



LEA HART

dangerous
FORTUNE

DANGEROUS FORTUNE



LEA HART

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DEDICATION

For My Daughters, My Heartbeat

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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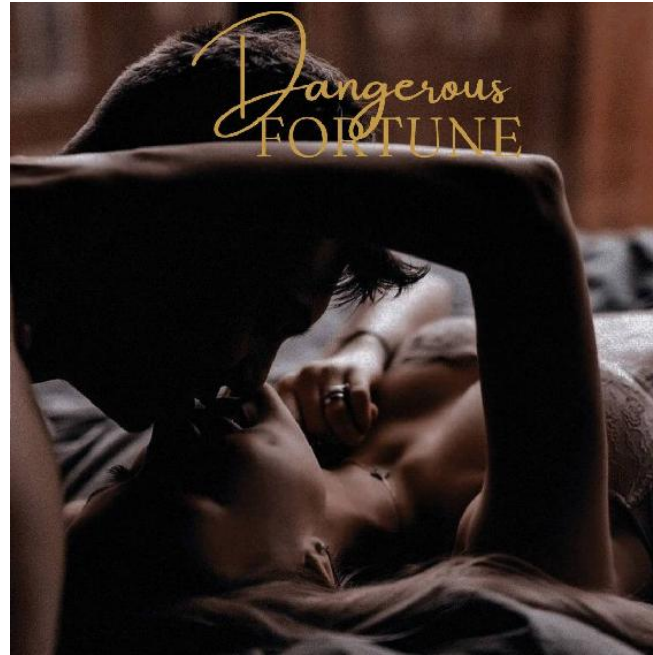


*When destiny shuffles the cards, only
love can change the game.*

Outrageous, curvaceous Abby Mercer is the last woman Enzo Bianchi should get involved with. Unfortunately, that small fact keeps slipping his mind. Even though she's making his life a thousand times more complicated than it needs to be.

Abby can't help it if she was born with a brain that resembles a computer and enough curves to make men foolish. She's going to use what the good Lord blessed her with and become the best damn poker player the city has seen. All she has to do is avoid the arms dealer who's still a tad pissy about *a girl* beating him at cards. Poor thing doesn't seem to have a sense of humor about losing.

Dive into this delicious Mafia romance and see what happens when Abby attempts a life-saving sleight of hand. Will she succeed, or will the sexy mobster save the day...and steal her heart?



[Dangerous Fortune Playlist](#)

Demons & Angels



CHAPTER ONE



Abby

When I was clinging to the bottom rungs of the social ladder in high school and college, I didn't envision a future that would include playing poker with senators, titans of industry, and criminals.

Yet here I am...swimming in the deep end of the pool in all my card shark glory.

At least, that's what I think is happening.

The high-end private club oozing with sophistication sure suggests it's possible since it's the sort of place where folks don't breathe without a formal invitation. I study the glossy black doors through the tinted windows of the town car and still can't believe they welcome me with open arms. "One more time," I whisper to myself, fixing my posture as I step out of the car. "And maybe one more after that."

I stride toward the entrance and tip my chin to the man guarding it. "Sammy, it's a lovely evening."

"It is indeed, Ms. Mercer." He opens the door with a flourish. "Good luck tonight."

"Thank you." I sashay into the club like Cinderella despite the fact I have no interest in finding Prince Charming.

I'm hunting for something much more interesting...a pot of gold and a game where the stakes are so high they'd give the Eiffel Tower a run for its money.

More than half the patrons stare as I move into the room. Is my figure-hugging black dress, sky-high heels, and cascading blond curls grabbing their attention, or has my reputation finally preceded me?

Could be a bit of both, considering my winning streak shows no signs of slowing down, and my trusty double Spanx

are working overtime to keep things in check.

Taking a moment to soak in the club's opulence, I take a slow breath. Shiny marble floors, sparkling chandeliers, and men in suits so sharp they could slice a tomato. Chump change isn't being exchanged here. No ma'am. This is the kind of room where deals are made, and fortunes change hands with the flip of a card.

"Ms. Mercer," the maître d' greets me with a stiff bow. "We've been expecting you."

"How lovely," I reply breezily, taking in the high-stakes games unfolding before me.

The tension in the room is palpable, making it feel like an electrical current is crackling through the air. The players at the tables are not relying on bluffs or empty posturing; they are playing for keeps.

"Shall I get you a drink?" the maître d' asks as we stop before a bar featuring every libation known to man. The bottles gleam against a mirror framed in gold, and I momentarily wonder if anyone has ever dared to order a light beer in the well-appointed room.

"Thank you, but I'll pass.

"Very well." He nods, and I flash a tight smile as he leads me to a table at the far end of the room.

I take my seat and feel the other players' eyes. They are sizing me up, wondering if my reputation is well-deserved or just empty hype. Accepting the stack of chips the floor manager delivers, I let my fingers dance lightly over them, enjoying the satisfying weight and texture.

"Deal me in." I meet each player's gaze in turn. As the cards are shuffled and dealt, I feel a familiar thrill course through me – part anticipation, part adrenaline.

This is my favorite place to be.

The first few hands pass in a blur as I find my rhythm. The other players are skilled, but their tells are obvious. A subtle shift in posture, the flicker of an eyelid that betrays

uncertainty or overconfidence. It's all there, and it's up to me to catalog every one.

"Raise," I say coolly, tossing a stack of chips into the pot. My opponent hesitates, sweat beading on his brow as he considers his options. Thirty seconds pass, and he folds faster than origami in a typhoon.

Just like I expected, he would.

I scoop up my winnings and then signal to the waiter for a glass of sparkling water.

"Looks like Lady Luck is on your side tonight, Ms. Mercer," a smooth baritone voice says over my left shoulder. I glance up, meeting the piercing gaze of Senator Richard Carmichael – a high-ranking politician known for his love of high-stakes poker games and ruthless ambition. He sits on the opposite side of the table, and I try to remember what my friend said about poking bears with big appetites.

"Perhaps," I reply, my tone light but guarded. "But I've always been more partial to skill than luck."

A ghost of a smile flits across his lips, and I can tell he's intrigued. He may know my reputation, but he doesn't know my motivation, so no matter what assumptions he's made, he will never be able to predict my next move.

A new hand is dealt, and I study my cards carefully, weighing my options. "Call," I announce, matching the senator's bet. He raises an eyebrow, the tension at the table ratchets up a notch, and I feel the weight of expectation bearing down on me.

I'm walking on my usual tightrope and toeing the line between victory and disaster. One wrong move and the stake I've built could disappear.

I see the wheels turning in the senator's mind. He's trying to read me, searching for any hint of weakness or vulnerability. *Not today, you smug son of a bitch.* My expression is inscrutable, and the stone mask I've perfected is firmly in place.

“Raise,” I say once more, pushing another stack of chips into the pot. The senator hesitates, his fingers drum on the table in a staccato rhythm that betrays his nerves.

“Call,” he finally says, throwing caution to the wind.

The dealer reveals the last card, and I feel a surge of triumph. “Four of a Kind,” I declare, laying my cards on the table. The table erupts into murmurs and whispers, but all I can hear is my heart pounding in my ears.

“Well played, Ms. Mercer,” the senator admits, offering a gracious nod of acknowledgment. “I underestimated you.”

“Many do,” I reply with little changing in my expression. I learned early on that gloating only leads to problems, so I react to winning and losing precisely the same.

With equanimity.

I stand, taking a moment to admire the neatly stacked chips that now belong to me. For some reason, memories of my days at Boston University return. My college experience wasn't typical, but it did allow me to hone my skills in mathematics and probability into a sharp, deadly knife.

“Ms. Mercer, would you like a drink?” A smooth, accented voice pulls me out of my reverie, and I see a dapper waiter with slicked-back hair and a charming smile awaiting my response.

“Thank you,” I reply, giving him a flirty wink. “A dirty martini with extra olives, please.”

“Coming right up,” he says, already moving toward the bar.

I wander to a table near the bar and wonder what the kids I went to school with would think of me now. I was a scholarship student, and many people in my classes looked down their noses at me as if my presence was an affront to their privileged upbringing.

“Here's your drink, Ms. Mercer,” the waiter announces, placing the perfectly mixed martini in front of me. I take a sip,

savoring the taste of victory that lingers on my tongue.
“Perfect.”

He slips away. I survey the room and decide the table in the center is the best place for my next victory since garnering invitations to high-stakes private games won't happen if I hide in the corner all night.

Twenty minutes later, cards glide across the green felt, and my fingers itch to reveal their secrets. I slip them up from the table, feeling the weight of the stakes in the air. My mind races, calculating probabilities. Knowing the numbers isn't enough to win – I need to read the table to gauge my opponent's tells and spot their chinks in the armor.

The people filling the table are from every walk of life. A high-ranking politician with an apparent cocaine problem sits to my left. He's twitchy as hell but meets my gaze with steely determination. A woman with a voice smooth enough to talk me into eating kale sits to my right. She gives nothing away and could very well be my biggest obstacle in winning the pot.

The seasoned gambler who sits opposite could also prove to be a formidable opponent. Like a chameleon, he blends into his surroundings, absorbing the energy of the room and using it to his advantage.

The one staring at me since I sat down is by far the most formidable, though. Mafioso, Bratva soldier or mercenary for hire? I can't tell, but he clearly doesn't play by the rules and wants none of us to miss the malevolence sliding off him in waves. His deeply tanned skin is carved by thick veins, and the biceps beneath his suit jacket look like two bulldozers on the brink of breaking free.

“Your bet, Ms. Mercer,” murmurs the dealer, his eyes impassive behind dark-rimmed glasses. The other players watch me intently, trying to get a read on my hand.

“Twenty-five,” I say casually, tossing a handful of chips into the middle with a clink. It's a bold move but calculated – I want to see who will match it *and* who will fold under the

pressure. My gaze flickers around the table, taking note of each player's reaction.

The coked-up politician hesitates, his knuckles whitening around his cards. Bluffing but determined to stay in the game. He matches my bet with a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. Poor bastard doesn't stand a chance.

"Call," says the woman with the great voice. She gives nothing away, but there's a slight twitch at the corner of her mouth. Is she bluffing, too? Or does she have something up her sleeve?

"Raise," comes a deep voice from the other side of the table. Mr. *I May Kill You* meets my gaze with deadly calm. "Fifty." The potential body dismemberer locks eyes with me, and for a moment, I wonder what disposal method he prefers. River, crows...perhaps something more creative like fluoride?

"Call," I say at last, matching his bet and raising the stakes even higher. The tension is obvious now – a thick, heady fog that wraps itself around me like a lover's embrace... or a noose's rope.

My heart races like an overcaffeinated hummingbird, but my hands are steady as I lay my cards on the table.

"Full house," I announce, feeling a surge of triumph as the other players groan and toss their cards down in defeat. All except for *Mr. Evil*, who reveals his own hand with a dark smile.

"Four of a kind," he murmurs, sweeping the pot toward him with a victorious gleam in his eyes. "Well played, Blondie."

"Likewise, kil...er...sir," I reply, refusing to let my disappointment show. It's a setback – but one that might just save my life.

"Shall we up the ante?" he asks, his gaze locked on mine, daring me to accept.

"Not tonight," I say, my voice cool and confident. "Netflix is calling."

Confusion flashes across his hard features, and I pray the comment slides me into the ditzy blond folder in his mind. I don't get spooked often and respect when my survival meter pings and tells me to fold. "Have a good evening."

The floor manager watches me closely as I stroll to the cage. His expression suggests I did the right thing by extricating myself from the table.

The only thing I love more than winning is living. And if I had continued to play with *Mr. Malevolence*, the second might not be possible.

After I slip the receipt for my winnings into my purse, I turn and see the head of security.

"You made the right choice."

"Was it that obvious?"

"No." He adjusts his jacket, and I notice a black leather gun holster lying against his chest. "You're clearly a contender."

"And?"

"Not everyone is a gracious loser, and it's best to avoid those who don't play well with others."

The corners of my mouth lift. "I appreciate the advice and will take it to heart."

"Excellent." He snaps his fingers, and a large man in a suit appears instantly. "Bobby is going to escort you to your car."

"To what do I owe such excellent service?"

"Keeping our patrons alive is good for business."

"Indeed." I follow the hulk toward the door and know I've been given a warning I would be wise to heed.

CHAPTER TWO



Enzo

Being born into the Cosa Nostra guarantees there are few days when one's mortality isn't in question.

Today is no exception.

Not only do I have some euro trash brats to deal with, but I have to be on guard for the Cartels retaliating for bullshit the Pakhan stirred up.

So much for alliances. The one we forged with the Volkov Syndicate has yet to deliver any of the promised benefits, and the only thing holding hands with our old enemy has given us is more bodies to dispose of.

A situation that proves Papa was right when he said things always get bloody before they get better. Unfortunately...or fortunately, depending on your view, I'm the one tasked with ensuring blood isn't spilled inside the crown jewel of the family empire.

The Encore Resort and Casino sits on the water's edge and is meant to show the world that the Bianchis are successful, legitimate businessmen, not Sicilian kings of the underworld.

I say potato, potahto, but I'm fifth generation Cosa Nostra and have no illusions about what our lives entail.

Family first. Everyone else dead last.

Black and white. I don't operate in gray when it comes to family or loyalty.

Which means I better move my ass and make sure things are running smoothly. I stride toward the roulette tables and hear glasses clinking and a low hum of excited chatter. The crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceilings throw patterns of light across the polished marble floors, and I know

the wealth that flows freely within our walls could rival that of any good-sized nation.

The dealers nod respectfully in my direction, and I see my floor manager tilt his head in the direction of a table in the corner. Time to play nice with the people who keep federal prosecutors out of our yard.

I approach the secluded corner table, where a group of influential politicians and government officials sit, nursing their drinks, and hear the clink of ice against glass punctuating the air.

“Ah, Enzo, just the man we’ve been waiting for,” says Senator Carmichael, a silver-haired man with a reputation for ruthlessness in both his political and personal dealings. “Come, join us.”

“Of course,” I reply smoothly, sliding into the vacant seat beside him. My eyes scan the faces surrounding the table. Each and every person holds a different kind of power within their grasp. Power that I must ensure stays aligned with the interests of the family.

“Enzo, you’ve truly outdone yourself with the new additions to the casino floor,” remarks Councilwoman Hamilton, her words laced with just enough flattery to make her intentions clear. “The high roller suite is absolutely exquisite.”

“Appreciate the high praise,” I nod with a warm smile. “We’re particularly proud of the artwork that was commissioned for it. We believe in creating an atmosphere that caters to the tastes of our esteemed clientele.”

The words feel like rocks in my mouth, and as much as I want to choke on the bullshit I’m expected to produce, I know it’s impossible. Andre is entrusting me with the casino’s success, and the last thing I will do is fail the Don.

“Speaking of catering to your clients,” interjects Mayor Watkins, a sly smile playing on his lips, “I’ve heard rumors of a certain underground poker tournament taking place here next month. Care to share any details?”

