets back, I’m going to make him tell us where Antonio is, and then we’re going to help our brother. Trust me.”

Mia comes running down the stairs. “It’s been chaos. Two men showed up out of the blue and grabbed Antonio and took him away. Franco went with them. I never thought he could do something like this. I thought he loved us.” It’s clear Mia knows nothing of the abuse Mom has endured from Franco.

Mom comes back into the room, the twins on either side of her. They both look scared and confused. As five-year-olds, they don’t quite understand what’s happening.

Now that I know the truth, when I look at Lucia and Luca, I can see a little bit of Franco in them. But since Franco and my dad looked so much alike, I never even questioned my mom’s story about the twins being Dad’s children. My eyes go to my mom. Yes, I have a complicated relationship with her,

but she's also endured a lot since Franco forcibly moved in with us. Abuse. Rape. I wish I could talk to her, comfort her, but she'd probably ignore me as usual.

Mom meets my eyes for a second, frowns, and turns away.

While Emilia comforts our younger sisters, I force myself to go over to my mom. "Are you ok?"

"Of course I'm not ok," she snaps. "My son was taken, and I don't know where he is. If he's even alive!" A sob escapes her. Lucia pats Mom's hand.

"It's ok, Momma," she says. "You don't need to cry."

She whimpers, crying harder.

Luca walks over to me, presumably tired of our mother crying. "Where have you been?" he asks me.

"I live in LA now, remember? You were there for my wedding."

"Oh, yeah. I remember. I've missed you."

I startle at his words, not expecting them at all. "You—you missed me?"

"Yeah." He shrugs. "You're my sister." He gives me a quick hug before running off. My heart feels instantly warmer.

Lucia walks away to join her brother, leaving Mom and me to stand next to each other. Cecilia and Mia are taking up all of Emilia's attention.

"Mom, let me help you," I say, pushing the words out.

She looks up from her hands, tears streaking her cheeks. "Help me how? Unless you can get Antonio back, you're no help to me."

I immediately turn away from her, fighting back my own tears.

The door opens, and Franco steps through entry. Emilia detangles herself from Cecilia and Mia and storms over to him. "Where is he?"

Franco steps back, eyeing Emilia over in a way that feels more intimate than an uncle looking at his niece. “Where is who?”

“Antonio,” Emilia seethes. “You took him someplace. Where?”

“He was becoming a problem. I dealt with it. I suggest you get over your feelings, grieve your brother, and move on.”

Mom crumbles to the floor, sobbing so loudly my heart begins to break.

“So, he’s dead?” Emilia asks.

“Yes.” That one simple word makes all my sisters start to cry. Whereas I can only stare at Franco in shock. He couldn’t really kill Antonio. My brother is his nephew. His blood. You can’t hurt your own kin. Antonio cannot be dead.

Emilia wipes away her tears and slams her fists into Franco’s chest, making him step back. “No. You tell me where he is! Tell me where he is!”

Franco shoves her back. I run forward and catch Emilia before she can fall. She gives me a grateful nod. Franco huffs and walks past us, heading into the living room.

“We need to find out where Antonio is,” Emilia whispers to me. “He can’t be dead.”

“What ...” I hate to ask it. “What if he is?”

Emilia shoots me a sharp look. “No. Don’t give up hope.”

“I won’t. But I don’t think Franco will tell us anything.”

“I know. Unless ...” She eyes me over. I frown. “Unless you’re somebody he tends to ignore.”

“Oh no.” I step away from her. “I can’t *spy* on Franco.”

“You have to. It’s our only way. Francesca, I know you don’t like it, but you do tend to be ignored. It’s not fair. It’s not right. But use it to your advantage. Listen in to Franco’s conversations. See if he tells anyone anything about Antonio’s whereabouts. Please.” She grips my hand. “You’re the only one who can do this.”

“What about our sisters?” I nod at them. They’re still huddled together, crying. “Why can’t they do it?”

“They’re too young. You have to do it.”

She’s ... right. I was ready to say goodbye to my family, but now, I have to be the one to save them.

“All right,” I finally say. “I’ll try.”

“Thank you.” She hugs me fiercely, and it reminds me of how good Emilia is at comforting people, how warm her hugs can be.

Emilia goes to our sisters and mom and leads them upstairs. She makes a big show of making a lot of noise so Franco knows she’s gone. That just leaves me.

I edge closer to the living room and listen in, but Franco’s just watching TV. I don’t know how he can be so callous as to hurt my brother, then come home and watch TV like nothing happened.

I stand there for so long that I’m about to give up when I hear Franco speak. “Is it done?” he asks. I jerk up. Looking around the archway into the living room, I see him talking on his phone. He doesn’t even look over at me. “Is the little shit dead?” He must be talking about Antonio.

Franco is quiet as whoever is on the other line speaks. “No. You need to make that happen.” He propels himself to standing. “What! He can’t have escaped. You need to go and get him back. *Now*. He needs to be dealt with immediately.” Franco pauses. “If you find him, bring him back to the docks. Understood? And then kill him.” Franco hangs up, tossing his phone onto the ground as he groans. “Why can’t anyone do anything right?”

He starts to turn in my direction, but I back up before he can see me. The only problem is I end up bumping into the side table in the foyer. Oh no.

Franco comes storming into the foyer and freezes when he sees me. “Francesca? I didn’t realize you’d returned from LA.”

“I ... I came with Emilia,” I whisper. “I just came down to get some water. So ...” I try walking past him, but he stops me.

“Were you listening in on my conversation?”

“What conversation?” I ask as fast as I can.

Franco huffs, a smirk on his face. “I don’t think you’re as sweet and innocent as you’d have everyone else believe. I’m watching you, Francesca.”

“No one ever does.” I walk around him and head to the kitchen, where I stop and prop myself on the counter, catching my breath. That was a close call. Franco knows I was listening, which means Emilia and I only have a small window to find Antonio. I don’t have a specific place where he was last seen, but I know it was down by the docks. If Antonio is on the run, then we can start looking there.

I hurry upstairs to find Emilia and Mom in Mom’s room. “I know where Antonio is.”

Both their heads whip around to look at me. “Where?” Emilia asks.

“Well ... I don’t have the exact location, but I heard Franco say he was down by the docks. He escaped. He’s on the run. We have to find him now.”

“That’s not a lead,” Mom says. “We’d just be running around in circles.”

“Do you want to find Antonio or not?” I snap, making her jerk back.

“Of course, I do,” she says in a quieter voice.

“Good. Then stop making me feel horrible about myself. You always have. I’m trying to help. I’m the one who heard Franco talking. That was because of me. If you don’t want my help, fine. But I’m going to help find my brother, even if you’ve made me feel like I don’t belong. Antonio deserves help, and so do you, Mom. Despite how you’ve treated me. So, are we going or not?”

Emilia smiles at me, pride on her face while Mom looks withdrawn.

“I’m going,” Emilia states as she stands up, joining me at my side. “How about you, Mom?”

“I can’t leave the kids alone with Franco, but I want to go. Someone needs to stay.” She turns to me. “Francesca, can’t you? Emilia and I can handle this.”

Emilia wraps her arm around me. “No. Francesca needs to help us. She’s good at this, Mom. I’ll call Gemma and have her and Viktor come over. They can more than handle Franco. Francesca is a part of this family, and it’s time you started treating her as such.”

Mom looks between Emilia and me for a moment before sighing and nodding. “Fine. All right. Let’s go.”

Emilia takes a moment to call Gemma and have her come over to keep an eye on our younger siblings.

That’s how I find myself heading downstairs with my older sister and mother, ready to go out and find my brother. Even if Franco tries stopping us. Even if Antonio will be hard to find.

I tried pulling away from this family because I felt like I never belonged. I still don’t, honestly. But my brother needs us, and I’m willing to help because it’s the right thing to do. I can’t be a coward forever. I need to stand up for myself and the people in my life.

The sad part is, it was Leo who inspired this change in me.

Now, I might never see him again, and I don’t know how to feel about it.

CHAPTER 18

Francesca

Franco intercepts us as we're making our way to the front door. "Where do you think you girls are going?"

"Girls?" Emilia huffs, shaking her head. Mom places a hand on her arm, stopping her from getting into a fight with Franco.

"We're off to find Antonio," Mom tells him. "You can't stop us."

"I can, and I will." He steps in front of the door, his much larger stature meant to intimidate us. "You three are to remain here. I'm in charge. Not Antonio. He's not going to take what's mine."

"You took it from him in the first place," Emilia snaps back. "Antonio is the rightful heir to the family business, not you."

Franco smirks. "It's cute you think that."

Pure, unadulterated rage crosses Emilia's face, and she does something I never knew anyone had the guts to do.

She slaps Franco across the face.