“Mayor Watkins, you know I would never withhold information from you,” I reply evenly, meeting his gaze with a practiced nonchalance. “However, I can neither confirm nor deny such rumors at this time.” Politicians think they’re the only ones skilled at the game of evasion, but little do they know we learn the skill in the crib.

“Very well,” he concedes with a chuckle. “I suppose I’ll just have to wait and see for myself.”

I pour myself a glass of water and raise it in a toast. “To continued success and prosperity, gentlemen – and ladies.”

“Here, here!” they echo in unison, clinking their glasses together before sipping their respective drinks.

My mind runs through strategies as the conversation continues around me, weighing the risks and rewards of each potential alliance. Every detail matters, from the subtlest nuance in tone to the flicker of emotion in a politician’s eyes. It’s a careful dance of verbal sparring and calculated manipulation that has taken me more than a year to master.

The conversation with the politicians reaches its natural conclusion, and I excuse myself from their company and stride across the grand casino floor.

Sal, one of my trusted floor managers, meets me near the tables. “We got a problem with the blackjack tables.”

My eyes narrow as they dart over to the area in question, taking in the players’ and dealers’ agitated expressions. “Can you handle it?”

“Yeah.”

I give him a slow once-over. “No blood. And make sure everyone leaves satisfied.”

“This civilized shit is boring.” He shakes his head. “These supposed titans of industry are a bunch of pansy-ass whiners that act like we’re the ones controlling the sugar supply.

“That’s because we are.” I slap my old friend on the shoulder. We came up together and were made men by the age of fifteen. “At least this gig allows you to save on dry cleaning

bills.” He gives me a fake smile and then strides off to handle the issue.

“Enzo!” A familiar voice calls out, drawing my attention to my cousin, Luna. Her dark hair elegantly frames her face, and her sparkling eyes suggest she had more than one glass of wine with lunch. “You look far too serious. This is a place of entertainment, after all.”

“Luna, you know better than anyone else that running this casino is more than just fun and games,” I retort, unable to stop a small smile at her teasing. “How did your lunch with the capo’s wives go?”

“Fine.” She looks past my shoulder. “And before you ask, your sister was well-behaved.”

“I’m assuming that means she insulted only half the women this time.”

“And you would be correct, but we’re gonna take the wins where we can.”

My baby sister is a handful and wants nothing more than to escape the golden chains that bind her to a life she has no interest in.

“If Franco gives her a little more space, she may not feel like she has to act out so much.”

“We both know she’s hanging on to her good reputation by a thin thread. One more,” I make quotation marks with my hands, “incident will make that thing snap, and no man inside the Cosa Nostra will marry her. Even if she’s the consigliere’s sister and the Don’s cousin.”

“Maybe that’s not the worst thing in the world,” she murmurs quietly.

Surprised that my perfect cousin would think such a thing, much less say it, I step closer. “Is there anything you want to tell me about?” She looks up, startled. “I can help. If you need it.”

“Don’t be silly.” She smooths out her designer dress and lifts her mouth into a smile. “I’m the capo di tutti capi’s

perfect daughter.”

“All the same. You call me first.”

“Absolutely.” Luna nods toward the approaching figure of a politician who has proven to be tricky. “Looks like you get to smooth some ruffled feathers.” She kisses my cheek and then follows her bodyguard toward the lobby.

I watch City Councilman Davis move in my direction and remind myself that his political favors have proven invaluable in the past.

“Enzo,” he greets me warmly as he extends his hand. “Always a pleasure to see you here.”

“Likewise, Councilman,” I reply, my charm on full display as I shake his hand firmly. “How was your meeting?”

“Fruitful.”

“Excellent.” I lead him toward the lobby. “Your support has been instrumental in allowing us to continue providing this level of excellence. If there’s ever anything we can do to repay the favor, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“Appreciate that, Enzo,” he responds, his eyes lighting up at the zeros he’s probably envisioning on our donation checks. “I’ll certainly keep it in mind.”

His security detail meets us near the carousel, and I hand him off, wondering why people think our way of doing business is less preferable to the way politicians handle theirs.

I head toward the elevators and see my sister flirting with a high roller. Long leash my ass. The girl is testing every limit my brother has set.

I watch Ari deftly weave her charm as the man who drops a million a month in the casino reaches out to touch her arm. I hurry my pace as I move in her direction. Before I can get there, Ari expertly evades his grasp, flashing a flirtatious smile as she firmly asserts her boundaries.

The man sees me approach, and he and his group disperse almost instantly. My reputation is well known, and they’ve all

made the right decision by not making me prove how far I'll go to protect my sister.

“Where the hell is Fausto?”

Turning, Ari's long hair flies around her shoulders. “Hello to you, brother.”

“You're lucky it's me and not Franco who saw the interaction.” I look around and see her bodyguard walk out of the men's room. “Why are you still here?”

She rolls her eyes. “I'm pretending I don't live in a golden cage and have agency over my life.”

“I'm here, boss.”

“Next time, bring a second man.”

“Jeeze, Enzo. Don't be so paranoid.” Ari waves her hand around. “This place is packed with men from the family. I couldn't grab a donut from Dunkin without five people reporting it.”

“Are we gonna get donuts?” Fausto asks as he buttons his coat. “I heard they got a new jelly one.”

“Really?” I step into Fausto's personal space. “You gonna fucking talk about eating when you left my sister alone?”

“She likes donuts, boss.”

Before I can respond, a shot of awareness slides across my shoulder blades. Not the kind that makes me want to pull out my piece, but the kind that tells me a certain card shark has arrived on the property.

Turning slowly, I see the woman who's been starring in my fantasies for the last several months.

Abby Mercer – a vision in red, her golden curls cascading down her back like a waterfall of honey – strides into the lobby with confidence and purpose that turns heads. My attention is riveted as she makes her way across the lobby floor, her heels clicking on the marble, the sound echoing in my ears.

The dress isn't outrageous, but the way her curves fill it... is.

"Enzo," Ari says as she shoves her bony elbow into my side. "Card sharks and mobsters don't mix."

"Really?" I reply with sarcasm dripping from every syllable. "'Cause I'm thinking it could be a perfect union."

"Smart ass."

"Thank you." The woman has been winning big at the tables for several months and attracting big whales who can't wait to pit their luck against hers. Or stare at her lush mouth. The woman is a stunner with a mind that closely resembles a computer.

Ignoring the warmth that floods my chest, an instinctive desire to possess her roars through my veins.

"We're gonna grab those donuts," Fausto says loudly. "And then head back to the compound."

Ari grabs my arm and leans close. "It seems I'm not the only one interested in breaking a few rules."

"Go home, Ari." Fausto leads her away, and I return my attention to Ms. Mercer. Before she passes, I offer a slight nod of acknowledgment. Her sea-green eyes lock onto mine, and for a split second, I'm sure time has stopped.

"Why are you looking at the card shark like she is the last glass of water in the desert?"

"Fuck you." I turn and watch Nico, my second in command, laugh.

"You gonna get to know her?" He adjusts his jacket. "The arranged marriage deal isn't inked yet, so you got time."

"A woman with more balls than half the soldiers we work beside isn't gonna be interested in a half-ass offer."

"Fair point." Nico clears his throat. "But why not offer her more?"

I ignore the comment since a capo's daughter in New York has been put forward, and I'm not sure I want to do

anything about it. What I am sure of is that the card shark, who is one part siren and two parts intelligence is the most alluring woman I have ever seen. Not that I have any kind of interest in someone with enough fire to make one of those volcanoes in Hawaii look like a candle.

Quiet. Dutiful. That's what I need in a wife and what Teresa Ricci will be if I agree to the match. At least, that's what I expect she'll be. We met five years ago and had a ten-minute conversation, and I'm not sure if I could pick her out in a crowd.

A fact that doesn't matter much since marriage in the Cosa Nostra is about duty and tightening the bonds, not a fucking fairy tale.

CHAPTER THREE



Abby

I stand in the hallway, a sea of strangers surrounding me. The phrase, “Never play with the men who look like they could eat you for breakfast,” runs on a loop in my mind.

Have I finally encountered someone who could stand in the way of my goals? The dangerous man I crossed paths with at that private club the other night has left me feeling uneasy, and despite my reluctance to acknowledge it, I find myself in need of a confidence boost.

With a sigh, I retrieve my phone from my bag and dial my friend’s number, hoping she’ll deliver a hype speech to end all hype speeches. “Hey, girl.”

“Are you in trouble?” Nadia asks.

“No! Why would you assume the worst?”

“Because your location is pinging at Encore. Either you’ve run into the man who made you shit kittens the other night, or you finally talked to the mobster you have the hots for.”

“I do not have the hots for the casino manager.”

“And I eat vegetables willingly.” Her laughter comes through the earpiece. “If we’re going to tell lies, then I can keep going.”

“Fine. But that’s not why I’m calling.” I pull down the hem of my dress and wish that cozy sweats were considered acceptable attire. “I’m spooked, Nadia. What if I run into *Mr. Dark Force* again?” My gaze fixes on a man in the corner, nursing a beer. “I’ve never been run off a table before, and the fact I skulked away the other night is bugging me to no end.”

“Self-preservation is an important quality. Don’t fool yourself.”

“I hate being intimidated.”

“You are five feet five and can’t throw a punch, so being intimidated by a man who eats nails for breakfast is a good thing. Listen to your inner voice telling you that taking on the world’s monsters will not end well.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. You’re right.”

“I always am.”

“Box blond chunky highlights. 2008.”

“Alright, we’ll go with a healthy seventy percent.”

“Love you. Thanks for the pep talk. I’m ready to win big tonight.”

“How’s your Nonno?”

“The wheelchair is no longer optional, and he needs twenty-four-hour care.”

“When are the ramps going in?”

“Hopefully, the week after next.”

“I’m lighting a candle so Lady Luck stays with you.”

“Thanks, girl.” She ends the call, and I feel my confidence return. It’s time to tuck away my nerves and make sure my card shark persona is firmly in place.

When I play poker, I’ve got the confidence of a rock star in her prime. In real life...I’m a geeky math kid who prefers books to clubs.

Shaking out my hair, I step into the room where the high-stakes games are played and tell myself I’m ready for anything. The air is thick with the usual anticipation, and the clink of chips and low murmurs of conversation all blend into a familiar symphony.

“Abby Mercer, always a pleasure,” a dealer greets me, eyeing my figure appreciatively. I offer him a polite smile before settling into my seat at the table. Around me, men in tailored suits size each other up, their hungry gazes betraying the stakes of this game.

“Shall we begin?” I ask, my voice cool and confident. The first hands pass quickly, the pile of chips before me growing steadily.

My earlier anxiety has disappeared, and I remind myself that big wins come with a price tag. I accept a glass of sparkling water from a waiter and notice the casino manager standing by the bar, his gaze fixed on me.

Enzo Bianchi.

The man has been a constant presence in my life for several months. Tall, tattooed, and undeniably handsome – he’s not someone who goes unnoticed. Nor does his connection to the family that rules the East Coast.

A shiver runs down my spine as our eyes meet. Holding his gaze, we play an unblinking game of chicken. *I can do this all day, sir. Make no mistake.*

Folding thirty seconds later, he cuts the tension with a slow, sexy blink.

I’m sweating like a sinner in church and silently pray my disquiet doesn’t show as I return my attention to the table and watch the next hand being dealt.

I take in a discreet lungful of air and wonder if he’s ever made a woman spontaneously combust. Given his level-one-million magnetism, it doesn’t seem out of the question.

Wiping away the picture of flaming satin panties and fainting women, I focus on the task at hand. Money doesn’t appear out of thin air, and the only way to ensure my family has what it needs is to keep my eye on the prize.

Fifteen minutes later, my gaze flickers toward the bar, where Enzo stands with a drink in hand. For a brief moment, our eyes lock, and I feel an electric thrum of connection pass between us.

Oh, what I would give to unravel the enigma that is Mr. Bianchi.

The man beside me shifts. I look up, seeing the dealer waiting for me. *Shit.* I never lose focus. “Fold.” My hand is

lousy, and there's no need to pretend otherwise.

Feeling his energy from across the room, I glance over my shoulder and see Enzo move toward me, his steps deliberate. The room slows down around him, the casino noise fading into the background as he moves closer.

"Mind if I join you, Miss Mercer?" His words are smooth, his voice low and rich like dark chocolate. My heart skips a beat, but I maintain my composure, my fingers steady as they grip the glass in my hand.

Doing what I can to appear like my brain is still functioning, I hold my breath and hope the cloud of testosterone surrounding him doesn't cause me to do something foolish.

"By all means, Mr. Bianchi," I reply, the corners of my mouth lifting. "But don't expect me to go easy on you." His gaze rakes over me slowly, and I silently pray my Spanx don't go up in flames.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he says, his gaze never leaving mine. It feels like he's searching my soul for secrets as his mouth lifts into a knowing smile.

What kind of trap is this man trying to lay?

Tearing my eyes away from his beautiful face, I pick up my cards, staring at them blindly.

"Your bet," Enzo prompts, a hint of amusement in his voice as he watches me study my hand.

"Twenty-five," I announce, pushing the chips into the center of the table. The other players follow suit, but Enzo raises the stakes.

"Fifty," he counters, his eyes never leaving mine. I can tell he's testing me, trying to gauge my reaction.

Not today, mobster. You may be the king of the jungle... and the occasional star of my fantasies, but that doesn't mean I'll let you win.

"Call," I say firmly, meeting his gaze with equal intensity. There's an unspoken challenge growing between us, a silent

battle of wills that has nothing to do with poker and everything to do with whatever is brewing beneath the surface.

“Very well,” Enzo murmurs, his voice barely audible above the soft clink of chips and the hum of conversation around us. He flicks his cards on the table as I lay mine down, confident in my hand.

“No wonder all the whales want to play with you.”

I give him a small smile. My hand beats the others, and I can't help but wonder what kind of game I've gotten myself into – and whether winning is truly possible.

“You're on quite the winning streak,” Enzo says quietly, leaning in so his warm breath brushes against my ear. The sensation sends shivers down my spine, but I refuse to acknowledge the effect he has on me.

“Something like that shouldn't be said aloud,” I answer, feigning disinterest as I move the chips into equal stacks. “It could make Lady Luck change her mind.”

“I doubt luck has anything to do with your success.”

A wolflike hunger flickers in his gaze, and I wonder if being consumed by him would be such a bad thing. “Perhaps,” I concede, glancing up to meet his penetrating gaze.

Unable to make sense of his sudden interest, I lean forward. “Why tonight?”

“Why not?”

Unspoken words sit between us. He's never bothered to offer more than a polite greeting. Yet tonight, he plays against me and loses fifty thousand dollars.

The tension shimmers and I feel a low magnetic pull in my core. “My plate is full, Mr. Bianchi.” A sentence that means nothing and absolutely everything at the same time.

The air between us crackles with electricity.
“Understood.”

My heart pounds, and I know there are probably a hundred better ways to handle the situation. I need his

goodwill to continue playing the tables. “And if I’ve misread the situation, just ignore everything I’ve just said.”