Mom steps back with a gasp. My mouth is dropped open. Franco is so stunned he freezes for a moment. It's long enough for Emilia to push past him, head outside, and lumber toward the car, but not before telling Franco, "Now you know what it feels like." I follow her, but Mom remains back.

Franco grabs Mom's arm. "You're not going anywhere. You tell your daughters to get back in here now."

Mom struggles to pull away, her eyes searching frantically for an escape. Emilia is at the car. It would be so easy for me to join her, seek protection by my sister's side.

But I can't always remain a coward.

I march back inside and push Franco away from my mom. He whirls on me, raising his hand to strike me. As I flinch, Mom grabs his hand and flings it back at him. Franco stares at us with wide eyes.

"You don't get to hit my mom again," I tell him. "Come on," I tell her, taking her arm and guiding her outside. Franco follows, of course. He can't stand to lose.

"Do not get in that car!" he shouts.

Mom glances back at him, but I pull her forward. She clings to me. It's the first time she's ever sought comfort from me. As we near the car, Emilia joins us, halting Franco as he comes toward us.

"Back off," she growls.

Franco stops. "Just because you're pregnant, doesn't mean I won't hurt you if you get in my way."

"You can't hurt me," she says. "Marco would rain hell on you if you did." For a second, a flash of fear passes across his eyes. "Yeah. You know my husband wouldn't stop until he killed you. So don't even think about it."

Franco looks at the three of us. "You're just women. You can't stop me from stopping you."

"Maybe not, but I can," a man's voice rings out. Looking over my shoulder, I see Viktor and Gemma walking toward the house. Like the rest of us, they're bundled in heavy winter jackets and hats.

Gemma comes to my side, giving Emilia and I a nod. Viktor walks straight up to Franco, no fear in his expression. Viktor has always been a wild card. He's not afraid of anything—in fact, he thrives on the thrill of danger.

"I told Antonio I'd stand by his side," Viktor says to Franco. "So, if you're intent on killing him, I won't allow it."

“We had a deal,” Franco seethes. “You, me, and Marco. You don’t get to go behind my back on that.”

Viktor makes a big show of looking around. “Whoops. Looks like I already did. Now, we’re going to walk inside so these women can find Antonio. And I’m going to keep an eye on you until Antonio is found. Now, come on.” He smacks Franco on the back, making him jump. Viktor sniggers as he shoves Franco toward the house.

Gemma turns to me. “I’ll stay with Viktor, if you don’t mind. Franco looks like he might shit himself, and I don’t want to miss that for the world.”

“We got this,” Emilia says. “We’ll find Antonio.”

“I’ll have Viktor tell his men to be on the lookout for him as well,” Gemma says. “Our brother will be ok. He needs to take over, so we can get rid of Franco once and for fucking all.”

“Gemma,” Mom scolds.

Gemma rolls her eyes. “Same old, same old.” She winks at me before heading inside with Viktor and Franco.

I get behind the wheel of the car, while Mom sits in the passenger seat and Emilia sits in the back. I know she probably wants to drive, but she’s too pregnant right now. “Franco said Antonio was down by the docks, but that he escaped, so he could be anywhere. But that’s where we should start looking.”

“I agree.”

I head off toward the docks. The car is silent until Mom decides to speak. “Francesca?”

I shoot her a glance, surprised she’s actually addressing me. “Yeah?”

“Thank you for what you did back there. I know standing up to Franco isn’t easy.”

I have to blink back tears. My mom never compliments me or thanks me for anything. “You’re welcome,” I say.

She shakes her head, staring out the window, not looking at me. “I haven’t even asked you how you’ve been. You got married, and I don’t even know how that’s going for you.”

My eyes meet Emilia’s in the rearview mirror. She gives me an encouraging smile. Now’s as good a time as any, meaning there’ll never be a perfect time to speak to my mom. But I have to try.

“Leo ... hurt me,” I admit.

Mom looks at me with a frown. “Hurt you how?”

“Not abuse.” We share a look, and by her expression, I can tell she understands I know the truth. “Emilia told me,” I explain. She nods, ducking her chin.

“You must hate me,” she says.

Clenching the steering wheel tightly, I sigh. “I don’t hate you, Mom. What Franco’s done to you is not ok. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

“I know I don’t make it easy on you, but with the twins and losing your father ... A lot has happened for me. My attention could only go so far.”

“Well, maybe once Antonio is safe, we can try to ... talk more?” I suggest. “I want to talk to you, Mom. It’s all I’ve ever really wanted,” I admit.

I jerk when she slides her hand across my mine, giving it a little squeeze. “I’d like that. I want to try more, too.”

We share a smile before I turn my eyes back onto the road. A long row of cars is backed up, partly from the snow and wind and partly from just New York traffic being New York traffic.

Mom checks her phone. “How much longer are we going to stay here? I want to get moving.”

I’m about to respond when Emilia lets out a small cry. Mom and I turn to look at her. She’s hunched over, clutching her stomach.

“Honey?” Mom reaches her hand back to touch Emilia’s arm. “Are you ok?”

“No,” she grits out, her face turning red. “I think I’m having contractions.”

Mom and I share a concerned look before Mom turns her attention onto Emilia. I keep my eyes on the road, preparing to move the moment I have a chance.

“Just stay calm,” Mom tells her.

“Ah!” Emilia screams. “Oh, it hurts.”

“Ok. Count the contractions. How long between them?”

I inch forward a few feet. We’re stuck in traffic, and Emilia is going to have her baby soon. And we still have to find Antonio.

This is not good.

Emilia screams again. “Uh, it’s only about a minute between. Shit.” I look in the rearview mirror to see what’s going on. Her lower body is soaked. “My water just broke,” she whispers.

“Oh, no. What do we do? What do we do?” Mom begins to panic.

“You’ve had eight kids,” Emilia grits out. “You know what’s happening.”

“Of course, I know what’s happening, but I’ve never had to deliver a baby myself. I was always at the hospital by the time this happened. And I had a C-section for half of you kids!”

While they continue to snap at each other, I know I have to make a decision. I pull to the side of the road and park the car. Mom watches in confusion as I get out and run to the back seat, joining Emilia.

“Someone needs to deliver this baby,” I say. “She’s giving birth.” Both Emilia and Mom are hyperventilating. For such strong women, it’s a little amusing to see them freak out. Normally, I’m the one hyperventilating.

If Mom can't help Emilia, I'll have to be the one. Thank goodness I went through a phase where I read about everything to do with the sixteen hundreds. I remember a chapter in one of my books that went into detail about how midwives delivered babies without any medicine or doctors.

"Emilia, I think your baby is coming," I tell her, helping her lie on her back. Mom watches helplessly from the front seat. Emilia's screams are piercing my eardrums. I'm not sure I'll be able to hear normally after this.

I take off Emilia's pants to get a good look at what's happening. I can see the baby's head. The sight of it takes my breath away.

"Ok," I say. "Your baby is coming right now. I can see its head. You have to push, ok?"

"Do you know what you're doing?" Emilia asks, panic in her voice.

"Yes," I lie. "You know I read a lot. So, trust me." Emilia nods, dropping her head back as she cries out.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this. I wasn't supposed to give birth until next week. Marco needs to be here with me."

"Honey," Mom says, rubbing her arm. "He's not going to make it. You're giving birth now."

"Em, push for me," I say, getting my hands read to catch the baby. Emilia shakes her head, tears streaming from her eyes.

"I can't do this," she says. "I can't."

"Yes, you can." I tell her. "I've been afraid of so many things. You're the brave one in this family. I'm the shy one. So, if I'm capable of delivering your baby, then you're capable of pushing. Your baby is ready to come out. Come on, Em."

Emilia pushes herself up on her elbows, gritting her teeth, her face red, as she nods. "Ok. Let's do this."

"Push."

Emilia does. She pushes and pushes until ...

... the baby leaves her body and slides into my hands. Her instant cries send a breath of relief through everybody. Glancing down, I smile. "It's a girl," I tell her.

Even though it's clear she's exhausted, Emilia laughs as she takes her baby from me, holding her to her chest.

"Do you have a name in mind?" I ask.

"I don't want to say without Marco here." Emilia smiles at me. "You did it, Fran. You did it."

I wasn't a coward. I chose to be brave.

"Let's get you to the hospital."

EMILIA WANTS to go with me to find Antonio, but Mom tells her to remain in bed. "You just need to be here with your baby," she says. Emilia sits back in the hospital bed, clutching her daughter to her chest. Mom already called Marco to let him know to get to New York as soon as possible.

"Find Antonio," Emilia says. "I can't rest until I know he's all right."

"I'm going to stay here with you," Mom says, stroking Emilia's hair back before leaning down to kiss her granddaughter on the head. "You need support."

"Mom, I'll be fine. Go find Antonio."

"I want more than anything to do that," she says. "But not until Marco gets here. I was thinking ... Francesca could continue to look for Antonio."

I jerk. "What?" Mom would really entrust Antonio's safety to me? Antonio, one of her favorites and me, her least favorite.

"Someone needs to be here with Emilia," she explains. "But it doesn't have to be both of us. You go after Antonio. Find him and bring him back to me. Besides, I can't drive, so it has to be you."

“You really trust me to do this?” I ask in a quiet voice so only she can hear.

As Mom smiles at me, I instantly feel warmer. “I just saw you deliver your sister’s baby. You stood up to Franco for me. You’re a lot stronger than I ever gave you credit for, Francesca. You can do this. I trust you.”

Without even thinking, I throw my arms around my mom, hugging her tightly. When she hugs me back, it takes everything in me to not cry.

“I’ll make you proud,” I tell her, pulling back.

“You already do. I just don’t tell you enough. And I should.”

There’s still a lot more for my mom and I to talk about, but right now, Antonio needs help, so I smile once more at her, Emilia, and my niece before leaving the hospital.

It takes me another hour to get to the docks. I really have no clue where Antonio is, but if he escaped Franco’s men, he’s likely on foot and didn’t get very far. Getting out of my car, I shiver and rub my hands up and down my arms, trying to warm myself. It’s so dark, and combined with the snow falling, I can barely see. All I can make out are shipping containers.

“Antonio?” I call out, my soft voice carrying on the wind. Men’s voices make me go quiet, and I duck around a shipping container as two men walk by. They must not have heard me over the wind. I vaguely recognize them from the day of my dad’s funeral. They work for Franco now.

“Come out,” one of them says, making me jerk up. “Antonio, I know you’re hiding from us. We can end this, quick and painless. You’re hurt. You can’t get far.” Antonio’s hurt? Then he must be in one of these shipping containers because where else would he seek shelter in this weather?

I wait for the two men to walk by, then sneak out and search for my brother. I try opening one shipping container, but the doors don’t budge. I try another, and the same thing happens. This is hopeless. There are too many containers and

not enough time, and I have no clue where he could be. I also don't have a weapon, and these men are armed. Hopefully, they won't shoot an unarmed woman. If they have any respect for my father, they won't hurt me.

Then again, they hurt Antonio. Anything is possible.

I'm about to step around another container when my foot bumps into something on the ground. Bending down to pick it up, I see it's my father's pendant – the image of the wolf on it stark against my white glove. The one Antonio was given the day of our father's funeral. Antonio would never go without it. He can't be far.

My eyes land on the shipping container in front of me. When I try the doors again, it doesn't budge. I have to take a risk and knock. "Antonio?" I whisper. "Are you in there?" I knock louder, looking over my shoulder to make sure the men don't appear. "Antonio!"

One of the doors creaks open, and a pair of blue eyes glower at me before widening in shock. "Francesca?" Antonio's voice rings out as he opens the door, motioning me inside. I hurry in before the men can find us. Antonio shuts the door, locking it again. "What are you doing here?" Before I can answer, he gasps and slumps onto the floor of the container. It's so dark in here, I can barely see. I grab my phone and turn on the light to see Antonio gripping his stomach.

"What happened?" I kneel beside him and shine the light on his wound. Blood is slowly seeping out of his gut.

"I was shot. I couldn't run, so I've been hiding here ever since. Franco wants me dead. He doesn't want me to take over."

"I can see that. I'm here to help. Let's get you out of here. My car isn't far." I start to stand up when Antonio grabs my hand, stopping me.

"No. Those men are still out there looking for me. I can't risk you getting hurt because of me."

“Then I’ll call for help.” But when I look down at my phone, I realize I have no reception. “Damnit.”

Antonio raises an eyebrow. “Did you, Francesca Moretti, just cuss?”

“It’s Francesca Benetti now, but yes, I did. And I’m going to get you out of here. I’m done being afraid of everything. Let’s go.” I help Antonio up, slinging his arm around my shoulder. Carefully, I ease open the doors and look around. I don’t see any men.

Antonio is limping, which makes me limp as we head for the car.

“Hey!” The shout makes both of us jump.

One of the guys comes running toward us out of the blizzard. He has his gun raised. “Stop!”

Antonio jerks his body to the side, bringing us both against a container as a bullet goes whizzing by. I gasp, shocked I’m actually in the middle of a shootout right now. Talk about a different life from reading books and going to museums all day.

Antonio puts his finger to his lips, telling me to be silent. Then he waits.

When the nozzle of the man’s gun pokes around the container, Antonio grabs it and points it at the sky. The gun goes off. I hold my ears, trying to stave off the worst of the piercing sound. Antonio punches the guy in the throat, knocking him onto his back. Then he manages to grab the gun from the guy, but before he can shoot, the man kicks out, knocking Antonio onto his back. They scabble for the gun.

“Shit!” Another man says as he comes into view. “I got this, Joe.” He lifts his gun to shoot Antonio, but I’m already moving into action. He doesn’t even see or hear me coming. I slam into his side, knocking him back and making him lose his gun. I pick it up and pause. He stares at me in shock. “You’re not going to shoot.”

I’m done with people telling me what I can and cannot do. I’m ready to make my own decisions and stand up for myself.

So, I shoot.

He screams as the bullet goes through his leg, making him fall onto the snowy ground.

In the kerfuffle, Antonio grabs the other man's gun and shoots him in the head. I gasp, looking away. I hear another gun shot, and when I look over my shoulder, I see the other man dead as well.

"Come on," Antonio says, grabbing my arm. "Let's get out of here."

I TAKE Antonio to the hospital to get help for his wound. He tries objecting, but I hold firm. "You could have died, Antonio. You need help."

"But I can't go home," he says as he stares at the ER doors. "If Franco finds me, I'm dead."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go in there and have them fix me up, but you need to make sure he doesn't find me here. Once I'm better, I ... I'll need to leave. I can't be around you guys, putting you in danger. I'll have to find my own way until I can take Franco down. If I go back home, he'll try to kill me all over again."

"So, you're saying you can never see your family again?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

I'm quiet, processing all of this. "Where will you go?" I finally ask.

"I don't know. But I need to find a way to take my rightful position. I can't do that if I'm worried about you guys. Don't tell him you helped me. All he needs to know is that I escaped. And one day, I'll come back, kill him, and take what's rightfully mine. What our dad wanted for me." He grips his pendant tightly in his hand, pressing it to his forehead. "I'll make you proud, Dad."

Tears sting my eyes. Antonio and I were never that close, so it doesn't feel right that I'm the one he's saying goodbye to and not our other siblings, especially Cecilia. They were always the closest.

"At least say goodbye to Mom," I tell him. "She's in the hospital with Emilia. She had her baby," I explain after he gives me a questioning look. "Mom would want to know you're ok."

"Ok," he says.

Together, we walk into the hospital, and quickly, he's pulled into surgery. Once he goes in, I find Mom and Emilia in the nursery wing of the hospital.

"Did you find him?" Mom asks, rushing to my side.

"I did. He's alive and in surgery for a gunshot wound. He'll talk to you once he gets out."

Mom slumps in relief. "Thank god. Oh, thank god." She pulls me into her arms. So many hugs from my mom within one day. If I didn't feel so alive right now, I'd think I was dreaming. "Let's go to the hallway." She guides me from the room because Emilia is sleeping.

"Is Marco still on his way?"

"Yes. He keeps texting me every five minutes, asking how Emilia is doing." Mom settles into a chair in the nearest waiting room. "I'm so happy Antonio is ok."

"Me, too."

Mom is silent for a moment, gazing around at the nurses and doctors passing by. "So, how is your marriage going? You didn't get the chance to finish telling me. You said Leo hurt you?"

"He ... it's embarrassing."

"I'm your mother. I can handle a lot."

With a deep breath, I say, "He made this bet to ... to seduce me. But then he tried kissing me, and Emilia caught us, and Marco made us marry. Things were going well for us,

though, despite the rocky start. He took me on dates. Museum dates! It meant so much to me. Until the truth came out, and I realized he was lying to me all this time. It just hurts, Mom. It hurts.” It takes me a second to realize I’m crying.

Mom rubs my back. “Did you get to know him?”

“I thought I did.”

“Well, take it from someone who loved a complicated man, the reason it hurts so much is because you love him.”

I wipe at my tears, glancing over at her. “I don’t love him.”

“You don’t? I remember seeing you two dance at the wedding. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look more peaceful in your life.”

“I ... I can’t love him, Mom. He lied to me.”

“You don’t think he changed? If he went out of his way to do nice things for you, you believe it was all a lie?”