His gaze locks onto mine with such intensity that I can barely breathe. A bead of sweat trickles down my back, and I refuse to break eye contact, unwilling to show any signs of weakness.

“You didn’t misread anything,” he replies softly, his voice barely above a whisper as he leans in, ensuring his cologne will cling to my clothes.

“Curiosity. It’s sometimes impossible to resist.” His mouth lifts, and I wonder why he’s decided to step outside the lines. Men in his world don’t get involved with women like me.

Perhaps it’s boredom or a need to understand what makes me so adept at winning high-stakes games. The answer isn’t clear, and given my usual success at sizing up my opponent, it’s incredibly frustrating.

The poker table is a battlefield of strategy and deception, and my ability to analyze every move, calculate probabilities, and anticipate my adversaries’ actions has never failed me.

But this man...staring into my soul, has put me off my game.

“I should return to my duties.” He pushes himself to his feet, and I do the same. The table has gone cold, and I need to get rid of the adrenaline coursing through my veins. “Have a good evening, Mr. Bianchi.”

“You too, Sharky.”

Smiling at the nickname, I watch him stride through the doors and let out a long breath.

What the hell was that?

Looking around the room, I realize that our little *tete-a-tete* is the first time I’ve let my guard slip. He broke my spell of concentration with nothing more than a curve of his mouth.

I shake out my curls and vow not to succumb to the magnetic pull of the mobster again. After scooping up my

chips, I head toward the cage and decide that a donut from Dunkin is the only answer. The oversized outpost in the food court has almost every flavor, and right now, I need about fifty of them to wipe away the picture of the most delicious man I have ever encountered.

CHAPTER FOUR



Enzo

The picture of Abby's red-painted mouth lingers as I cut through the crowds surrounding the slot machines. Why didn't I keep my fucking distance?

An hour ago, I would've sworn that resisting the woman until the end of time was possible, but now I'm not so sure.

Instead of falling into the woman's honeyed web, I should've left after I escorted the whale into the room. But goddamnit, watching her play was like observing a great artist create a masterpiece.

I want to know everything about her. What she eats, the scent that lingers on her pillows, and every thought that crosses her mind. I'm greedy for details and wish like hell that I wasn't.

The last thing I can afford is a distraction, yet her image keeps returning like a relentless wave crashing against the shore.

The way her lips part when she smiles, the way her hair falls gently on her shoulders, and how her eyes sparkle when she wins is on the highlight reel.

"Enzo!"

Turning, I see Nico stride in my direction. "What's up?"

"Just got word the *Serpent* walked into the lobby."

"What the hell is Rodrigo Vargas doing here?" I tap my earbud. "Benito, do we have a man on Vargas?"

"Yeah Boss. He's headed for the second floor."

"Work your contacts. I want to know who is holding his leash."

“You got it.”

My jaw tightens as venom crawls through my veins. “If he’s still playing with the Albanians, I’ll get rid of him tonight.”

“Last I heard, he’s still operating alone and sells to whoever pays the most.”

“These independent contractors piss me the hell off since there’s no way to predict their next move.”

Nico taps his earbud and then puts a finger up. I look around the busy first floor and see our men in position.

“He’s inside the high-stakes poker suite with a million dollars worth of chips.”

“Why is an arms dealer playing cards here?” I stride toward the elevator and know I’m about to fucking find out. He’s never stepped inside any of our businesses, and there must be a compelling reason why he would do it today.

His association with the Albanians puts a target on his back, and he’s not stupid enough to believe we’ve somehow become an organization that believes in forgiveness.

I step into the room where our biggest whales play, and millions of dollars are won and lost every hour. My eyes are drawn to Abby seated at a table in the center of the room. Around her, an assortment of intimidating opponents and wealthy spectators eagerly watch the game unfold.

Rodrigo stands near the bar with his focus trained exclusively on Abby. *Fuck me. Have they crossed paths before?*

The tension in the air feels like a taut string ready to snap.

Clinking chips fill the smoky atmosphere as the players’ intense gazes seem to dissect each other, searching for any hint of weakness. Abby’s face reveals nothing to her adversaries, and I’m again reminded that she’s a professional.

“Call,” she says with a velvety voice that demands attention. She slides her chips into the pot, never breaking eye contact with her opponent. The woman owns every player’s

attention. The slow smile, the eye contact. She's a master and, unfortunately, might've caught the interest of a sociopath.

Through the haze of smoke and mounting pressure, I see Abby remains unshaken, calculating her next move with the precision of an experienced strategist.

"Fold," one player announces, retreating from the battle. Others follow suit, leaving only Abby and a few remaining warriors to vie for the spoils of victory.

The dealer reveals the final card, and I see the gears turning in her mind, analyzing the possibilities and weighing options.

"Raise," she declares, her voice unwavering as she pushes a towering stack of chips into the center. The remaining players exchange glances, uncertainty etched on their faces.

"Too rich for my blood," a player mutters, throwing his cards down in defeat. One by one, they fall until only Abby and her most formidable opponent remain.

"Call," the man grumbles, his eyes never leaving Abby's face. The tension in the room increases as the dealer reveals the winning hand.

"Straight flush," Abby announces triumphantly, laying her cards down for all to see. A collective gasp echoes through the room, followed by a smattering of applause from the spectators.

Rodrigo's mouth tightens, and I know instantly he has his sights set on the woman who can't seem to make a wrong move.

"What are you going to do?" Nico asks quietly as he stands beside me?

"I'd love to put a bullet in bastard's head, but I don't have a good enough reason yet."

Rodrigo approaches the table, and I notice his muscular build has grown. Has he had time off or decided to juice? His shaved head gleams under the dim lights as he sits at Abby's table.

“You may have that reason before too long,” Nico mutters.

The *Serpent's* piercing eyes sweep the table, sizing up each player like prey before settling on Abby.

“Deal me in,” he demands, as the players at the table give him more than a cursory glance.

Abby holds his gaze, and I notice her hands shake ever so slightly. She knows who he is and what he's capable of.

The game begins, and the determination in her eyes is unmistakable. She matches his bet, her hand steady, even as I sense her heart racing beneath her composed exterior.

“Call,” Rodrigo rumbles, his voice low and threatening. The dealer reveals the next card, and I see the gears turning in her mind as she calculates the odds.

“Raise,” Abby says, pushing more chips toward the center of the table. Her eyes meet mine momentarily, and I see a flicker of uncertainty, quickly replaced by resolve. She's aware of the risk but clearly not willing to back down.

“Interesting move,” Rodrigo sneers, throwing in his own chips. “You must be feeling confident.”

“I'm not unconfident,” Abby retorts, her determination evident despite the tense situation.

“Raise again,” Rodrigo growls, his face hardening as he realizes Abby won't be easily beaten. With each bet, the tension at the table ratchets up another notch, the spectators holding their breaths as the showdown unfolds.

“Call,” Abby replies, her voice firm and unwavering. The final card is revealed, and the room seems to freeze in anticipation. She studies her cards, her lips pressed together as she makes her decision.

“Check,” she announces, meeting Rodrigo's gaze. He snarls, slamming his cards onto the table, revealing a strong hand.

Is it enough?

“Royal flush,” Abby says softly, flipping over her cards. The room erupts in a mixture of gasps as she collects the pot. Rodrigo’s eyes flare with rage.

“Looks like you underestimated me,” Abby says quietly, stacking her winnings.

Retribution brews behind Rodrigo’s eyes, and I know this game is far from over.

I’ve seen my fair share of talented card players, but there’s something different about this woman. She doesn’t just play the game; she commands it.

Abby holds the *Serpent’s* gaze. I would bet any of my collector comic books that she’s reading his body language and calculating his next move.

Rodrigo can barely contain his rage. There’s a dangerous edge to him, like a coiled snake ready to strike. Abby stacks her winnings, and I give Nico a nod.

The tension between Abby and Rodrigo grows, threatening to explode into something far more dangerous. I approach the table, eyes fixed on Abby and the storm brewing around her.

Rodrigo slams his hand down on the table with enough force to make the chips scatter. His gaze is locked on Abby, a venomous mixture of outrage and disbelief. “You’re a card counter and cheated!”

“Please,” she scoffs, her fingers dancing through her winnings with practiced ease. “I simply outplayed you.”

His anger surges like a tidal wave, threatening to engulf the entire room in chaos. I watch Rodrigo’s face contort with rage, his massive fists clenching at his sides.

“Enough!” I roar, my voice cutting through the tension like a knife. Ignoring Abby’s heady scent, I notice all eyes turning toward me as I put myself between her and the seething Rodrigo. The silence is palpable, broken only by the faint clinking of chips and the steady beat of my own heart. “She’s beaten you fair and square, Vargas,” I say, staring him down.

My voice is cold and unyielding, a warning not to push me further. “Accept your loss and walk away.” Her scent surrounds me, distracting me momentarily.

“Stay out of this, Bianchi,” Rodrigo hisses, the muscles in his jaw clenched tight. I see a second of realization flare in his stone-cold eyes. His bravado has gotten the better of him since he knows all too well what happens when you cross me.

Playing with Abby has made him lose control of himself as well as the situation. And it’s not about the money he just lost. A half-million isn’t a substantial sum for someone like him, so it must be his wounded ego and being beaten by a girl.

“Today is as good a day to die as any.” I face down the snake who dares to insult me inside my own home. “Slither back to whatever hole you crawled out of before I take your unimpressive insult personally.”

His eyes narrow, the fire of revenge already beginning to burn. He steps back, his jaw tight with frustration, and bows to the weight of my authority. “Nico will escort you back to your car.”

“Fine,” he spits, glaring at us both. “I concede... for now.” The threat in his words is unmistakable, but I meet it head-on.

No one intimidates me, least of all a man no organization will accept. They may pay him for his armaments and to do their dirtiest work, but they won’t offer him a place of respect.

Once he and Nico clear the room, I nod to the waiter. “Bring a round of drinks for everyone.

“Of course, sir.”

I turn to face Abby and feel a spark of something dangerous and powerful ignite between us. “Are you alright?” I ask, concern woven through my words. She nods, her eyes shining with gratitude and something more, something that makes me want to risk rewriting my future.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, her voice running down my spine.

“He won’t forget about this.”

“I know.”

Moving closer, I rest my hand on her back, knowing I will not allow Vargas to touch one hair on this woman’s head.

No matter the cost.

CHAPTER FIVE



Abby

The sun casts a warm glow through the lace curtains, illuminating the cozy living room of my family home in the North End of Boston. I sit on the comfortable sofa, fidgeting with the frayed edge of an embroidered pillow my grandmother made.

My friend, Nadia, sits across from me, her curly black hair cascading over her shoulders, her expressive brown eyes filled with concern. “I’m in one piece. There’s no need to measure me for a coffin yet.”

“Ugh, I hate your morbid sense of humor.”

“That’s a lie.” I wag my finger in her direction. “You love it.”

“Not when you’re tangling with the Bianchis and men with animal nicknames.”

I study the clouds decorating my sweatpants and then look up. “I still can’t believe the casino manager intervened on my behalf.” My heart rate quickens as I picture the man who could make any woman a fool. “He acted like a true knight in shining armor.”

“Or a man trying to keep blood from staining the marble floors of the high roller suite.”

I throw up my hands. “Geeze, can you at least wait a minute before peeing all over my sexy mafioso parade?”

“No!” She leans forward. “You are too important to me, and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Are we talking about my heart or my body?”

“Both.”

“It wasn’t my plan to play cards with the *Serpent*.” My voice is defensive. “I almost got up from the table when he sat down.”

“Why did you stay after being spooked at the private club?”

“I knew if I ran away like a scared bunny, my reputation would disappear in a puff of smoke.” I look around the room and then let out a frustrated breath. “I’m welcome in the private clubs and exclusive rooms because I’m a formidable player and not intimidated. If word got out that I couldn’t handle a game with a less than savory character, high-rollers would avoid me like a rash.”

“I get it.”

“Excellent. Can we go back to talking about how delicious Enzo Bianchi smells? And as soon as we’re done with that, we can figure out why his sexual magnetism is dialed to a thousand, morning, noon, and night.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t say a million.”

Fanning my face, I laugh. “Believe me, I thought about it because if I hadn’t been wearing shapewear, my panties would’ve gone up in flames.”

“Where is my friend who’s been immune to men for the last couple of years?”

I raise my hand. “Here.”

“You must be an imposter.” Rolling her eyes, she flops against the wing-back chair. “Because the Abby I know would never consider crushing on a high-ranking mafioso praying it will miraculously result in a love story.”

“The man is a magnetar and almost impossible to resist.” I inspect my nails. “Not that I gave him a clue since I played it cool.”

“Are you watching Star Trek again?”

“No, but I enjoy an informative astronomy podcast now and again.” I pick a piece of lint off my favorite kitty

sweatshirt. “A magnetar is the most powerful neutron star in the galaxy and is lethal at a distance of 1000 km.”

“Good to know.” She shakes her head. “The most important word in that definition is lethal, and that is exactly what getting involved with Enzo will be.”

“I know that!” My stomach churns as I listen to her warnings. Warnings I heard a hundred times from my own mother. “Don’t worry, I don’t have plans to do anything about my y crush.” I run my fingers through my curls. “Men like him don’t marry outside the family, so it’s not like starting something is possible.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that since fooling around with made men is bad for a woman’s health.”

Her words weigh heavily on the small part of my brain still capable of making smart decisions. My lady bits would love to take a short walk on the wild side with Enzo, but my head knows it would be foolish.

The old grandfather clock in the corner of the living room chimes softly, pulling me back to reality. Nadia’s voice cuts through my thoughts, her eyes full of concern. “Abby, I know it’s hard to resist someone like Enzo, but you can’t ignore the risks like I did.”

She sips her coffee, and I can see she’s trying to decide which story to share. My smart, fearless friend has a history of falling for pretty men who make empty promises. “Are we about to walk down *douche* memory lane?”

“Yes!” She sits up. “Do you remember Carlo? Charming, passionate, with a smile that could stop your heart. Thank God his family discovered our relationship and forced him to end it. I would probably still be buying his pretty lies. They don’t marry outside the family, Abby. It’s a non-negotiable rule.”

I watch as she rubs her thumb over the handle of her mug, lost in memories. “And we can’t forget Rafael.” She closes her eyes. “His laugh was so infectious, you couldn’t help but join in. He promised me the world, then simply disappeared one day.”

Nadia looks at me, her brown eyes pleading for understanding. “Please don’t play with fire, no matter how intriguing the flames look.”

“You aren’t telling me anything I don’t know.” I sit up straighter and look her in the eye. “Nonno wasn’t a saint. I don’t know the particulars since Mom never gave us the details, but suffice it to say, the laundromats were not likely clean operations.”

“Of course, but that doesn’t mean—” she starts, but I hold up a hand to stop her.

“I see Enzo with clear eyes.” I trace the pattern on the armrest of my chair. “I have no interest in dating the guy. I’m just being honest about how I feel.”

“Do any of those feelings happen above your belly button?”

A surprised laugh falls out of my mouth. “Nadia!”