“I have to.” I shift in my seat. These hard hospital chairs are not exactly conducive for sitting in for long periods of time. “Otherwise, it hurts even more.”

“Your father and I had a rocky start.”

“Really? You always seemed so in love.”

She sighs, rubbing her finger down her temple. “We grew to that, but it took time. I was only eighteen, and it was an arranged marriage. He was older, more established. I hated him at first, but we found love. When he died, it felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest. It hurt so much because I loved him so much. It felt like a betrayal, even if it wasn’t. It wasn’t like he meant to die. But I held a lot of resentment for him after he died, for leaving me alone. So, the reason you’re hurting right now is because you might love your own husband. Otherwise, you wouldn’t care as much.”

“I thought you blamed me for Dad’s death,” I whisper.

Mom turns to me with wide eyes. “Oh, Francesca.” She pulls me into her side. “No. I was mad for a moment, yes, but I

let that go years ago. I don't blame you for Dad's death. Not at all."

These were the words I've been waiting to hear for years. I can't stop the tears from spilling out now.

And Mom just holds me, giving me all her attention. It means the world.

After a while, I pull back, wiping my eyes. "I do miss him," I admit. "I left without really talking to him. I didn't give him the chance to explain."

"Go back to him and do just that. Give him that chance. I know what it's like to have complicated feelings for your own husband. And the one thing I learned is that you never give up on each other."

"I'll try."

"There you are." The doctor who took Antonio into surgery approaches me. "Your brother is out of surgery if you want to see him now."

Mom gasps and immediately stands. She looks between the doctor and me, silently asking for permission to go. I nod. "Antonio needs you. I'm going to head home."

Home. I want it to be at Leo's side.

Mom hurries down the hallway with the doctor, not looking back. And for once, I'm not mad that she's ignoring me.

Now, I understand.

I CALL Marco to ask if I can take his private plane back to LA, and he says yes. He's already on his way to New York to be with Emilia, so I won't see him once I get there.

The plane ride is even more quiet than it was on the way over. And without Emilia, it's slightly somber. Things are looking up, though. Emilia had her baby. Antonio is alive,

even though I know he's giving Mom news she doesn't want to hear.

Once I get back to Leo's house, I burst through the doors, ready to tell him I want to talk. I want to hear him speak his truth. Why he made that bet and why he decided to end it.

I just need to know the man I married isn't a complete monster.

But Leo isn't here.

I search the entire house. It's empty. My anxiety picks up as I dial Marco, asking him if he knows where Leo could be.

"I forgot to tell you," he says. "I was so busy trying to get to Emilia."

"That's ok. Where is he?"

He sighs deeply, making the hair on the back of my neck rise up. "He's in the hospital, Francesca."

CHAPTER 19

Leo

The moment Francesca leaves with Emilia for LA, I lunge at Henry in the foyer. “You did this!” I shout. I manage to grab his shirt when Marco steps between us and pushes me back, standing between Henry and me.

Henry swipes a hand over his face. “I didn’t do anything you didn’t do yourself. You’re the one who made this bet, and then you married the girl. You can’t blame me for this.”

“Oh, yes, I can.” I roll up my sleeves. “Marco, get out of the way. This is between Henry and me.”

“No. I will not.” Marco’s commanding voice makes me stop. “I won’t have my second in command fight another one of my employees. It’s clear you’re both at fault. You both made the bet.”

“I’m not the one who tried seducing Francesca,” Henry states.

Marco slowly turns to him, giving him a cold look that would make anyone shiver. “You really want to argue semantics right now?”

Henry shrinks back. “Uh, I guess not.”

“Good. Now, leave Henry. I’ll deal with you later.” Henry scurries out of the house before I get the chance to take another crack at him.

“Damnit, Marco,” I growl. “You should have let me at him.”

“What did I tell you on your wedding day?”

“What? He’s getting away, Marco. Let me go after hi—”

“On your wedding day,” he says, overriding me. “What did I tell you?”

My hands flap to my sides, frustration coursing through me. “What does that matter?”

“Leo, think.”

I sigh, scrambling my brain to remember ... Then it hits me. “Don’t fuck up,” I say.

“Exactly. Don’t fuck up. And what do you do?”

“I fucked up,” I murmur, running my hand over my face. “I fucked up big time.”

Marco at least has the decency to give me a slightly sympathetic look, even though I don’t deserve it. “What were you thinking going after Francesca like that?”

“I wasn’t,” I admit. “I was ...”

“Thinking with your penis.”

“Ok, I deserved that.”

Marco huffs, turning away from me. “You need to resolve this once Francesca returns. You’re married now. I don’t want your marriage drama interfering with your work, so get it together.” He storms off, leaving me in the foyer alone.

My first instinct is to hunt Henry down and beat the shit out of him for telling Fran the truth, but the reality is ... I should have told her the truth. Well, I never should have made that bet in the first place. I just didn’t know I’d actually end up falling for her. I never fall for the women I fuck, but Francesca, she has my heart.

That’s probably why it hurt so fucking much to see her leave.

Even if I can’t go after Henry right now, there’s someone else I can take my anger out on.

I get in my car and drive, speeding through the streets of LA until I reach an old apartment complex hour away from the

city. I haven't been back here since I was seventeen.

After finding apartment nineteen and knocking on the door for a minute, someone finally answers.

It's my father.

He looks haggard, with messy gray hair and huge bags under his eyes. His shirt is stained with something yellow, mustard presumably, and his pants are baggy. Wrinkles cover his face. He's the same man, yet looks different.

His eyes widen when he sees me. "Leo?"

"This is your fault," I say to him in a low voice. "You taught me to not respect women. So, I followed your lead, and look where that's gotten me."

He opens the door wider. "Do you want to come in?"

"Do I want to come in?" I laugh, though it's not out of amusement. "Do I look like I want to fucking come in to the place where you killed my mom? Do I?"

"I ..." He shakes his head, his eyes watering. "I miss her every day."

"Stop with that bullshit. You killed her." I poke him in the chest. "*You* killed her. All because she was too afraid to leave. It's your fault I am the way I am."

Now that his shock is wearing off, my dad stands up straighter. "Don't blame me for anything you might have done. I haven't seen you since you were seventeen. You haven't been around. You don't get to blame for how you've lived your life."

"How I've lived my life?" I shout, slamming my palm against the door before he can close it. "You want to know how I've lived my life? I liked hurting women. Not physically, no. But emotionally? Oh, I fucking *loved* it. All because you taught me women weren't worth my time. That's on you."

"You're an adult now, Leo. You can't blame for your actions."

"Fuck you!"

“Keep your voice down,” he hisses, looking up and down the dingy hallway.

“Like anyone is going to come. No one else came whenever Mom cried out for help. She’d scream, but no one listened. I should have listened. I should have helped her, and I didn’t.”

“That’s not my fault, son.”

I scoff. “Not your fault? You’re the one who fucking beat her! Who killed her! If that isn’t your fault, then who’s is it?”

“I think you should leave now.” He starts to close the door, but I stop him again.

“You want to know what’s been going on with me? I got married.” I show him my wedding ring. His eyes widen. “She was the best thing that ever happened to me. She made me realize I could respect and love women. That I didn’t need to hurt them. To humiliate them. That I could a woman happy. It felt so fucking good because it was the right thing. I loved her.” The moment the words come out of me I know how true they are. “I fucking loved her. Love her. But because of my past mistakes, she’s gone. And she might never return, and I can’t even blame her for that because why would she? I don’t deserve it. I’m a bastard. I’m a bad man. All because you were my role model. And I hate you for it.”

He stares at me for a while, not saying anything. I want to keep screaming at him, but I know it’s pointless. With my dad, nothing ever gets through to him.

“If you hate me so much, what are you doing here?” he asks, startling me.

“What?”

“If you claim to love your wife, go after her. Don’t make my mistakes. Don’t stand here blaming me for something you did.” He shuts the door on my face, and I don’t try fighting it.

I hate to say it, but ... my father is right. I put myself into this mess, and it’s my job to fix it. I need to show Francesca how much she means to me—how much I was telling her the

truth when we went on our dates and spent our nights together. I started things with her over a bet, but I really do love her.

She needs to know that.

I'm going to New York to get her back.

As I hurry out of the apartment building, I pull out my phone, ready to get a ticket to New York. But I'm interrupted by a call. It's Jerry, the manager of the Velvet Lounge.

"Jerry, now is not a good time," I growl as I pick up.

"I know who's been stealing from the club. I managed to get a glimpse of their face on the security cameras."

"Who is it?"

The moment he tells me the name, I'm off in my car and heading for the club, texting that person to meet me there. Here's only hoping he actually shows up.