“What?”

“The man is beautiful, and you would have to be dead not to notice.”

“And I’m not dead.” I glance around the room, taking in the familiar surroundings of my family home – the worn rug under the coffee table, the framed photographs on the mantel, and the antique clock that has been in my family for generations. “But his looks are not the most dangerous thing about him.”

“He got you with the display of chivalry when he told the arms dealer to take a hike.”

“I’ve never had anyone do that for me before.”

“A knight in shining armor is hard to resist.”

“And a man in a Brioni suit is even more so.”

“We are suckers for excellent tailoring.”

“And men who smell so good it makes even the most well-behaved of us want to throw up a white flag.”

“Been there, done that, and have the *I survived a mobster* T-shirt.”

The sunlight streaming through the window casts a warm glow over the room, illuminating the motes of dust dancing in the air. “I may need to get the *I Survived a Scary Arms Dealer*’ version.”

Nadia leans forward. “How in the hell did you get on Rodrigo Varga’s radar? I thought you were avoiding him.”

I shudder involuntarily at the mention of his name. The man has been a dark cloud looming on the horizon since our encounter in the high-stakes poker game. “I regretted running off the first time and decided to hold my ground when he sat at the table I was playing at.” I let out a long sigh. “Who knew he would be such a baby about losing a half million dollars.”

“Why are you suddenly so brave? Facing off with the titan of toilets would’ve been a much better choice.”

“The Potty King almost had a heart attack the last time we played. I can’t have that on my conscience.” I rub my temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache.

“Maybe you could take a break from the local tables for a while,” Nadia suggests gently. “You can participate in one of those poker tournaments in Vegas.”

The reality of the danger looms large. “I don’t want to leave Nonno right now. We haven’t found enough caretakers that he feels comfortable with, and until we do, I need to stay right where I am.”

“Your brother could adjust his schedule and help out more.”

“The Prince of Pasta is trying to keep the restaurant going and can’t break away very often.”

“And yet, he always has time when his boyfriend flies in from Los Angeles.”

“He does his part.” I wave my hand toward the kitchen. “He cooks all Nonno’s meals and has lunch with him every

day. Marco is letting Nonno beat him at cribbage as we speak.”

“Abby, this thing with Rodrigo is serious. He’s not the type of man to forgive and forget.”

“I’m well aware of that.” I run my fingers through my hair as I try to come to terms with the reality of my situation. Distance might be the only way to protect myself from the dangers lurking in the shadows.

“I’m here and will support you no matter your decision.”

“I appreciate it.” I stand and pace the length of the living room. The familiar walls adorned with photographs provide little comfort, only serving as a reminder of what’s at stake.

“There’s an answer. We just have to figure out what the best one is.”

I return to the sofa and trace the faded floral pattern. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“Atlantic City isn’t so far. If you decided to play there for a while, you would just be a quick flight away.”

“Nonno’s memory is fading fast, and I don’t want to miss the moments when his eyes light up with recognition.”

“I get it. You two have always been close.” She pauses, her expression shifting into one of determination. “We’ll figure out another way to deal with Rodrigo.”

“Really?” I bite back a smile. “Exactly how does one face off with an arms dealer with no regard for human life?”

“First, we need to gather more information on him and his connections. If we know what we’re dealing with, we’ll have a better chance at staying one step ahead.” Nadia offers, her fingers tapping against the armchair. “My newly minted PI license has to be good for something more than chasing down cheating spouses. Let me work some of my contacts at the police department and see if anything shakes loose.

“Sounds like a plan,” I say, appreciating her enthusiasm. It doesn’t have a chance in hell of succeeding, but I know it’s important for her to feel like she’s contributing.

“Be cautious. You need to keep a low profile, especially when playing at the private clubs,” she warns. “The man’s reach is far and wide, and I wouldn’t put it past him to have eyes and ears everywhere.”

I nod, feeling the weight of the situation sink in. “Alright. Low profile, gather intel. Anything else?”

“Trust your instincts,” Nadia says, her eyes meeting mine with unwavering sincerity. “If something feels off, don’t ignore it. You’ve got a keen sense for danger – use it.”

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I realize, once again, just how much she truly cares. “Thanks, Nadia,” I murmur, my voice thick with gratitude. “I promise I’ll be careful.”

“Good. And remember,” she adds, her tone turning serious, “if things get too dangerous, you must walk away. No winning hand is worth risking your life for.”

I swallow hard, knowing the truth in her words. But even as I accept the need for caution, I can’t extinguish the memory of Enzo protecting me. Standing, I move to the window and gaze at the familiar streets of Boston’s North End. The sun casts a warm golden light on the neighborhood, and I wonder what it would be like to have someone like Enzo in my corner.

CHAPTER SIX



Enzo

I stare at a navy blue row house on a leafy street in the North End of Boston and wonder what growing up so close to your neighbors would be like. The houses are packed together tightly, making me think there would be little they wouldn't know.

A definite deal breaker for people in my world. We require eight-foot walls and plenty of land separating us from our enemies. Not to mention a cadre of loyal soldiers and people who know that looking the other way is not a choice.

Something Abby Mercer knows nothing about.

I step out of my car, take a cursory look around, and see nothing out of place. *Maybe I'm just being over cautious.* Or nosy. My cousin Gianna suggested it was the latter when I asked her to run down the address of my favorite card shark. And as usual, she is correct.

The blond bombshell with a dry wit has been on my mind for a week, and until I see her face and know all is well, I'm not gonna be able to let it go.

The dark brick façade of the home absorbs the afternoon sunlight as I move toward the door. Why is she living here and not in a high-rise with a view of the water?

If she wins like she did the other night, funding almost any kind of lifestyle is more than doable.

Not that there's anything wrong with living in one of the city's most iconic neighborhoods. It just doesn't fit the glamorous woman who strides through his casino like a tigress hunting her prey.

Ignoring the voice telling me that checking on her is weird, I knock firmly on the door. The curtain moves in the

window that flanks the entrance, and I look around for a camera near the door. Nothing. Not only does Abby live in a family neighborhood, but she thinks it's the nineties and home security doesn't exist.

The door swings open, and I can't stop a smile from forming. "My question is answered."

"The one about me being a cyborg or something else?"

"You're alive."

"Clearly." She leans against the door frame. "What are you doing here, Enzo?"

"Wellness check. You've been MIA for a week." I take in the well-worn jeans hugging her delicious curves, a college sweatshirt announcing she attended one of the city's best universities, and a face free of makeup.

How can she be so damn irresistible? And why does she make me feel so greedy? Every encounter makes me want more. Not only do I want to spoil and protect her, but I want us to see every corner of the world together.

"I didn't know casino managers were tasked with taking roll?"

Her generous mouth pushes together, and I add owning every inch of her body to my list. "Vargas made some interesting comments the last time you were at Encore, so I want to make sure you know it's safe to return."

"A speech like that makes me think you've missed my sparkling company." She sways from side to side. "I think you like me, Enzo."

If she only knew how much.

I clear my throat and remember my responsibilities. "This is a business call. I've got a handful of important players busting my chops since you've gone MIA. They're missing their favorite card shark and can't wait for you to return."

"Really?" She taps her lips. "Why didn't you send someone else to relay the message? Because running errands seem below your pay grade."

“I do whatever it takes to keep Encore’s clientele happy.”

“And above ground.”

“That too.” I rest my hand above her head and look down. “I thought you were much taller.”

“Rude.”

I catch her hand before she can swat me. “It’s an observation, not a criticism.”

“It’s a good thing you’ll be matched in an arranged marriage because I don’t know how well you’d do on the open market.”

A rough laugh erupts from my chest. “Where the hell did you get your set of brass balls?”

“On sale at Filene’s.” She slides her hand away. “And you’ve seen me play, so you know I use them regularly.”

“That you do.” She straightens my tie and then looks up, making me feel like jet fuel was in my coffee cup this morning, not espresso.

“So tell me, Enzo, where did you find a hacker talented enough to dig up my address?”

“A man never reveals his sources.”

“Must be someone in your family.”

She turns and grabs a set of keys from a dish on a small table, giving me a ball-tightening view of her hourglass figure.

God damn. Is this woman going to be my greatest test?

“I was just about to run over to Bova’s to pick up something for my grandfather. Would you like to join me?”

“Sure.” I step back and try to remember if I’ve ever done anything so normal.

We move toward the sidewalk, and I grab her hand as our footsteps echo on the cobblestone. If I’m gonna be *Jhonny Normal*, I gotta make sure to get the full fucking experience.

Lifting our clasped hands, she raises an eyebrow. “Are you afraid I’ll try and run away?”

“No.” I link our fingers more tightly and continue walking as though it’s the most normal thing in the world. I don’t have an explanation for my behavior, and for the first time in my life, I don’t care. Holding this woman’s hand feels good, and for right now, that’s all I care about.

We weave through the neighborhood, and I see several people look at me and then flick their eyes away quickly. “People will soon know that you’re under my protection. That should comfort you since no one crosses a Bianchi and lives to talk about it.”

“I don’t like the idea of being seen as a possession.”

Stopping under a tree, I look down. “If you and I ever get there, I’ll make sure you enjoy every second of belonging to me.” Moving closer, I fill my lungs with her scent. “Make no mistake.”

Her eyes go wide, and for a full thirty seconds, we stare at one another.

“I belong to myself.”

“For now.” I tug her hand and move toward the corner.

Have I lost my damn mind by making such provocative statements?

Possibly, but every word is true.

Glancing over, I see sunlight sliding through her curls and wish like hell I was a guy from the neighborhood and not a man who gets rid of a suit at least once a month because of bloodstains since it would make the path forward not so fucking complicated.

“Enzo—”

“So your Nonno is a biscotti man, not a cannoli one.” She shakes her head at the interruption, and I decide that living with her irritation is better than hearing her objections.

“I’m surprised you could surmise that just from the bakery I picked.”

“Any self-respecting Italian knows where the best pastries come from. Mike’s is for cannoli. Bovo’s has the best cookies, and The Modern Bakery has sfogliatella as good as any in Campania.

“Damn. The next thing you’ll tell me is that you’ve eaten at my brother’s place.”

She waves her hand toward a brick building. “Is Carmelina’s his?”

“Ours,” she clarifies quietly. “I’m his not-so-silent partner.”

“You’re bankrolling your brother’s dream?”

“And softening my grandfather’s slide into dementia.”

“No wonder you’ve been burning your way through the city’s poker tables.”

“A woman has to do what’s necessary.”

“No shit.” I move closest to the curb as we turn onto Salem Street.” A dozen questions beg to be asked, so I start with the least obvious. “When did you win your first game?” Her eyes slide over in confusion, and I decide not to retract it.

“I was seven, and Nonno let me play one hand with him and his buddies. Everyone thought it was luck, but I knew the way numbers ran through my head had nothing to do with luck.”

“And you’ve been perfecting your skills ever since.”

“Something like that.”

Laughing at the cryptic answer, I accept that she possesses more layers than any pastry in the bakery, and it will take a miracle for her to show me one. “Why have you stayed away from Encore? Are you playing somewhere else?”

“I took the week off. One of Nonno’s caretakers had a family obligation, so I decided to fill in.” She stops next to the drugstore. “Vargas made it pretty clear how he feels about losing to a woman, and I’m not ready to test his resolve.”

Moving closer, I trace the inside of her wrist. “I made my position clear when he threatened you so you can return to Encore and play as much as you want.”

“I appreciate the chivalry—”

“But?” She slides her hand down her neck, making a primal desire spark to life.

“I live in the real world and know your family will not approve of me becoming your pet project.”

My jaw clenches involuntarily as my concern for her battles with my family responsibilities. “I excel at juggling shit, so don’t worry about how many balls I’ve got in the air. I’ll deal with Vargas.”

Her gaze doesn’t waiver. “Thank you, Enzo, but I can fight my own battles.”

“I’m not gonna insult you and suggest that’s a naïve statement, but—”

“I know he’s a monster.” She steps away. “I’ve got options, so don’t worry about me.”

Courage and determination. Does she know how much I admire both qualities? “Are you refusing my offer because you’re unaccustomed to someone helping or because you’re worried about me holding a marker?”

“Maybe both,” she mutters, a genuine smile gracing her lips as we begin walking again.

“This is a no-string offer.”

“Do things like that even exist?”

“With me, they do.” I stop and tip her chin. “I do horrible things and do them well, but that doesn’t mean my promises are empty. You can take my word to the grave.” She blinks twice. “What?”

“Every time we’re together, it feels like I have every ounce of your attention.”

“Because you do.” The air around us stops moving, and I wonder what about this woman makes me want to be

unflinchingly honest.

“I have no idea what to do with that.” She looks away. “I appreciate the whole slay the dragon thing, but we both know raising your sword in my defense will sound alarm bells that we both want to keep quiet.”

Sliding my finger under her chin, I turn her face so our gazes lock. “Perhaps you’re worth the trouble,” I reply, my voice rough with challenge.

“The dangerous fortune I won is my problem, and I won’t lay it on your door.” She leans up on her tip toes and kisses my cheek. “Thanks for the offer, though.”

I hold her in place and put my mouth against her ear. “It’s a gold-plated promise, sweetheart.”

“I’ve never had one of those.” Looking up, she stills. “If we...came from the same world, nothing would stop me from —”

“If you want to give this thing a chance, I will find a way.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She unlinks our hands and strides toward the bakery.

One thing I know for certain is that I won’t leave her to fend for herself.

The woman is a queen with neither crown nor kingdom, and until I can figure out a way to change that, I’m gonna make sure she’s protected.

An hour later, I pull away and watch the sun casting a golden glow over Abby’s family home. The memory of her mouth against my cheek lingers like smoke from a fire as I make my way across the city.

What the hell did I just start with the promises I made? I grip the steering wheel tightly as I zig-zag through traffic. Why am I allowing myself to feed the attraction?

Because you have no choice.

My mind jumps from one possibility to the next. I reshuffle facts, and one thought returns again and again.

I have three markers.

One from my brother, one from the Don, and finally, one from Gianna's husband, the Pakhan.

Would calling one in allow me to marry outside the family? My grandfather never agreed to such an arrangement, and I don't know if my cousin would consider it.

Especially for someone like me. I'm not only trusted at the highest level, but I'm bound tightly in blood. A flash of annoyance sparks in my gut, and I swallow it down.

This is just a test. A way to prove to myself that I'm all the things I say that I am. Loyal. Steadfast. A true Bianchi. Nothing comes before the family. And the strong, resourceful, and fiercely determined woman won't make me veer off course.

Unless I can somehow do the impossible and chart one that my family accepts.

Either way, I will do as promised and extinguish the threat Rodrigo seems intent on pursuing. Wiping away the picture of her smile, I focus on the road and accept the weight that settles on my chest as I drive through the compound gates and nod to the men on guard.

Gravel flies as I stop my car next to the others. "Patience," I instruct myself sternly as I step out. Before I can button my coat, I see my brother striding in my direction. "Franco."