Relief courses through me when I reach the club and see Henry at the bar, drinking his stupid pina colada like he hasn't done anything wrong.

I approach him. "Stealing from the club, buddy?" I whistle. "Let me tell you. Not a good look."

Henry tenses slightly but doesn't look at me. "I have no idea what you're talking about." I grab the umbrella out of his drink and smash it into his eye. Henry screams, jerking up from his seat. The bartender glances over, but once he sees it's me, he doesn't interfere. Everyone who works here knows to not interfere in Mafia business.

"What the fuck?" Henry hisses. He doesn't get to say anything else before I slam my fist into his face. He stumbles back, hitting the barstool and falling to the ground.

"You're just as bad as me," I seethe, punching him over and over again. "You made that bet with me." Punch. "And then you told Fran, acting like you were the high and mighty one and I was nothing but scum." Punch. "And then I find out you've been stealing from the club. Stealing from Marco. He's going to love to hear this." Punch. "So, it seems our bet actually came true." Punch. "I got to fuck Francesca, and you

made yourself look like a fool in front of Marco. I win.” Punch, punch, punch. My knuckles are bloody, though I’m not sure if it’s my blood or Henry’s. He gurgles and tries to reply, but I don’t let him. I continue hitting him until I decide to be done.

Henry is lying on the ground, his face battered, bruised, and bloody. The memory of my mother flashes through my mind—her bloody face, body splayed on the ground—but unlike Henry, she died. Unlike my dad, I know when to stop.

I jerk Henry up, and he wobbles on his feet, squinting at me through swollen eyes. “I’m taking you to Marco and letting him know what you’ve done.” I drag Henry out to my car. He’s in so much pain; he can’t even object.

“You’re wrong,” he says, though he sounds like he’s speaking around a mouthful of rocks.

“How am I wrong?” The California landscape passes us by as I drive to Marco’s mansion in the hills.

“You said”—he gulps— “that I act like I’m better than you.” Henry slumps forward, gripping his knees. “But you ... you’re the one who thinks you’re better.” He gasps, clutching at his face. “All because you got the girl. All because you think you’ve changed. But you haven’t changed.” He laughs, then quickly winces. “You’re still the same Leo who likes to hurt women. You’ll always be that way. Nothing can change it. And bringing me to Marco won’t fix things with Francesca.”

“So, I might as well let you go? That’s what you’re implying?”

“Yes.”

I huff, keeping my eyes on the road. Henry isn’t even worth my fucking time, but I’m still Marco’s employee, and I need to bring Henry to him. “Fuck you, man. I’m going to make things right with Francesca and prove you wrong.”

“You can’t if you’re dead.”

I frown. “What?”

Henry lunges for the steering wheel and turns it before I can stop him. I try getting control of the wheel, but it's too late. We're in the other lane, facing oncoming traffic. The closest car tries to swerve out of the way, but it ends up hitting us, sending my car gliding across the freeway and into the path of other cars.

Another car slams into mine, hitting it on my side. Glass explodes. The car warps. Henry cries out in pain. And the last thing I see is Henry slumped over the dashboard, his eyes wide open and lifeless, before darkness takes me.

THE FIRST THING I see when my eyes blink open is Marco's face above me. "What's going on?" I groan, trying to sit up, but Marco pushes me back down.

"You're hurt. You're in the hospital."

"What?" I look around the room, taking in the disinfect smell, the beeping sound of the machines, and the cold sterile room. "Huh. I guess I am." I eye Marco. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm your emergency contact."

"How long was I out?" My body feels like it was hit by multiple cars. I guess I was.

"A few hours. But I can't stay long. Emilia gave birth, and I need to head to New York to be with her."

"Any news on Francesca?" Her pretty smile and large eyes fill my mind.

Marco sighs, shrugging. "I don't know. I know they're still looking for Antonio but got sidetracked because of Emilia. I need to go."

Before he can leave the room, I ask one more question. "Henry?"

Marco won't meet my eyes as he replies, "He died."

The petty part of me wants to tell Marco Henry was stealing from him, but I keep my mouth shut. The man is dead. He's been punished enough.

Marco gives me a nod before leaving. I sigh and slump back against the mattress. I don't know how long I'll need to be in the hospital, but I don't do well with staying in one place for too long. I didn't even get the chance to go to New York to make things right with Francesca.

Now, I might never see her again.

HOSPITAL FOOD FUCKING SUCKS. At least, the stuff they give the patients does. When a nurse brings me a soggy turkey sandwich and Jell-O, I almost want to puke. Who even eats Jell-O anyway?

"You need to eat," the nurse says. She's pretty. If this were before my marriage, I would've been flirting with her by now. But since I'm in love with Francesca, the sight of another woman does nothing for me.

I grumble, grab my Jell-O, and stuff a bite into my mouth, giving her a smile. "Happy?"

"Yes." She checks my monitor and nods as if everything is looking good.

"When can I get out of here? I need to see my wife?"

She gives me a pitying smile. "You probably won't be out for another few days. You were badly hurt in the crash. We need to keep you here under observation before you can go home. If you give me the name and number for your wife, I can contact her for you."

"It's fine." I push the Jell-O away from me. "She probably doesn't even want to see me."

"I'm sorry. If you need anything, let me know, ok?"

"Yeah, yeah."

I'm left to my own devices, which pretty much means watching animal documentaries on the small TV in the room and waiting to heal so I can get out of here. Or die. Honestly, death would be better than this shit.

I manage to fall asleep for a while, and when I wake up, I have to take a piss. I shuffle over to the bathroom. While I'm in there, I hear a sound in the room. Probably just one of the nurses coming to check on me.

But when I walk back into the room, I freeze.

Francesca is here.

"Leo?" she whispers.

"You came back."

"I did."

For a moment, neither of us moves, then she takes one step forward, and I do the same, and then we're in each other's arms. I hold her tightly to me as she buries her head into my chest.

"I thought I'd never see you again," I tell her.

"I thought that, too." She pulls back, looking me over. "Lay down. You shouldn't be standing if you're hurt."

"Nothing can keep me down." Though, I still let her help me back onto the bed, where, admittedly, I feel better than when I was standing.

"Marco told me you were in the hospital. I was so scared."

"I'm fine. Just got into a car crash. Henry died."

She gasps. "That's horrible."

"Did you find your brother?"

"I did. He'll be all right, but ... he can't return home. Not with Franco wanting him dead. My entire family has been fractured. Nothing will be the same ever again."

I reach out for her hand and pause before touching her, waiting to see what her next move is. When she doesn't pull her hand away, I take it in mine. "Fran, listen. I need to

explain. No, actually. There's no explanation for what I did. I did it because I was an asshole. That's the truth. But then we married, and it ended up being the best thing for me. I ... fell in love with you, Fran." Her eyes widen. "That's the truth. I told Henry the bet was off, that I didn't want to seduce you for fun anymore. I just wanted to be with you, Fran. I still do. If you'll have me."

She doesn't answer.

"I know I messed up," I continue. "I know you probably don't trust me. But I'm telling you the truth. All the dates we went on, all the nights we talked ... that was all real. I wasn't faking that just to get to you."

"So, us sleeping together ...?"

"Was real. That's why I pushed you away at first. I felt guilty. I didn't want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you again. You mean everything to me, Fran. Truly. I have no more secrets to keep. No more lies to hold onto. It's all out in the open. You know what kind of man I used to be, but you also know what kind of man I've become. I just want to see you happy. And I want to be the one responsible for that. I never faked my affection for you. Not once. The only reason I made that bet in the first place was because I was attracted to you. I know that's not right. I never should've done it. But I want you to know I was never faking how I felt for you. From the moment you told me you preferred lilies to roses, I was captivated. Even though I didn't want to get married at first, it ended up being the best thing to ever happen to me. It brought me to you. I never want to lose you, Fran. Can you forgive me?"

She stares down at our hands for so long that I think she won't reply. Then she asks, "You really love me?"

"I do." I squeeze her hand. "I do."

Fran lets out a small laugh tinged with tears. "Well, when you put it all out there like that, how can I not forgive you? My mom told me the reason your betrayal hurt so much was because I ... loved you, too."

“Loved?”

She inhales deeply before giving me a warm smile. “Love. Present tense.” Her words send a flare of hope through me. “When Marco told me you were in the hospital, I was so scared. I knew in that moment I loved you. If you tell me you’re a changed man, that you meant everything you said to me, then ... I choose to believe it. I can tell you mean it. You just have to promise me to never make such a stupid mistake ever again.”

I laugh and lean over to kiss her cheek. “I promise.”

“How about we start fresh? Because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you when I knew we were fighting. I don’t want to ever feel that way again. So, let’s start anew. No bets. No past mistakes. No doubting each other. Let’s begin again and see where our marriage takes us. We’re both changed people. I want to be my new self with you.”

“I want that, too.” I almost can’t believe any of this is happening because I’ve never felt like I deserved much forgiveness. But there Francesca goes again, surprising me in the best way possible. “But just for good measure, I’m going to send you bouquet after bouquet of lilies until the end of time, just to show you how much you mean to me.”

“I won’t complain about that,” she says, leaning down until our lips are about an inch apart.

“Good. Because you’re stuck with me, and I’m going to make sure you feel loved every day because that’s what I want. I want to see you happy, Fran.”

“Then let’s get to it.” She bridges the final gap between our lips and kisses me deeply.

CHAPTER 20

Francesca

“Do you trust me?” Leo asks, holding out his hand. I stare at it for a moment, though I already know my answer. Even though Leo hurt me, I know he regrets it. I know he wants to make things better between us.

And I’m tired of holding back my feelings, my words, and my heart.

I’m ready to live my life to the fullest with Leo at my side.

So, I know my answer. I don’t hesitate to say it. “I do.” I slip my hand in his, and together, we walk over the threshold of our home.

Leo has a clean bill of health. I remained at his hospital bedside until he could leave. And the entire time, we talked and cleared the air. He told me about seeing his father and how he found closure in it. I told him about seeing my mom and finding closure in that.

Now, we’re ready to put the past behind us and focus on our future together.

Leo scoops me into his arms, making me gasp as I cling to him. “Should you be picking me up?” I ask as he carries me upstairs to our bedroom.

“I’m healthy. Why wouldn’t I? I want to feel my wife in my arms.”

“All right, then. No complaints from me.”

When we enter our bedroom, I gasp again. Bouquets of lilies after lilies rest on the nightstand tables, the dresser, the

windowsill, and the floor. “When did you do this?”

“I called for a delivery when you left to get food one day. I wanted to surprise you with this.”

I have to blink back tears as I kiss Leo, long and deep.

“I only want to see you smile like that for the rest of our lives,” he tells me, setting me down on the bed.

“Then give me more reasons to smile,” I respond, pulling him down with me. Leo kisses me again. It’s passionate and full of things we’ve already spoken to each other—apologies, forgiveness, and, most importantly, love.

I rip Leo’s clothes off frantically, desperate for him to touch me. Leo, on the other hand, takes his time taking mine off, driving me crazy.

“I need you,” I whisper into his ear. That’s the one thing Leo has taught me—how to speak up for what I want, and right now, all I want is my husband.

“God, I need you, too,” he says, his voice haggard.

Our lips meld together as we lie back onto the mattress, fully naked, holding each other in our arms. Leo rolls me onto my back, spreading kisses all over my chest and neck and breasts. I sigh and arch into him. He cups my breasts, sending a wave of pleasure over me and to the spot between my legs.

“Leo.” I grasp the back of his head. “Oh, I need you.”

“I know.” He kisses down my body and rests himself between my legs, looking up at me with not only lust-filled eyes, but loved-filled ones, too. “Let me show you how much you mean to me.” Then he presses his lips to my sensitive nub, and I cry out, unable to hold back my voice any longer.

Leo licks me all over, from my nub to my folds. I can barely stand the sensation. It makes me feel like the only woman in the world as I’m being cherished by my husband. My hips arch up. For once, I don’t blush. I don’t need to anymore. Leo has shown me he accepts me for me. I don’t ever have to feel embarrassed about being myself again.

When he slides his tongue over my nub, flicking it again and again, I finally lose it. My orgasm hits me fast and hard, and I know what I want to do.

I want to scream my husband's name in pleasure. "Leo!" I don't hold back.

He sits back once my body stops trembling and leans over me, settling his body between the curves and folds of mine. His erection is so close to my entrance, and my body throbs at the reminder of how good it feels to be with him.

Leo holds my gaze and slides his fingers through mine before he enters me in one smooth motion. We moan together. He clenches my hands so tightly, I almost can't feel them, but I don't care. All I want is to be here in this moment with the man I love.

We find our pace together and move as one. Leo has always been so gentle with me when it comes to sex, but there's still that underlining passion that makes it so amazing.

He rolls onto his back, bringing me on top of him. For a moment, I hesitate. "You be in charge tonight," he tells me, gripping my hips. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not." And I start to move.

It takes me a moment to get used to this new position, but once I do, I let myself go. I just feel. Leo looks up at me with so much love in his eyes, I can almost cry. I rest my hands on his chest, feeling his heartbeat underneath my palm, and match the pace of my hips to his beating heart.

Leo helps me find my rhythm. "That's it, Fran. You're so fucking beautiful."

I gasp and grind my hips down against his. This new position helps his length reach a new spot within me, and every move of my hips sends a jolt of pleasure over me. "Leo," I gasp out. "I'm ready. I'm ready."

He grips my hips. "Then come for me."

I do.

“Oh, Leo!” I cry out as I come, my body shuddering. Leo thrusts his hips up a few more times before groaning, following right behind. I lay myself on top of him as he wraps his arms around me, somehow pulling me closer. He kisses the top of my head, making me smile.

“If fighting leads to makeup sex like this, then maybe we need to fight more,” he teases.

“No,” I say, looking up at him. “We don’t need to fight to have moments like this. Let’s just be happy.”

His eyes soften as he leans down and plants a kiss on my lips. “I can get behind that. Let’s just be happy.”

“COME IN,” Mom says, ushering us inside her home. It’s strange. This is my childhood home, and yet it’s not my home anymore. Leo’s house is my home now, and it feels right.

Leo and I hold hands as we enter. It’s been a few weeks since I was in New York, but with everything going on with Antonio, I wanted to come back and check on my mom and other siblings. Emilia and Marco remained in New York for the time being because they didn’t want to travel with their newborn daughter. So, Mom invited us for a family dinner night.

Emilia and Marco are already there, with Emilia looking phenomenal after having had a baby a couple of weeks before. She’s glowing as she holds her daughter.

“You’re looking better,” Marco says to Leo, shaking his hand.

“I am.”

Emilia looks between Leo and me. “So ... how are things?” I can tell she’s dying to know, so I put her out of her misery.

“Leo and I made up. Things are better. Leo has really changed, Emilia.”

She gives Leo a once over before nodding. “Fine. If Francesca says so, I’ll believe it.”

“So, what did you decide to name her?” I ask, nodding at the baby.

Emilia and Marco share a look before Emilia turns back to me. “We decided to name her Essie.”

“It’s beautiful.” I give little baby Essie a kiss on the head.

“It’s short for Francesca.”

I stop and look up at my sister. “What?”

Emilia shifts Essie in her arms. “Well, you did deliver my baby, so I think she deserves to be named after her badass auntie.”

“I ... I don’t even know what to say.” I blink back tears. Emilia squeezes my hand, giving me a knowing look.

“Just accept it. If Essie can grow up to be anything like you, then I’ll be one proud mama.”

“I just ... Wow. Thank you.”

Mom comes over, letting us know dinner is on. Leo and I follow the other three into the dining room.

“Can you believe that?” I whisper to Leo.

“I can. You’re pretty amazing, Fran.”

I’m smiling so widely as I enter the dining room. Viktor and Gemm are already there, with Viktor munching on a dinner roll. Mia is on her phone as usual, and the twins are teasing each other over who can eat more food in one go. Cecilia looks distraught as she stares at her plate. Not even her guard, Theo, can cheer her up as he stands near the back wall. She used to have the biggest crush on him. but the news about Antonio leaving hit her hard.

She looks up when I enter, her blonde hair making her practically glow in the warm candlelight. “Do you know where he is?” she asks, rushing over to me. “Did Antonio tell you where he was going? Mom didn’t say anything, and he didn’t tell me goodbye.”

“I’m sorry, Cecilia. He didn’t. He just said it wasn’t safe for him to come back, not with Franco wanting him dead. I don’t know where he is, just that he’s alive and figuring out how to take over.” Speaking of Franco, I notice he’s absent from this family dinner.

Tears start to spill from Cecilia’s eyes. “I miss him. He’s my best friend.”

“I know,” I say, squeezing her on the arm. “But you still have the rest of us, and Antonio will be fine. He survived this ordeal. He can make it through.”

“Only because you helped save him. I didn’t thank you before.” She wraps her arms around me. I can’t remember the last time Cecilia and I hugged. I’m not sure we ever have.

“Antonio will be ok,” I say so only she can hear me. “He’ll be ok.”

She sniffles as she pulls back. “I have to hope so. He needs to take over. Franco can’t just get away with this.”

“Where is Franco?”