"What the hell is going on with Rodrigo Vargas?" He adjusts his holster. "Word on the street is that he's slinging insults our way."

"Do you want the short version or the long one?" I reply as we walk toward the massive front doors of the house.

"What do you think?" he replies impatiently.

“A woman beat him in a card game, and he got butt hurt and made some threats.”

“The bastard is growing bolder.”

“I give him credit for swinging the hatchet in public.”

“Because that shows he won’t bother hiding his sins,” Franco finishes.

“Exactly.” My brother is the consigliere and bears the responsibility of stopping things before they start. And believe me when I say he never lets anything start. “Maybe he aligned himself with the Albanians and thinks they will protect him from our wrath.”

“Then he’s a bigger fool than I thought.”

“Foolish men can make a mess as easily as men capable of critical thinking.”

I nod, feeling the weight of the promise I made. “Are you giving me orders to handle the situation?”

“Not yet. I’m going to see who he’s in bed with before we make a move.”

“I’ll stand down until I hear otherwise.” We move down the grand hall, and my gaze falls upon a portrait of my great-grandfather. The first Bianchi to land on the shores of America provides a stern reminder of the expectations passed down through generations.

Abby’s smile pops up, and I immediately wipe it away. “Is Ari around?”

“Of course.” Franco stops in the doorway of the library. “Where else would she be?”

I put up my hands. “Easy there, brother. You know she has a million excuses to miss these things.”

“Tell me about it,” he mutters. “She is testing every limit I set.”

“Rare birds don’t like to be told where to fly.”

“If she’s not careful, I will clip her wings and ensure she stays on the ground.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I study the room filled with family members. “It could break her.”

“What the hell choice do I have?” He runs his hand down his face. “No respectable man will marry her if the rumors become too big to ignore.”

“You tell the men what to believe. Why should this situation be any different?”

“Some men can’t swallow a lie like that, and I don’t want to see how they would treat Ari if I made them.”

“Fair enough.” I follow Franco into the room and begin formulating ideas on how to escape living a life with a chain wrapped around my heart.

Perhaps Ari and I aren’t so different after all...since a life lived on my own terms looks damn appealing.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Abby

As I stroll into the enormous food court inside the Encore, I look around and wonder which treat will soothe my battered ego. The two hours I just spent at the tables cost me twenty thousand, so comfort food is not only needed but necessary.

Cutting through the jungle of tourists, I'm surprised to see Enzo standing in front of the coffee cart. Feeling my heart beat especially hard, I turn and pretend to study the menu at Pho Palace.

The man has been dominating my thoughts, and it wouldn't take much encouragement to go down a road I would undoubtedly regret.

"Abby!"

I look up and see my prince of gold-plated promises slice through the crowd. His eyes never leave mine, and I wonder if the moment looks as cinematic as it feels. Smoothing my hand over my curls, I remind myself there's zero chance of ever having a love story together.

"Hey, Sharky."

"Hello Mobster." He hugs me tightly, and I'm surprised when he holds me a few seconds beyond polite. Filling my lungs with his scent, I close my eyes. "I didn't know we were doing that."

"Now you do," he says quietly before releasing me. "I heard you had a tough run at the tables."

"Ugh, I don't want to talk about it." I wave my hand around. "I came down for some carb therapy."

"Sweet or salty?"

“Why are you asking the perfect question?” Pressing my hand to my chest, I fake groan and ignore the shot of electricity his nearness produces. “I can’t do an unrequited love thing with a high-ranking criminal. It would be too cliché.”

“Yeah, I think it’s too late for that.” He takes my hand and leads me to a table near the waterfall that dominates the large space. “You should just accept that I’ll be your one and only true love.”

“I’m gonna need some fried food before I make confessions like that.”

He glances over his shoulder, and a man in a suit appears almost instantly. “Bring us the hangover special for two.”

“I want some of that.”

“What?”

“Real power.” I look around and realize it must sound ludicrous. “I pretend I’ve got it when playing at the tables, but you’ve got the real thing.” Trailing my finger over the tattoos covering his fingers, I shake my head. “You feel like a different species. Bigger. Stronger. In control of everything around you.”

He moves closer. “You wouldn’t want to pay the price for the kind of power I have.”

A sea of secrets lies behind the statement, and I’m sure he has no intention of sharing them.

I slide into the chair he’s pulled out and accept that he will likely always make me feel like I’m on a ship in rough seas.

“Did your Nonno enjoy the cookies you brought home?”

“Yes.” I study my hands and tell myself not to be impressed he’s asking about my grandfather. “It wasn’t his best day memory-wise, but we enjoyed watching our shows.”

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

“It’s not fun, but I’m grateful to have him around. He owned three laundromats for years, and yesterday, he was

insistent that I go in and make sure that all the machines were working.”

“How did you handle it?”

“I told him my brother would do it and not to worry about anything.”

Enzo leans in and covers my hand. “Why are you so damn perfect?”

A surprised laugh falls out of my mouth. “I’m definitely not.”

“Tell me your five top disgusting habits, so I believe you.”

“No way!”

He throws up his hands. “Then I guess it’s settled...you’re gonna make me fall for you.”

“You have lost your mind.”

Leaning closer, his eyes burn. “Maybe I have...since the images cascading across my mind could get us into a lot of trouble.”

The air is instantly charged, and something that very much resembles desire ricochets between us. I study the edge of a tattoo peeking out from the collar of his shirt and wonder how many women throw themselves at him.

Shaking my head so the swoon threatening to take over doesn’t take hold, I do algebraic equations to distract myself.

A man in a suit delivers a tray heaping with fried food. Chicken nuggets, corn dogs, French fries. It’s all here. “Now you’re the one being perfect.”

“Good.”

He holds my gaze, and my heart does a little somersault. “What are we doing?”

“Eating.” He hands me a napkin. “We can leave the what-ifs for later.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna pass on swimming in those dangerous waters.”

“Sharky...you surprise me.”

His legs move on either side of mine, and I feel caged in. “You expected me to welcome the challenge?”

“No.” His large rests gently on my leg. “I expected you to understand that I never back down.”

I pick up a chicken nugget and press it against his lips. “Now would be a good time to stop talking.” His teeth graze my fingers, and I feel it down to my toes.

Mr. *Never Back Down* chews his food slowly. His Adam apple bobs, and I know it won’t take more than a little nudge for me to agree with anything he suggests.

I pick up a corndog, dip it into the mustard, and then bite. The tang of the hot dog plays against the warm, sweet cornbread batter, and I feel a tiny flutter of panic trying to fight its way free.

I can not fall for this man.

“Breathe, Sharky.” He wipes a crumb from the corner of my mouth. “I’m not gonna ask you to go steady tomorrow.”

“I know that!” I wave my half-eaten treat in his direction. “You are probably promised to some princess in the organization who will bat her eyes and agree with everything you say.”

Sitting back, he crosses his arms over his chest. “I hear a hint of jealousy, sweetheart.”

“Then you need to get your hearing checked.” I drop the dog on the plate and wipe my hands. “Thanks for the snack.”

My brain is scrambled, my heart is pinched, and I don’t know how to make sense of the conversation. Standing, I smooth my fitted pencil skirt. “Take care, Enzo.”

Before I can step away, he catches my hand. “Just because it looks impossible doesn’t mean it is.”

I squeeze his hand and then walk away, knowing that some things are exactly what they appear to be.

As I push through the doors of my brother's Bistro, the rich aroma of garlic and simmering tomato sauce envelops me like a warm embrace. The bustling atmosphere and conversation filling the air are the perfect antidote to my mood.

The encounter with Enzo is still pinging around in my mind, and the distraction of working a shift is just what I need.

"Abby!" Maria, one of the waitresses, calls out with a bright smile. "So good to see you! We could use an extra set of hands."

"Great. I'm ready to pitch in," I reply, tying my apron around my waist and slipping into the familiar rhythm of the restaurant. The noise fades into the background as I focus on the tasks at hand. The mathematics of it all is soothing – calculating orders, timing dishes, and keeping everything running smoothly.

"Table four wants the carbonara, but no bacon," another waitress tells me as she rushes past. My fingers dance across the point-of-sale system, making the necessary modifications before sending the order to the kitchen.

"Got it," I confirm, flashing her a quick smile. It's been months since I've worked a regular shift, but the teamwork among the staff makes it feel like I never left.

"Abby, can you take this to table six?" Marco asks as he slides a steaming plate of lasagna across the counter.

"Of course." I balance the dish on my arm and weave between tables, delivering it to the man who owns the dry cleaners. "Buon appetito!"

"Thank you, Abby." His eyes light up as he picks up his fork. "I finally fixed that beaded dress you dropped off, so come by any time this week to pick it up."

"Perfect." I squeeze his shoulder and return to the kitchen, giving myself credit for quickly falling back into the routine.

The adrenaline from working in a bustling restaurant is nothing compared to the high-stakes poker games I've been playing, but there's a certain comfort in the familiarity of it all.

"Abby, two tiramisus for table eight," Maria tells me as I pass her. I nod and grab the desserts from the fridge, placing them on a tray before returning to the dining area.

"Here you go, enjoy!" I cheerfully tell the young couple as I set down my brother's most requested dessert. They both thank me, their eyes never leaving one another.

A momentary stab of sadness slices into my chest. How do people find something like that...and then hold on to it?

Stomping down the melancholy feelings that want to settle in, I look around the busy restaurant. No doubt about it, funding Marco's dream is one of the best decisions I have ever made. He is a pain-in-the-ass diva on most days, but his talent in the kitchen needs to be shared with the world.

Several hours later, the warm glow of the restaurant lights dim as the last few patrons trickle out, their laughter and happy chatter following them through the door.

"Abby," Marco calls from across the room, his dark blue eyes meeting mine, a hint of concern etched on his handsome face. "Are you hungry?"

"Am I breathing?" He blesses me with his usual cocky grin, and I set the dishes on the counter then join my brother in the small alcove near the back of the restaurant. "Damn, do you have bad news for me?" I drop into a chair and study my favorite chicken piccata nestled into a mound of mashed potatoes. "This is a bad news meal if ever there was one. Did the freezer go out again?"

"No!" He runs a hand through his thick hair and collapses into a chair. "Did you really stroll around the neighborhood with a mafioso yesterday?"

"I drag my fork through the creamy mashed potatoes and feel my appetite slip away. "It's a long story."

“We’ve got all night.” He points his glass of wine toward my plate. “And don’t murder my perfectly creamy mashed potatoes. *Manjiare!*”

I do as I’m told because my brother gets next-level snippy when his food isn’t eaten. “This is delicious.”

“Of course it is.” He stretches out his long legs. “I’m a genius and have taken everything Nonna taught me and refined it.”

I enjoy the perfectly prepared piccata as memories of my brother standing beside my grandmother roll across my mind. The kitchen was his sanctuary. A place where he could be himself without fending off bullies and listening to insults. Our neighborhood wasn’t particularly kind to people who didn’t fit the mold, and Marco was bullied relentlessly until he got bigger than the other kids.

“You haven’t dated anyone in two years.” He fills my glass. “Why jump back into the dating thing with a made man?”

“We’re not dating!”

“You’re just making cow eyes and holding hands while everyone in the neighborhood looks on.”

“No cows were present.”

“Clearly the point.” He leans forward and wipes my chin. “Start at the beginning, and don’t leave anything out.”

“Marco—” I hesitate, wondering if I should edit the story. We don’t typically keep things from one another, but this may be more than his over-dramatic heart can handle. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s sure as shit something so spill.”

I let out a dramatic sigh. “I caught the attention of an arms dealer, and he’s a little pissy that he lost to a girl.”

“What?”

“Arms dealer. Pissed. At me.”

“And jumping from the fire into the frying pan is the right way to handle the situation.”

“There’s the kitchen metaphor I was waiting for.” After folding my napkin, I lean back. “Rodrigo *The Serpent* Vargas is not happy with me.”

I swallow hard, feeling the weight of the situation pressing down. “I walked away the first time but didn’t the second,” I admit, my voice cracking with emotion. “I thought my skills would be enough to win and get out unscathed.”

“You always believe you can outsmart everyone,” Marco says, his voice soft but still filled with worry. “And it finally caught up with you.”

“Well aware of that,” I whisper, my eyes filling with tears. “I’ve been so focused on providing for us, for Nonno, that I ignored the red flags waving in my face.”

“So, how are we going to fix this?”

“Nadia is doing a little recon.”

“She sits in her car taking pictures of people cheating on their spouse.” He snorts loudly. “She isn’t qualified to do any digging.”

“I know, but she likes to feel included.” My chest tightens, and I pray that I haven’t inadvertently put my family in harm’s way.

This was never supposed to happen. I just want to help support the people I love, and now I might’ve risked everything.

“Does the *Serpent* thing have anything to do with your sudden interest in made men?”

“No...I’ve been aware of Enzo for months.”

“Aahhh, you’re on a first-name basis with a Bianchi.”

“How did you know his last name?”

“They rule the East Coast, and you’re not one to waste your time on rif raf. If you’re gonna do the criminal kingpin

thing, you'll do it with someone from the top of the food chain."

"I'm not sure how close he sits to the throne of power, but it's probably pretty close."

"And you like him?"

I cover my eyes and let out a low groan. "Yes. Way more than is good for my mental health."

"When you decide to go off the rails, you really commit, don't you?"

"I don't know what it is about him." Looking up, I see concern and amusement filling my brother's eyes. "There's this thing between us. An energy that makes me want to forget about the rules and beg him to run away.

"It's called lust."

"I think it's more than that."

He makes a gimme motion with his hand. "Start talking and tell me why this criminal is turning my practical sister's head."

"He makes me feel like I'm strapped to a rocket, and someone lit the fuse." What I keep to myself is that he's in possession of the most coveted attribute of all. Duality. Dominant but not a monster. Kind, but not a pushover. "I like how I feel when I'm with him. He doesn't look at me like I'm a freak who needs to be put in her place. He seems to accept me as is."

"Damn." He leans back and crosses his arms. "That kind of thing is hard to resist."

"Tell me about it." My shoulders drop. "I keep thinking the feeling will disappear, but so far, no luck."

"I respect that, but dating a mobster is complicated." He taps his mouth. "Especially if you've spun him into your web."

"I'm not a spinner of webs."

“And I’m straight.” He picks up my empty plate and stands. “You don’t even know you’re doing it.”

“As is evidenced by my thrilling social life.”

“You could have a date every night of the week but prefer to sit at home in your mismatched sweats watching documentaries.”

“It’s better than going through first date hell and telling strangers that I prefer dogs to cats, chocolate over vanilla, and don’t have a gag reflex.”

“Ugh! Don’t make my ears bleed.” He spins around and marches toward the kitchen.

“Baby,” I mutter before draining the wine in my glass and gathering my things.

Once the restaurant is locked up for the night, we head down the street. The soft glow from the string lights casts a warm, inviting glow over the road, making me wish I hadn’t made my life more complicated.

“I can’t believe you’re interested in a mafioso,” Marco says as he takes my hand. “Ma has warned us against that life since we could throw cheerios.”