“I told him,” Mom says, “he wasn’t allowed at this family dinner. I put my foot down. He didn’t want to listen, but Marco and Viktor backed me up, and I think he got scared.” A small smile tugs at her lips. “Well, Emilia also told him to leave, so she might have scared him the most.” That makes everyone laugh around the table. Lucia giggles, but I doubt she even knows why everyone is laughing. She just doesn’t want to miss out on the fun. Luca, on the other hand, is content to make funny faces at his sister until she swats at him.

Those two are in for an interesting life if they ever find out the truth about who their dad is. But I don’t care about that. Lucia and Luca are my siblings, and I love them, no matter that Franco is their father.

Leo and I take our seats at the table next to Mia and Cecilia. Across from us sit the other couples, Emilia and Marco and Gemma and Viktor. Mom sits at the head of the table, and next to her are the twins. It’s nice to have a family dinner and be invited. It’s nice to not be afraid to attend. I

don't have to be afraid of my family ever again now that I can speak up for myself. Mom and I have a lot to work on when it comes to our relationship, but I can tell she's putting in more effort when it comes to me, even though I live across the country. She's been sending me texts almost every day since the night of Essie's birth.

"I want to say a prayer for Antonio," Cecilia says, grabbing Leo's and Mia's hands. I take Leo's hand in mine and share a small smile with him. "Let him be safe. Let him stay strong. Let him take over in father's footsteps. Amen."

"And let him kick Franco's butt," Gemma mutters, making us laugh again.

Mom raises her glass. "Hear, hear."

We all toast to the safety and future of Antonio. Even though I'm worried about my brother, I focus on the here and now. I'm with my family, enjoying a meal with them for once, and the man I love is at my side.

I'm actually happy.

It's an incredible feeling.

"SO, THIS IS THE PAINTING, HUH?" Leo looks up at "Study of a Young Woman" by Johannes Vermeer.

"That's the painting." I rest my head against his shoulder, our hands linked together. It's still cold outside, but inside my favorite museum in the world, all I feel is warmth.

Leo studies it for a minute before nodding. "I see why you like it."

"You do?"

"Yeah. She's you, Fran."

I step out of the way as an elderly couple walk past me. "We don't look anything alike."

“You’re right. You don’t. But it’s not about looks. It’s in her eyes. She has a sense of wonder in them. A sense of hope. She’s shy, yes, but she’s not afraid to look you in the eye. That’s exactly you.”

I look back at the painting with Leo’s perspective. “You know ... I think you’re right.”

That same elderly couple passes us by again, and the woman stops, looking at me and Leo. “Sorry to bother you, but I just had to say what a cute couple you make. Both so beautiful. If only I were a few years younger.”

“Maureen,” the man says, sighing. “Sorry about her,” he says to us.

“I’ll always take a compliment,” Leo says, winking at Maureen. “Especially coming from a beautiful woman such as your wife.” Maureen waves her hand in a demure fashion.

“Have a nice day,” the man says, guiding his wife away.

I turn to Leo. “You know, the last time I was here, I was almost sat on. That’s how invisible I was. But with you at my side, I’m no longer invisible.”

“It’s not me, Fran. You’ve never been invisible. Not to me, anyway.”

“Sweet talker,” I tease, looking back at the painting.

“Well, you know me.”

“I do. Never change.” I lean my head against his shoulder again. “You’re the man I love.”

“I love you, too,” he whispers into my hair.

All I can do is smile as I stand with my husband, looking at my favorite painting in my favorite place on earth.

The End.

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I was locked away my entire life... until he set me free.

Dario Santoro, head of the Italian mafia.

He has decided that he wants me for himself.

So, on the day of my wedding to another man,

Dario whisks me away to become his instead.

I've been held shackled by my father my whole life.

But Dario shows me that I can have freedom.

The way he touches me,

The way he treats me,

I've never known such kindness.

But how can I let this man into my life when I have demons of my own?

Even though I'm out of my tower,

I'm still stuck from the trauma my father inflicted on me.

Now, he's after Dario.

My husband has to protect me but at what cost?

Dario and I will either get our happily ever after

... or our marriage will crumble and collapse.

And I don't know how I will survive without my husband.

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SNEAK PEEK

Chapter One

PIA

I've spent most of my life mute. I was shy as a little girl, but once the incident happened, I stopped talking.

I've been like this for years and grown used to my solitude, so it isn't so bad. At times, I wish I could communicate more with people, but I haven't seen another person other than my father in years. Mostly, I wish I could get through to him and make him understand how he scares me. How I wish I could never see his face again. But I can't tell him. He ignores my sign language, insisting I talk.

But I know what he's done. I can never forget it.

It's my father's fault I'm this way.

I stare out through my tiny bedroom window, looking down at the lush Italian countryside below, full of olive trees and green grass for miles. My window is barely big enough for me to stick my arm through. Not that I could do that, to begin with, seeing as the window never opens. But I appreciate this window because it lets me see out into the world at least, giving me a chance to imagine a different life than the one I have.

My life, as it is now, is full of quiet and loneliness, stuck in my room inside my father's mansion. I feel like Rapunzel at times—alone with no one to talk to, trapped in a literal tower. My father constructed this part of the house when I was a little girl. He blended gothic and rustic Italian architecture to create this imposing addition to the house—a tower he locked me away in.

All because I saw something I shouldn't have. He doesn't want me to ever talk about what I saw—he would kill me if I told the truth. But even if I could, I wouldn't want to.

I remember the incident so vividly. It's part of why I'm unable to speak now. The memories of that day swirl in my

head, again and again, enough that I can't imagine ever forgetting it enough to heal.

The day my mother was murdered.

By my father.

I saw how he held her as she bled out, a bloody knife in his hand. I remember the stab wounds all over her body. There were so many that it almost looked like one giant stab wound across my mother's body, slowly killing her.

Her head was tilted back, and her eyes met mine as I stood in the doorway. My father hadn't noticed me yet. It gave me a chance to say goodbye to my mom, not with words, but with our eyes.

She blinked when she saw me. Her dark hair, so like mine, hung around her face, obscuring some of the blood from my view. I always loved my mother's hair. Its vibrancy. The way it was so dark, yet full of color, a mixture of browns and reds creating a stunning depth. She was so beautiful. Everyone told me I was lucky to have a beautiful mom since I'd look just like her when I got older.

But now I have no idea if that's true. I haven't seen myself in a mirror since I was a child. I could be the exact opposite of my mom for all I know. The one thing I'm sure about, though, is that my hair matches hers, which comforts me.

As life slowly crept out of her, her eyes searched mine. It was like she was looking for comfort herself. I felt like I was the only one who could provide that for her. The barest smile passed her lips as she looked at me, and then her eyes glazed over, and I knew she was dead. It was hard to see through my tears, but I watched every minute of it, even though I was only eight years old. I wanted someone to remember my mom, and if no one else could do it, I would take that burden on myself.

After she died, no one ever spoke about her again. Not my aunts and uncles, not my parents' friends, and especially not my father. It was like she'd never existed.

When my father found me standing in the doorway, he punished me. I'd never been spanked before, and it left bruises

on my behind for weeks. Sitting was impossible for days after. My little legs hurt standing for hours on end, but I viewed it as fitting—if my mom suffered in her final days, I would suffer with her. She would know, even in heaven, that she was not alone.

It took my father a few weeks before he finally locked me up for good. I asked too many questions for his liking, like why he'd killed my mom. Of course, he never answered. All he said was that she deserved it, and that was that.

I've never gotten closure. How could I? The person who did it won't give me answers and, instead, locked up in his mansion.

I continue to stare out my small window, seeking solace in the sun shining down on the olive trees. Those trees are the only way I feel alive. They represent life, growing in the fall and hibernating in the winter, only to bear more fruit in the future. They're the only things keeping me from losing my sanity.

My bedroom door bangs open, and there he is. My father. Tommaso Vitale. An intimidating bulky man with dark, narrowed eyes and strong features that make him look angry.

I gasp at the unexpectedness of his presence and stumble back, my legs hitting the edge of my bed. I sit down on my mattress hard. My room is barely the size of a closet. It's narrow, and the ceiling is tall, so it gets incredibly drafty during the winter. I have one thin blanket on my bed that barely covers my body. A toilet and shower are shoved into a corner. I guess my father wanted to make sure I had everything I needed so that I never had to leave my tower,

“Pia,” he says gruffly. His voice has always been rough, and even when he's not mad, he sounds like he is. He waits for me to acknowledge him, and I nod. He sighs, grumbling under his breath. Even now, years after my mother's death and when my muteness began, he still expects me to magically speak one day. I continue to disappoint him.

“I have news,” he continues. “You're getting married.”

I blink. Getting married? In ten years, I haven't been allowed to leave my tower. I haven't conversed with anyone else, and now, he's speaking about marriage? I sign my confusion, but that's not good enough for my father. He wants me to talk, and nothing else will do.