“Which doesn’t make a lot of sense since growing up with our grandparents was pretty idyllic.”

“Maybe some mini-mafioso broke her heart.”

“I guess that’s possible.” I shove my hand into my coat pocket. “Do you remember when you told me you’d never be interested in a blond surfer with a trust fund?”

“I don’t like where this is going.”

“One drink with Blair made you throw out all your rules. What made you decide that a gorgeous lawyer from California could be the love of your life.”

“Lust.”

“Liar. He’s in full possession of your heart.”

“And I’m not happy about it.”

I squeeze his hand as we walk past the darkened storefronts. “The heart wants what it wants even if it makes no sense.”

“Platitudes.” He scoffs. “I expected better from you.”

“I’m a math genius, not a poet.”

Marco stops under a street light, and the concern in his eyes is unmistakable. “I’m not going to do anything.”

“Yeah, I said the same thing.”

“So do you think Nonno was mafia or just mafia adjacent?”

“I’m ninety-eight percent positive the dry cleaning stores laundered money.” He swings our clasped hands back and forth. “I remember seeing men in custom suits picking up packages. Every Saturday, two of them would show up, have an espresso with Nonno, and then leave with bundles that were definitely not clean undershirts.”

“Maybe that’s how Mom met the man that broke her heart.”

“Possible.” He rolls his shoulder. “If our working theory has any legs, it would explain why she married Dad.”

“A nice all-American Navy man was the complete opposite of the men in the neighborhood and gave her a shot at living far from Boston.” I blow out a breath and try and picture my father. “If Dad hadn’t died a year after you were born, her dreams could’ve come true.”

“I don’t know why she disliked life in the North End so much.”

“Bigger dreams.” I pull my coat tighter. “She loves being a cruise director.”

“She loves being away,” he says quietly.

I don’t bother responding since it’s true. After Dad died, we moved in with Nonna and Nonno, and Ma did everything she could to be gone as often as possible. When Marco

struggled with his identity, she was cruising the high seas. Our grandparents did their best but didn't always know how to help him navigate a life they didn't understand.

"Maybe it's time you took a break from Boston. You could go to Las Vegas and play on one of the professional poker teams."

"Nadia suggested Atlantic City, so you're both on the same track."

"Gawd, if she and I are coming up with the same idea, you know things are dire."

My heart skips a beat at his suggestion. A part of me longs for the freedom and excitement of a new city, a fresh start away from the trouble I've found myself in. But another part of me hesitates, my mind racing with thoughts of what it would mean for Marco and our grandfather. "I don't think I can just up and leave," I reply, my voice wavering. "We've got so much going on here. The bistro is just starting to take off, and Nonno needs us. I can't abandon you two like that."

"I know this will come as a shock, but we can manage without you."

"Really?"

"Yeah, especially if it means no one will take a shot at you." He hip-bumps me. "Besides, going to Vegas might allow you to win even bigger pots, which could help us in the long run."

My mind is torn between wanting to stay and protect my family and the opportunity to grow and challenge myself in a new environment. "If I were to leave, I'd need to ensure everything was handled here in Boston."

"We'll be fine," he reassures me, gently squeezing my hand. "You need to do what's best for you right now. And if that means taking some time away, then so be it."

I know he's right. I can't let fear control my life, nor should I try to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders. The city of lights is a tempting prospect, not only because I

would do well there but because it would put a big barrier between me and temptation.

Something I desperately need. The more time I spend with Enzo, the faster my defenses will slip, which will not bode well for either of us.

“Abby,” Marco says softly, his dark eyes meeting mine. “It’s time for Mom to pitch in. Not only because it’s right, but she also needs a chance to make peace with Nonno before it’s too late.”

I raise an eyebrow, skeptical at the thought of our mother taking on more responsibility. She’s never been one to put someone’s needs before her own, preferring to focus on her career instead. “It might be worth taking a trip just so she won’t have a choice.”

“This debacle could be the perfect excuse to get out of town and stretch your wings.”

As much as I hate to admit it, he’s right. “Okay,” I finally concede, my heart pounding with a mix of fear and excitement. “I’ll give it a shot. But only for a couple of weeks. If it works out, maybe I can do a back-and-forth thing.”

My brother pulls me into a tight hug, and I can’t help but feel a flicker of hope. “Thank you, Marco,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion.

Thoughts of Las Vegas dance in my mind like the neon lights on its famous Strip. I can almost hear the cacophony of slot machines and feel the dry desert heat on my skin as I walk down the bustling streets lined with casinos.

I picture myself shuffling chips and decide a little vacay is the best way to make Rodrigo forget about me and a chance for *me* to get over my infatuation with Enzo.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Abby

The smoky haze of the dimly lit room hangs heavily around me as I gather my winnings from the table. The thrill of victory courses through my veins, along with a small twinge of melancholy.

This will be the last evening I play at Encore's tables. My ticket for Vegas is booked, and as soon as my mother arrives, I'll be flying to Sin City.

"Looks like you've got quite the lucky streak going."

I glance up to find a stunning woman standing beside me, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders like a waterfall of shadows. Her eyes sparkle with mischief, and I can't help but wonder who she belongs to. "Or maybe I'm just that good," I retort playfully, scooping up the last of my chips.

"I'm Ari Bianchi."

I quirk my head and tell myself it's no big deal that Enzo's sister suddenly finds the need to introduce herself. "Hello, Ari." I put out my hand. "I'm—"

"Abby Mercer. The woman responsible for making my unflappable brother... flap a little."

"I don't think—"

"Let's grab a drink." She nods toward the bar, a daring glint in her eyes.

The last thing I should be doing is spending time with Enzo's sister, but I am too curious to resist her offer. "Lead the way."

"Where you running off to now, Little Bird?"

"Fausto, can you give me a little space?"

A large man who looks more sumo wrestler than Mafia soldier rolls his eyes. “Yeah, Ari. ‘Cause that’s how things work. Your brother would love it if you escaped again, and the Don would be thrilled if he discovered his cousin is flitting around unprotected.”

“I don’t flit, Fausto.”

“No, you just stomp your high heels all over the rules and pray we survive.”

“So far, so good.” She straightens his tie. “I’m gonna have a drink with Abby, the famous card shark.”

He checks his watch dramatically. “You running on a different clock than me?”

“We have donuts whenever you want.” Waving her hand toward the bar, she smiles. “Now we’re having tequila when I want.”

“Fine.”

“See how easy that is.” She shakes out her hair. “And they say negotiating with the Mafia is difficult.”

“Say that louder, Ari. Because all the tourists milling around are dying to know if the rumors are true.”

“Space, Fausto.” She stretches out her arms. “Don’t get closer.”

“Until you need me to grab something you can’t reach or carry your packages, or—”

“I get it.”

“Do you?”

“Yes!” She throws up her hands. “You are on my last nerve today and making me rethink joining the nunnery.”

“Like they would let you in,” he mutters, waving his hand. “Go. Get a drink already.”

“I think you two have a very happy future together,” I say while biting back a laugh.

“I’d rather be hit by a bullet between my eyes.”

“And I would prefer to live among the Bedouin tribe and wear a Bhurka.” She takes my hand and heads toward the bar. “Which is not meant to disrespect the people of the desert. I just don’t do well in hot climates and suffer from a bit of claustrophobia.”

“Good to know.” I follow Ari through the crowd and notice her stride is purposeful and confident. The woman is a magnet for attention, with several men risking neck injuries as they spin around and gawk.

We take our seats at the bar, and Ari orders two tequila shots. “To new friends and unexpected connections.” She raises her glass, and I clink mine against hers.

“Salud,” I reply with a smile. Warmth spreads through me when the tequila hits my chest.

“Tell me about yourself,” Ari says, her voice commanding. “How did you become a brilliant card shark with an unerring fashion sense?”

“I appreciate the fashion compliment, but it’s not deserved.” I pull the hem of my dress down. “I just wear sparkly things and high heels so men are distracted long enough to miss the fact I’m a math whiz.”

“Bait and switch.” She nods appreciatively. “Big fan of the strategy.”

Surprised that I feel camaraderie with a woman who is so different, I smile. “I’ve always had a knack for numbers, and poker is a great way to ensure my piggy bank stays full.”

“I envy you,” she says quietly before she looks over her shoulder. “To be able to make your own decisions and chart where your boat goes is something I will never have.”

“The bars of your golden cage becoming a little oppressive?”

“I’ve been gnawing on them for years and have yet to make a dent.”

Laughing at her description, I wonder how literal she’s being. “I might have an extra saw I can loan you.”

“I knew we would become friends.” She squeezes my hand. “Most people see a spoiled princess and never consider for a moment what living inside this family costs me.”

She orders another round, and I wonder how far she’ll go to carve out a life she doesn’t dread. We down our second shot, and I see Fausto shake his head. “You and your bodyguard seem to have a good relationship.”

“We’ve been together since I turned eighteen. I drive him nuts, but he will be rewarded handsomely if he can keep me alive and out of trouble until I walk down the aisle.”

“And how soon is your wedding?”

“Never o’clock if I can manage it.”

My fingers idly trace the rim of my glass as I watch Ari fiddle with the diamond bracelets on her wrist, a small smile playing on her lips.

“So what did you do to my brother,” she asks, her expression a mix of curiosity and amusement. “He’s usually a stoic bore, but something has changed, and I think you’re responsible.”

“Is that so?” I ask, trying to maintain a nonchalant demeanor.

Ari nods, her dark eyes sparkling. “He’s never wanted to break the rules, but—”

“I’m not asking him to.” I take a sip of tequila, allowing the burn of the alcohol to temper the fluttering in my chest.

“I’m not suggesting that you are...but for the first time in his life, he’s considering it.”

“That wouldn’t end well for us, and given my ability to play the odds, it’s not something I plan to stake my future happiness on.”

“That’s very logical.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Affairs of the heart have nothing to do with reason.”

We sit in silence for a moment, the weight of her words hanging in the air between us. Neither of us is in a position to go after what might make us happy, and saying the words aloud only makes the reality that much harsher.

“Abby,” Enzo’s voice cuts through the air like a knife, shattering the fragile moment. My heart leaps into my throat as I turn and notice his smile is as revealing as a da Vinci portrait.

“Enzo.” I ignore my pulse pounding in my ears and realize he’s even more attractive in profile. Ruler straight lines, sculpted angels, and eyes that don’t miss a thing.

“I see you’ve met my sister,” he replies, his gaze never leaving mine. The weight of his stare is unmistakable, and I can only assume it’s because he doesn’t want me to become acquainted with his family.

“Pull the ruler out of your ass, brother.” Ari stands. “We’re not breaking any rules.”

“I didn’t say you were,” he replies with an even tone.

“Whatever.”

Fausto joins the group and sighs. “I never let her out of my sight.”

“I know,” Enzo says with a clipped tone.

“As much fun as this awkward conversation is, I’m gonna skedaddle and let you work out the family drama.” I grab my purse off the bar. “Thanks for the drink, Ari.”

“Any time.”

I spin on my heel and ignore the flare in Enzo’s eyes. The last thing I want to do is muddy the waters even more than they already are. I wander into the sports bar and study the screens. Horse racing has always held a special place in my heart. Dreamers. That’s what people are who bet that one of the foals registered every year has what it takes.

After studying the odds, I choose the horse running forty-to-one odds and grab a ticket.

Why not throw a little faith toward the one who no one expects to win?

“Abby!”

Turning, I see Enzo striding in my direction, making people part like the Red Sea to let him through.

“Why did you run off?”

“I find family discussions don’t need an audience.” *And I don’t need to be tempted by something I can never have.*

“I didn’t know you were interested in the ponies.”

“I like the big races.” I tilt my head toward the monitor. “And who doesn’t want to catch a rising star?” He grabs the ticket in my hand and smirks. “There’s no fun in winning three to one.”

“If you say so.” He gazes at me with lowered lids as he moistens his lips. “Are you heading home?”

My pulse flutters and I shake my head. “I’m going to play a few more hands before I leave.”

If someone asks me what I do, I say play cards, but that’s not entirely accurate. What I really do is gather information and decide what it means. Enzo’s interest in me doesn’t add up. His life could never include someone like me, and not just because men in his position don’t live long if they break too many rules.

He moves us to an alcove. “Have dinner with me tonight.”

The invitation catches me off guard, and my heart begins to race. “That is a bad idea.”

“I know.” He moves closer. “But I think we should do it anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to share a meal with you.” He links our hands. “If I had a different life, I would ask for more...but I don’t, so I’m hoping you’ll consider spending a few hours together.”

I look down at my persimmon pumps and feel like I'm standing on the cliff's edge. "Alright." I raise my gaze. "I'm heading to Vegas in a few days, so this can be a goodbye dinner."

"Vegas? Why the hell would you go there?"

"For all the obvious reasons."

"What about your family?"

"Turns out they can spare me for a little while." His mouth tightens. "I'm ready for a new view and don't want to waste time looking over my shoulder in case Rodrigo doesn't get over his snit." I take two steps back. "Maybe spending time together isn't a good idea after all."

"We're having dinner." He moves closer and a part of me wishes he wasn't so beautiful. "Have the floor manager call me when you're done playing."

I watch him take a few steps backward. "Are there any other orders you'd like to give me?"

"I'll let you know after our first glass of champagne."

He spins around before I can respond. Feeling both nervous and excited by the prospect of what's to come, I laugh uncomfortably, knowing my trip to Vegas couldn't come at a better time.

I learned long ago not to gamble with something I can't afford to lose, and allowing myself to be drawn in by the allure of enigmatic Enzo Bianchi would mean risking everything.

CHAPTER NINE



Enzo

The door to my office creaks open, and my mother's signature perfume fills the air. Donatella Bianchi, the acting matriarch of our family, stands in the doorway with an air of authority, and I know she's not here to discuss the weather.

"Enzo, we need to talk," she says, her voice smooth yet firm.

I exhale slowly. "What's on your mind, Ma?"

"Gossip." Her silver hair gleams under the dim office lights, framing her face like a halo. "I've spent the last hour listening to the women from the *famiglia* discuss your interest in a certain card shark."

I clench my jaw, my fingers tightening around the pen in my hand. "Must be a slow news day if I'm the only gris available for the gossip mill."

"You know that I don't appreciate sarcasm."

"And I don't care for my personal life being discussed."

Scoffing, she sits in the chair facing my desk. "The Cosa Nostra doesn't have much use for privacy."

"Be that as it may, it must be more than the ladies twittering that brought you down here."

"Are you denying what the rumors suggest?"

"I don't give a damn about rumors."

Ma narrows her eyes, unimpressed by my attempt to deflect. "You know that's not what I'm talking about," she snaps. "You have a duty to fulfill, Enzo. You are promised to the New York Capo's daughter. This... dalliance needs to end."

I grind my teeth together as I force myself to maintain eye contact. I know she's right – tradition and loyalty have always been the backbone of our family. But the thought of pushing Abby away feels like a knife twisting in my gut. "I understand the importance of fulfilling my duties."