But how can I verbally speak to the man who murdered my mom? Just the sight of him makes my skin crawl as the urge to vomit overtakes me.

"It's about time you got married. You're a woman now, of an age to be married. This is happening."

I lift my hands in confusion as I shake my head.

He shakes his head in frustration, but I feel like only one of us has the right to be angry right now, and it isn't him. "I'm a leader in our community. I hold a lot of power. This marriage alliance will ensure that power remains strong. In fact, Pia, you've become something of a myth yourself. Men from all over want to marry you, but I chose the one I think is best suited to my needs. His name is Lorenzo Esposito, and he comes from good stalk. He will make a fine match for you and fortify my power in our territory."

What territory? I sign. I know my father is a powerful man. There's no way he could have covered up my mom's murder and locked me up for years if he weren't. But I've never been given any news about my father's business dealings. I've gotten the sense that they may be shady, but I'm not sure exactly how. I've been kept in the dark. I'm tired of it.

"You know I run a business."

I smile smugly. So he *can* read my sign language. He just chooses not to most of the time.

"And," he continues, "in that business, I have men I need to please. And those men would like to marry you as a sign of good faith. Of course, only one man can marry you. That's where Lorenzo comes in. You'll marry him this evening."

I sit up straighter. This evening?

But I don't know him. I sign. While I've hated being locked up in my tower, it's the only thing I've known since I was

eight. Marrying a man I don't know is terrifying. Does this mean I won't live in my tower anymore? Will I get to leave? While that sounds exciting, I'd only get that chance by marrying a man I don't know. Is he kind? Is he like my father? Because I can't imagine spending the rest of my life with a man like my father. I've already spent too much time living with my father.

"That doesn't matter," he snaps. "All that matters is you're marrying him. Now, be a good girl and nod for me."

He stares so intently at me with those angry eyes that I have no choice but to nod.

"Good. The maid will bring up your wedding dress. I suggest you try it on and don't do anything to ruin it. If you do, you're still wearing it tonight, even if you rip it to shreds."

I know why he's warning me. Throughout the years, I would smash, break, or tear up gifts he gave me. I didn't want his gifts, not when he murdered my mom and locked me up.

And I know another reason for his warning—if I rip this dress up, I'll still be expected to wear it, even if parts of my body are showing.

Will there be a crowd? I sign.

"Yes. I've invited everyone who works for me and with me to this wedding. There will be over two hundred people. So don't mess this up, Pia. I expect you to be on your best behavior. If not for me, then for yourself." His thinly veiled threat is obvious. He'll beat me if I don't get in line. "This wedding will be talked about for years to come. Make me proud."

Before I can respond, he turns and shuts the door behind him. The click of the lock signals that I'm stuck in here, just like I've always been.

Married.

I'm getting married tonight to a stranger.

God, why is this happening to me? What have I done to deserve this kind of treatment? When will I get the chance to

live my life on my own terms with my own agency?

When will I ever speak again?

The maid, Mia, shows up sometime later with my wedding dress. She's the only other person to have a key to my tower. I've tried getting her to let me out over the years, but she's just as tough as my father is. She's no-nonsense, blunt, and expects perfection, just like him. I'm surprised my father hasn't married her yet, considering how similar they are. But my father would never canoodle with the staff. He knows his place in this world, and he's quick to point out everyone else's place. If you're the maid, then you're nothing more than the maid in his eyes.

Mia glares at me as she sets a garment bag on my bed. "Get to it. Your father wants you in this dress right now. The wedding is happening in an hour, and we need to get you ready."

I touch the garment bag. Inside this bag is my new life. That doesn't exactly make me happy.

At Mia's annoyed expression and hand motions to hurry up, I finally unzip the bag and get a good look at my wedding dress.

It's conservative, to say the least. Long sleeves, high neckline. It won't show any of my skin. Even now, my father is still trying to control every inch of me.

I know there's no use resisting. I stand up, and Mia helps me into the dress. "Help" is a generous word. More like she forces me into the dress so roughly that parts of my skin get rubbed raw and turn red.

I look down at the dress. There's no lace on it. No frills. No embellishments. It's just a conservative white gown with no personality. There's not even a shape to it as it loosely hangs around my body. This dress isn't supposed to show me off. It's supposed to hide me away again and show that my father has complete control over me.

Though, I guess this Lorenzo man will soon have complete control over me. Please, God, don't let Lorenzo be anything

like my father.

Once I'm dressed, Mia gives me a once over and nods. "You're sufficient. Let's go."

She opens the door and motions for me to follow.

I pause in the doorway. I haven't seen the rest of my house since I was eight. I'm desperate to take a step forward but also terrified. What if everything is different from what I remember? What if it's exactly the same, and the memories of my dead mother come back to me? I'm sure my father will not appreciate me breaking down into tears anytime soon.

I have a wedding to attend.

With a deep breath, I step outside my room. Since we're near the tower, we're on the top floor of the mansion. With every step I take, the floorboards creak. Mia walks with a purpose. I'm supposed to do the same, but I've never felt more lost.

We make our way downstairs. The more I walk through the house, the more memories that come back to me. Images of my mom and I playing hide and seek. The sound of my mom calling for me. The smell of her warm perfume whenever she pulled me in for a hug. It all comes back.

I stop dead in my tracks when I see the door Mia approaches. Inside is the large ballroom. Where my mother was murdered. I stood in that doorway and watched the life leave her eyes.

I grab Mia's arm, and she sneers at me. *I'm getting married in there?* I sign.

She rolls her eyes and flings open the door. Inside, I see row upon row of people seated, waiting for a wedding. Near the front of the room, I see a younger man who's skinny and tall. My father walks down the aisle and approaches me, but I take a step back.

"Pia, it's time," he says under his breath, practically hissing at me as he holds out his hand.

I look down at it, then back up at him. I can't do this. I shake my head faster and faster.

He scoffs. "You're doing this, Pia. Now take my hand. You don't want me to have to punish you in front of all our guests, now, do you?"

My eyes flit back to the ballroom. People are starting to look in my direction. My breath comes out faster, like my lungs can't fill up properly. I feel like I'm dying.

I bend forward and clutch at my chest. God, I'm dying.

"Pia." My father grabs me roughly by the arms and shakes me. "You're getting married even if I have to drag you down this aisle myself. Now, stop being difficult. You don't want to end up like your mother, now, do you?"

This pulls me up short.

I force my breathing to get under control, and as I do, some of my lightheadedness goes away.

"Good. Now, let's go." He holds out his hand again. I'm surprised he's giving me this option, but it's not really an option. It's coercion masquerading to be an option.

I stand up straight and meet his eyes. *I hate you*, I think. He quirks an eyebrow in challenge.

I don't fight him.

I grab his hand.

His smile is ugly as he guides me into the ballroom, where the hundreds of people he said would be there are watching me. I could pass out. I might pass out. I think I'm going to pass out.

I grip my father's hand tighter to steady myself. Even though I'm terrified, I don't want to look like a fool. If I did that, my father would whip me in front of everyone.

I focus on taking one step after another until we reach the far end of the ballroom, where the skinny man stands with a priest next to him.

Lorenzo, I presume.

“Hello, Pia,” Lorenzo says, his voice soft and airy. “I’m Lorenzo Esposito. I will become your husband today.”

My father places my hand in Lorenzo’s. His palm is a lot softer than my father’s, but that doesn’t bring me any comfort. In fact, I feel even more afraid. This man is an unknown. I don’t know him, and I have no basis to know him. If I can’t even compare him to my father, then how am I supposed to manage him?

Lorenzo waits for me to speak. I guess that was something my father forgot to mention about me.

I just offer him a tight smile.

This seems to appease him enough because he turns to the priest and nods. “I think we’re ready.” The look Lorenzo gives me makes me shiver in a bad way. There’s a sudden look about him like he’s desperate to marry me, desperate to consume me, desperate to control me.

I’m tired of being controlled.

The priest begins the ceremony. Every word he says brings me closer to my marriage with Lorenzo. I want to scream at the priest to be quiet, to stop what he’s saying. But no words come out, as usual. I force my lips to move, but nothing happens. It’s like my vocal cords are stretched so thin that they can’t make a sound.

The next words the priest says catch my interest. “If anyone objects to this marriage, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

It’s silent.

I want to object. All I want is to be free. Free to see the olive trees in person.

Then a voice cuts through the silence.

“I object.” It’s a deep voice, one that almost reverberates throughout my body.

Gasps sound around the room. The look of anger in Lorenzo’s eyes makes me shrink back.

I turn to see who spoke.

And when I do, I see the most handsome man I can imagine looking at me as if I already belong to him.

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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...

Even if it means my death.

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