Her gaze softens ever so slightly, but her resolve doesn't waver. "I know you're struggling, Enzo," she replies quietly. "But you know better than anyone that sacrifices must be made for the sake of our family."

"Really?" I push my seat back from my desk. "You're reminding me about sacrifices?" Her gaze flickers away, and I know that she understands there are lines she can't cross.

"Ma," I begin, my voice steady despite the storm brewing inside me. "The girl was promised to me, not the other way around. I have never shied away from my responsibilities."

"Enzo, you know as well as I do that this isn't about who was promised to whom. It's about upholding our family's honor and preserving our traditions." She takes a deep breath. "Arranged marriages often offer a great deal of happiness. Look at your cousin Gianna and the Bratava Pakhan."

"They are the exception and not the rule, and you know that."

"True," she admits quietly.

I can see the years of pain etched into her face, the memories of her sacrifices haunting her still. My father was a cruel bastard, and no one paid the price more than she did. "I respect all you've done for us," I say, my voice filled with patience I don't feel.

A flicker of sadness crosses her eyes, and for a moment, she appears vulnerable. But just as quickly, she regains her composure, her gaze meeting mine with unwavering resolve. "I did what I was raised to do and would do it again even knowing what I know."

Silence hangs between us like a thick fog, suffocating me with its weight.

“Enzo, sometimes we must make difficult choices for the greater good,” she says softly, her eyes filled with sadness. “Just remember that whatever path you choose, there will be consequences.”

I grab the crystal decanter off the bookcase and pour myself a healthy shot of scotch. The memory of my father’s cruel nature wraps around me like a cold, unyielding chain. I can still hear the echoes of his harsh words and the haunting sound of his fists against flesh.

“You are not your father,” she states firmly. “But you know our world doesn’t allow sentimentality, and the sooner you accept it, the easier the next chapter will be.”

Her words strike a chord but are not strong enough to change my mind.

“Perhaps it is time for you to meet the woman,” she suggests, her tone measured. “Take a trip to New York. Get to know her. It is only fair to both of you.”

I shoot back the dark liquid in my glass. “I’m too busy with the casino and can’t afford to be away.”

Ma’s eyes remain resolute, a testament to the strength that’s carried her through countless battles. “I’ve said all I can, and you will have to deal with Andre when the time comes.” She stands and smooths out her dress. “I love you son.”

I watch her walk out, her words resonating within me like a haunting melody. I know she’s right – my choices will have repercussions. Unfortunately, my heart is a stubborn bastard and believes there’s a way to have what I want.

Abby’s smile flickers through my thoughts like a beacon, and I know I need at least one night together. The woman is living in my head rent-free, and until I can unravel the reasons for the power she holds over me, I won’t be able to walk away.

My gaze drifts toward the window, and I notice the lights of the casino entrance cast a kaleidoscope of colors onto the wet pavement. Conflicting emotions roar through my chest.

Everyone in the family thinks I’m a dreamer, and perhaps there is a shred of truth in a perception I have always fought

against.

Because right now, I would give anything to come up with a magic formula that allows me to fulfill my duties *and* have a relationship with the woman who captivates me.

CHAPTER TEN



Abby

My receipt slides across the marble counter, and I note the amount at the bottom of the paper. “Vegas, here I come.”

“What that?”

Turning, I see my dinner date leaning against a pillar. Sleek as a seal in a black suit, Enzo looks like he fell off the runway in Milan. “Are you lurking, Mr. Bianchi?”

“No.” He pushes himself up. “I’m waiting patiently.”

Ignoring the flutter in my chest, I smile and pray my nerves don’t show. “I didn’t realize mobsters did that sort of thing.”

“We’re proficient in many areas.”

Nodding, I hear the skeletons behind his words and know I don’t want the details. “I’m not sure if I should make a flippant comment or go for an awkward segue.”

“Neither is required.” He moves closer. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m breathing, so the answer is yes.” He takes my hand, and I feel like I’m experiencing that moment in the movies when a character first glimpses that everything is about to change.

No one has ever looked at me the way Enzo does. It’s not polite interest or casual flirtation. It’s darker and reminds me of a lion that’s spotted the prey he can’t wait to devour.

“We’ll have dinner in my suite.” He brushes my hair aside and lets his finger slowly trail down my neck.

Resistance.

Who is she?

Earlier, I was filled with conviction, but now...I'm more than willing to agree with every suggestion he makes. "Is that a statement or a question?"

"Both." He takes our clasped hands and presses them against his chest. "I don't feel like being on display. I want your full attention, which won't be possible if people stop by every five minutes."

"Will you behave?" I can feel the beat of his heart beneath the layers of Italian wool. "Or will you give into the desires you're doing little to hide?"

"It's up to you."

"A gallant kingpin." I step closer. "How unexpected."

"I will be as polite as you want me to be."

"Alright, Mr. Bianchi. Lead the way."

"Believe me, I plan on it."

I follow the tall, broad-shouldered man down the hall and accept that I am willingly walking into the flames of hell. Whatever happens between us won't be without consequences, and in this minute, I couldn't give a flying fig.

We come to a set of double doors at the end of the hall, and I watch him press his hand against the pad on the wall. *Last chance*, my brain whispers silently. *As if* my lady parts respond.

Ignoring both, I follow him into the suite, noting it's as elegant as the rest of the property. He slides his jacket off and drapes it over a chair. Dark shadows play beneath his white shirt, and I wonder if every inch of him is tattooed.

"Drink?"

"Sure."

He pops a bottle of champagne I've never heard of and fills two glasses. The bubbles dance in the crystal flutes, mirroring the feeling in my stomach as I accept the glass.

"To us," he says, raising his glass to mine. The clink of crystal fills the air as we drink, our eyes never leaving one

another.

Moving closer, he rests his head against mine, making me wish I could stop time. “Out of eight billion people on the planet, why are you the one to make me feel this way?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

A knock at the door interrupts the connection. “You should get that.”

Pressing a kiss to my head, he lingers for a second before stepping away.

I suck in a breath and then look around the room. Dimmed lights cast a warm glow over the room, reflecting off the polished surfaces. Is this his home or just a place where he brings...never mind, I don't want to think about it.

The waiter sets the table near the windows and then disappears almost instantly. Taking Enzo's outstretched hand, I follow him and try to calculate how long it will take before my resolve vanishes completely.

“Should we do twenty questions?” He refills our glasses. “Or try truth or dare?”

“That is the most awkward question.”

“Not really,” he smirks. “There are at least five circling my brain that would put those two to shame.”

I sip my champagne and feel him study me closely as I gaze around the room. His silence feels like a live wire. No man has ever given me a quarter of the attention, and I don't know what to do. Sliding my eyes up to his face, I try to picture what it would feel like to have his hands sliding over my body. What kind of lover is he? Tender? Dirty? Rough? Sweet? Perhaps a mixture of all four.

“Tell me when you knew that your card skills were unusual,” Enzo asks, his eyes never leaving mine.

I smile, recalling the memory. “I was sixteen, trying to make a few extra bucks at a seedy underground club. It didn't take long to realize that my skills were not a fluke. I had a real knack for the game.” I pause, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

I rarely talk about how hard I've worked to become successful. "The allure of playing wasn't just about the money. It was the thrill, the challenge... and knowing that I could beat players with years of experience."

"Sometimes all it takes is a single experience to change a person's path."

"Or an unexpected encounter."

"I assume you're talking about us."

"Have we encountered?" I tap my lip. "I'm not sure that we have."

"Every single time our eyes met, sweetheart."

I lean forward. "Why now?"

"You asked me that a couple of weeks ago."

"And I'm asking again."

"You don't seem to be a choice for me." He runs his blunt finger over the stem of the glass. "We are every kind of bad idea there is...but I can't talk myself out of exploring the possibilities."

He reaches for the champagne bottle, his tattooed fingers gently grasping the neck. Unable to ignore the fluidity of his movements, I watch him pour the golden liquid into our flutes, the bubbles rising and dancing.

"Salute," I murmur as we raise our glasses, clinking them together.

"Salute," he echoes, his eyes never leaving mine.

"You can have almost anything you want...why are you interested in spending time with a geeky mathlete?" I shift in my seat. "What you saw the other day is the real me. This glammed-up version only happens when I'm trying to distract the people I play cards with."

"For the record...I like the woman in jeans and no makeup." He leans back, his broad shoulders spilling past the chair. "Why does gravity work the way it does? The moon pulls the ocean, and you do the same thing to me."

I watch him take my hand. “What are you—”

“You make me want to break every rule I hold sacred.” His grasp tightens. “I want to open you like a book and read every goddamn page until I have you memorized.”

“Why?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

“Because then you will always be a part of me.”

His words catch me off guard, and I swallow hard, feeling the weight of our connection. “Don’t say things like that,” I whisper.

“Why?”

“Because this is all we’ll ever have.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” He lifts his glass. “But we’ll start with tonight.”

He pushes a plate filled with canapes forward, and I choose a small shrimp roll and feel exactly like I’m the one being pulled. Everything he does draws me closer, making me never want to let go. A picture of us sitting on the kitchen counter, laughing skitters across my mind. “You are dangerous to my well-being.”

“I doubt it.” He tilts his head. “Whatever our souls are made of, yours and mine are the same.”

“Emily Bronte?”

“Yes.”

“Should I ask how you came to quote the author of *Wuthering Heights*?”

“My cousin. She loved it and repeated passages until my ears bled.”

“Lucky you.”

“Yeah... I might be.”

I breathe deeply and tell myself I’m not falling for him. “So—”

“When you’re not taking money from unsuspecting strangers, how do you fill your time?”

“I think the other players know what to expect by now.”

“Hobbies, interests, something you enjoy.”

“Documentaries, hot yoga, books and quiet.”

“Introvert?”

“Yes. But an extrovert when I have to be.”

“Same.”

“How is that possible? You interact with people all day?”

“The family business doesn’t really take into account personality types.”

“That’s a shame.”

“It’s life.”

“I want to ask you more, but know that the topic of work is off-limits, so tell me something you enjoy that doesn’t involve the disposition of your enemies.”

“Luckily, I never had to be a cleaner, so the details of what happens after the disagreement is resolved isn’t something I have to worry about.”

“That doesn’t tell me how you fill your time outside the resort.”

“This place has held me captive since I took on my responsibilities, so my answer will bore the hell out of you. I only made it to one Sox game, and if that isn’t a tragedy, then I don’t know what is.”

“Sports fan. That’s to be expected.” I sip my champagne and then choose a small mushroom cap from the plate. “What else?”

“I know a shit ton about the Housewives of Hell franchise.”

“What?”

“Miami. I’m practically an expert.”

“And how did you find yourself in possession of this alleged encyclopedic knowledge?”

“There is no alleged. It’s straight facts.” He pops a piece of cheese into his mouth. “My cousin is a massive fan, and I was her bodyguard for eight years, so it was unavoidable.”

“Your cousin sounds like a close friend.”

“She is.”

I sense there is a great deal to the story and wonder if I’ll ever hear the first chapter.

He tips his chin toward the plates. “Try the arancini. The chef is known for them.”

“I guess that means my nosy questions are finished.”

“You can ask all the questions you want...I just not be able to answer them.”

“If your life wasn’t predestined, what would you be doing?”

“That’s like asking a polar bear what they would do if they happened to be born in Miami.”

“So you’re going with the fate thing and telling me there was never another path?”

“Yeah.” He slides his hand across the table and links our fingers. “I’m fifth generation, and the odds of outrunning what’s tattooed on my DNA are lousy.” He drains the golden liquid in his glass. “This is always who I was going to become.”

“Fair enough.”

“My turn,” he begins, mischief dancing in his eyes. “When you played that game against Vargas, what was going through your mind?”

“Enzo! I exclaim, feigning shock at his question. “Are you implying that I did something other than use my incredible mathematical skills to outwit him?”

Smiling, his dimples deepen as he leans in closer. “Of course not. I just want to know your secrets since I’ve never seen anyone make the *Serpent* sweat like that.”

“I just played the hand I was dealt.” Running my finger over the stem of my glass, I look up. “I imagine you do the same thing in your line of work and make the most of whatever advantages present themselves.”

“I don’t wait for advantages and do whatever is necessary to defend what I hold dear.”

His words send a shiver down my spine. “Am I a threat to what you hold dear?”

“Unless you’ve got a secret plan in the works to take over the Cosa Nostra, I’m gonna say no.”

“All my free time is spent with Netflix, so scheming simply isn’t possible.”

“Good to know.”

“Enzo,” I breathe, feeling the weight of every move we make.

“Abby,” he whispers back, the warmth of his touch seeping into a place that has never been touched before. “It’s time to eat.”

“Alright.” The sound of a distant clock chimes, reminding me of the fleeting nature of our time together. I watch him lift off the covers of the dishes filling the table and let the incredible aroma of our meal distract me from the questions I want to ask.

The dimly lit room casts a warm glow over the table, creating an intimate atmosphere that feels like a sanctuary from the outside world. I pick up my fork, the cool metal glinting in the candlelight, and take a small bite of the branzino. “Wow.”

“It’s the most popular item on the menu.”

“Don’t tell my brother, but this could easily be added to my list of favorite dishes.”

“All your secrets are safe with me.” He grins, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “It’s your turn. Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

I smile, taking a moment to consider my response. “When I was a teenager, I used to sneak out of my window at night and stargaze. It made me feel like anything was possible and that my life wouldn’t always be confined to our corner of the city.”

“Freedom. It’s a seductive master.”

Our fingers brush against each other as we reach for our glasses, sending a jolt of electricity through me. In this place, we are not Abby, the woman who dared to cross Rodrigo Vargas, nor Enzo, the man entangled in the dangerous world of the Cosa Nostra.

We’re simply two people that are drawn together.

Enzo wipes his mouth and sits back. “Have you ever felt this kind of thing with anyone else?”

“Well...I was crazy about Cookie Monster when I was a kid. Took him with me wherever I went. Preschool, playground, my grandfather’s laundromats.” I look up. “If I didn’t have him in my grubby little hand, the world didn’t feel right, so to answer your question, yes, I have felt this before.”

He fights a smile. “I never thought I would want to kick Cookie’s ass, but I’m kinda jealous.”

“As anyone would be.”

“Just know I will happily hold your grubby hand and make the world feel safe whenever you want.”

“Don’t cast a spell that you can’t deliver on,” I whisper, my heart pounding as our fingers intertwine.

“I want one night together,” he says softly, his eyes locked onto mine. “I don’t have a clear path forward, but that doesn’t mean I won’t eventually find one.”

“One night?” I ask quietly.

“For now.”

Silence envelops us as a thousand unspoken words pass between us in an instant.

“One night shouldn’t change our fates,” I say quietly.

“But it probably will,” he replies as he stands and pulls me into his arms.

He tips my chin and stares at my mouth like it’s an apple he can’t wait to take a bite of. The heat of his body burns right through my clothes, and he kisses me softly, making my resolve vanish faster than two fingers snapping.

Gentle but firm. Slow but dominant. His hands feel rough, but the way he kisses is light and airy. He tastes like the mysterious drug we’ve all been warned about.

“I knew it,” he mumbles against my mouth.

Pulling away, I look down, surprised my bones aren’t lying in pieces on the ground. “A kiss like that is hard to deny.”

“Yeah...it sure the hell is.”

“What should we do, Enzo?”

“I know what I want, but it’s up to you.”

He runs his finger over my cheek, and all my suspicions are confirmed. This man is going to break my heart into a million pieces. “I want you.”

I ignore every alarm ringing and feel one hand slide into my hair as he takes my mouth in a punishing kiss.

Feasting on one another, I feel like this is the first real kiss of my life.

Whatever I did before isn’t in league with what’s happening.

Muttered words in Italian drag me out of my dreamlike state as he slides his mouth down my neck. His lips dance along my jawline, down to the hollow of my throat, and I don’t bother pretending this isn’t what I’ve wanted all along.

We sway together, our bodies pressed close, hearts pounding in unison. “Enzo,” I whisper, my voice barely audible above the soft music playing in the dimly lit room.

He lifts his head and holds my gaze. “Give me a yes,” he demands, his voice rough with desire.

“Yes,” I reply, my own conviction surprising me.

With a nod, he leans in, his mouth claiming mine once more. This time, there is no hesitation, no uncertainty – just an all-consuming need that ignites like wildfire.

There isn't one thing I would refuse this man...even if it means he'll be the owner of my heart.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Enzo

I open my mouth to say something but find that all my words have disappeared. Abby's dress is in my fist, and my fingers are on her impossibly soft skin.

My blood turns to fire in my veins as our mouths meet and our tongues tangle. Grasping her head in my hands, I close my eyes and give in to the desire that's plagued me.

From the moment she crossed my path, a primal need has been building, and the small surprised sound of pleasure rumbling in the back of her throat lets me know she might've been having a few thoughts as well.

Melting against me, she pulls me closer as restless energy bounces between us.

"We're just satisfying our curiosity," she mumbles against my mouth.

"It's a hell of a lot more than that," I growl against her neck. "I'm going to own you."

"That's not possible."

Her cheek is hot against mine, and listing reasons one through a thousand why there will never be an us is a waste of precious time.

"One time. No strings."

I pull my head back, and we stare into one another eyes. My jaw ticks. No one sets terms with me. "I've got a fucking rope, so I don't care about your stupid strings." I slide one finger past the lace trim and work my way inside her pussy.

She grips my arms as I add another finger, allowing me to feel just how perfect she really is. Compressing her clit, she rolls her hips into my palm. "And I'm gonna make sure we're

bound together.” I slide my finger out, sink to my knees, and push her dress up her bare thighs.

Putting my face between her legs, I inhale deeply. Heaven. I have finally fucking arrived.

A hungry sound rumbles from my chest before I open my mouth and nip her through her panties.

“Enzo!”

I look up and hold her gaze, slowly rubbing my jaw along her inner thigh. My stubble scrapes her skin, and I feel like a king marking her.

I don’t know what kind of miracles I’ll have to pull off to make this woman mine, but I vow to find a way.

“You must be Hades,” she says breathlessly.

“It’s nice to meet you.” I lick her skin and feel a full shiver rack her body. “Spread your legs,” I command as I run the tip of my nose across the damp lace. She draws in a hard breath as I suck her throbbing clit through her panties.

She sways, and I stand in a lightning-fast move and drag her against his chest.

Kissing her ferociously, I cup my head with one hand and use the other to caress her breast.

Stroking, pinching, I’m tuning her up like an instrument. “Clothes. Off.”

“Yes, you should be naked.”

Laughing, I slide her dress over her head and feel like I’ve taken a bullet to a chest. Curves. Gorgeous Botticelli curves. This woman is a fucking feast.

“Enzo—”

“Sssh.” I press my finger to her lip. “I’m admiring you.” I drag my finger over her padded hip and feel every cell in my body respond. “Your body is calligraphy...each line swoops into the next, and it needs to be worshipped.”

Her cheeks bloom pink, and I see her eyes close. Soft emotions are not my forte, so I carefully lift her into my arms and lay her on the bed. “If I was a poet, I could drown you in beautiful words.” I get rid of my clothes and hear her gasp. “But I’m a man of action.”

Trailing her fingertips over my arm, she shudders. “How are you so ridiculously beautiful?”

“Sweetheart, you have me beat by miles and miles.” I cup her breast, feeling her crashing heartbeat beneath it. “You are perfect.”

I take a nipple into my mouth and hear her exhale. Feasting on her beautiful breasts, I lose a sense of time. Reality flickers, and all my focus goes to reading her signals. Harder. Softer. A bite here. A nip there. What combination will give her the most pleasure?

Straining, she moves closer, and I feel my cock press against my jockeys like it’s trying to break free. “Only me,” I rasp. “No one else.”

I graze her nipple with my teeth and feel her nails scrape down my chest.

“What are you doing to me?”

“Whatever the hell I want.”

“Then I’ll do the same.” A mischievous smile lights up her face, and I wonder if she is going to meet me beat for beat.

Her hand slides into my jockeys, and she quickly finds my cock. “Interesting move.”

“It will be,” she replies, licking her lips as her short nails trace its shape, rubbing against the ridge where the head meets my shaft. Colors I didn’t know existed color my vision.

Relentlessly, she traces every inch. Back and forth. Down the shaft. Up the head until I’m throbbing. “I’ll be the one conducting the overture.” I slide away from her demonic fingers and take a long breath when my body protests.

Rising on her elbows, she watches me move down her body, and I notice the brightest bits of green in her eyes glint

like glass. “This is the part where we get familiar with one another and set up the drama for the next act.”

“That’s what I was doing?” Her full mouth forms a pout. “Until I was rudely interrupted.”

Laughing, I pull her ass toward the end of the bed. “Tell me how you feel in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty—” She leans up on her elbows and stares.

“Maybe forty.” I move her panties aside and taste her. Salty, sweet perfection. I open her with my thumbs, making a V with my fingers, and slash my tongue against her nub. Heaven. Abby’s pussy is where I belong. I sink two fingers deep into her soft warmth and feel her slickness. Groaning, her eyes close as her head falls back.

Inhaling her scent, I slide my fingers slowly in and out, thinking how good she’ll feel wrapped around my cock. I lap at her sweetness and let it dissolve against my tongue. Her delicate interior pulses with each stroke, and I know I am one step closer to becoming the center of her world.

I ease up and slow the pace. Her moans get needier, and I play with her a little bit. Letting her know I’m the one conducting the orchestra.

Her grip on my shoulders tightens, and her nails dig into my skin. Reaching up, I put my hand on her chest and push her firmly against the bed.

“Enzo!”

I part her legs, pressing my tongue to her opening.

“Holy mother of—”

I dig in deeper, letting the soft flesh of her pussy get to know the grit of my stubble. Sliding my fingers in, I find her G-spot. “Bullseye.” Her body responds powerfully, making her hips pop.

“Ride my fingers, Abby.”

She does as she’s told, and I know we’re matched perfectly.

This woman gets me.

She may be strong as steel, but in this moment, she's doing as she's told and giving me something incredibly invaluable. I play her pussy like I would an instrument. Time the tempo of my fingers to the thrusts of my tongue.

Higher. Each thrust gets her closer. My fingers make wet, sloppy sounds as I pump in and out, and my cock threatens to tear my jockeys. "Come for me, sweetheart."

She rides the edge, her jaw clenched and lets herself go.

"That's how an opening act should close." Crawling up her body, I take her mouth in a demanding kiss.

I want her to taste herself. So she knows what I'm addicted to.

Nose to nose, her eyes meet mine. Her ethereal green eyes blaze, and I know instantly there are few sins I won't commit to make a permanent place for her in my life.

"Don't smolder. I'm already under your spell."

"Prove it."

She leans up and kisses me, making me wonder if my soul is about to leave my body. Not one to be outdone, I bite her lower lip between my teeth. Then, do it again because I like how it makes her shiver.

Shifting closer, my cock jumps, and there's no way to miss the message he wants in on the action.

Pulling away, Abby smiles and then moves down my body. She tugs off my jockeys, and I hear a hum of approval right before she mouths the head, sucking it softly like a popsicle. The warmth of her mouth makes me feel like I'm melting against her tongue. She massages under the head of my cock, licking and lapping.

I never thought I would glimpse heaven, but what she's doing with her mouth proves I was wrong. Sliding her hand down hard until it catches under the head, I see stars. Then she squeezes it tight and pulls until my cock points straight up.

Every drop of blood rushes south when her other hand cups my balls.

Fuck.

This woman.

Sealing her mouth around my cock, she moves her hand up and down the shaft while moving my balls from hand to hand. I feel like I'm strapped to a rocket, and she's the one who is about to light the fuse. She slides me deeper into her mouth and swallows when I hit the back of her throat.

I'm ready to worship at her altar. Each bob of her head makes me harder. My hips move of their volition as I fuck her mouth. Kneeling between my legs, her head bobs in rhythm to her hands.

Control is an illusion. Abby owns me. She pumps me ruthlessly and looks me in the eye, daring me to blow. I spurt into her mouth, hot and molten. Locking her lips around the head, she sucks until all I can see are black sparks, and my brain explodes into a million points of pleasure.

I pull her down on my lap, driving my still hard cock into her welcoming heat. Thrusting upward, I discover her pussy is as wet and tight as I imagined. I run my hands down her back, wanting to make her a part of me. "Ride me, woman. Take what you need."

I grip her hips, pulling her down harder.

Abby does as I ask, gasping and panting, her eyes unfocused. We're more than two bodies chasing a release. We're two souls connecting. Me inside her, and she inside me.

I fist her curls in my hand and pull her head back so I can feast on her neck. "Come for me again."

The effect is instant. Her back arches. Hips thrust forward. Her pussy grips me like a vise.

"So beautiful."

She lets out a long cry with my cock buried deep inside her and gives into her release. I join her and watch her fall

backward. “So fucking perfect.” Panting, I press my thumb against her clit and watch her pussy twitch around my cock.

“I can’t take more.” Her hand swats me away, and I let out a low laugh. My cock is still halfway hard inside her, and I pull her against my chest and hold her tightly. “Mine.”

“In this moment, I am fully yours.”

Ignoring the qualification she put on my statement, I pull her close and kiss her head.

I always get what I want.

And this woman isn’t going to be the exception to the rule.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Abby

The dim lighting of Enzo's suite casts a warm glow over the bed, and I blink twice as I rouse myself from the dreamlike state I've fallen into.

"Don't move."

"Ever?" I feel his grasp tighten. One hand is on my breast, and the other is on my stomach. "Because that could be problematic."

"Shhhshhh." He pulls me tighter. "Everything is perfect. We don't want to disturb it."

A concept I understand completely, given that I used to hold my breath as a child when I didn't want anything to change.

And right now, that's exactly what I want...to remain in this bubble.

Connecting with Enzo was more than our two bodies fitting together... it was our souls. At least, that's what it felt like for me.

Do I dare allow myself to take another hit of the magic, or is it better to run? I wiggle a little to test his resolve. "Do you plan on keeping me prisoner?"

"No." He turns me in one easy move, and we lie face to face. "But we're just getting started."

I trace the intricate tattoo pattern on his chest. "I don't—"

"I get that your big brain is telling you the magic we just experienced isn't real, but it is."

I look up and feel pulled into the vortex of his gaze. "Don't make this hard, Enzo."

“I’m sure as hell not going to make it easy.”

He trails his finger slowly over my face, and I can’t stop a sigh from escaping. “Why do you want me to fall in love with you when you can never offer more than what we have right now?”

Pressing his mouth against mine, he kisses me mercilessly. As though his determination alone can change the reality of our situation.

“I can give you a thousand words...or remind you why there will never be another.” He pushes himself to his knees and grasps his cock. “Let me take you to the place only I can.”

He gives himself several strokes, and every smart decision I was going to make flies out the window. Nodding, I let my knees fall open and tell myself my fate isn’t sealed.

Using my wetness to lube up, he pushes into me a half-inch at a time. Gasping, I’m surprised by how enormous he feels in this position. “Go slow.”

“I got you,” he growls as he presses in another inch. “You are ball-busting tight, so if I pass out, promise you’ll revive me.”

“Always,” I mutter, gripping the sheets in my hand. He moves my knees to his shoulder and then kisses my calf. “Why does this feel so good?”

“Because we’re meant for one another.”

He drives into me, and I lose myself as his strokes hit the magic spot inside my body. “What are you doing to me?”

“Making sure you can’t think of anything except getting my cock inside you.”

He doubles down, making me think he’s taking this thing seriously.

“You ready to admit you’re mine?”

“Uuuh—” He does something with his hips that makes white pricks of light fill my vision. His pelvis grinds against

mine as he fucks me harder and deeper and with more confidence than any man ever has.

The universe shivers, and my body begins to shake. “Enzo, have mercy.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. No can do.” He smiles like the devil. “Give me what’s mine.”

Emotions roll over me, quick and sudden, and I feel like my heart is flying outside my body as I dissolve.

“Let go, Abby.” He drives into me again and unleashes even more. My hands slide off his arms, and he drops his head, pressing our foreheads together. “I will always catch you.”

I close my eyes and disappear into the pleasure blackout, knowing my fate is no longer in my hands.

Two hours later, I check the clock and know I should find my way home.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Enzo says as he hands me a pack of cards. “You promised to teach me some tricks.”

I mindlessly shuffle the deck and tell myself another hour won’t make a difference. My fingers move smoothly, showing off years of practice.

Enzo watches me intently. “You’ve got my full attention,” he says, his voice deep and smooth like the whiskey he’s drinking.

“Really?” I close the robe I’m wearing. “Because my eyes are up here.”

“It’s bad manners to ignore world-class art.”

My face heats with the compliment. “You don’t—”

“I’ve seen most of the world’s masterpieces, and you can’t argue with me.” His smile is playful, so I return my focus to the cards and vow to learn how to take a compliment. “We’ll start with something simple.”

I demonstrate a basic card trick, making a random card seemingly disappear and reappear at will. Enzo's eyes narrow as he tries to figure it out.

"Damn," he breathes. "How did you do that?"

"Trade secret," I wink, privately loving that he's impressed. "Alright," I say, suppressing a smile. "I'll teach you how it's done." As I walk him through the trick, I watch him fumble and think of how his strong hands made me feel worshipped.

Duality. This man has it in spades. Despite his power and influence, he is willing to learn from me.

"Your hands are the first thing I noticed about you."

"That's surprising." He passes the deck of cards back. "Most people comment on my tattoos or eyes."

"Hands tell a story like nothing else can." I mindlessly reshuffle the cards. "Yours are strong. Nicked with scars. But well kept. Brutal. Unforgiving. Fair. That's what your hands tell me."

He takes my hand and lays it inside his. "Powerful. Kind. Patient only when absolutely necessary."

Surprised by the generous description, I close my eyes, wondering if there's any way I can walk away from this encounter with my heart intact.

"You're not the only one who can read the players at the table."

"Yeah...I'm starting to get that."

"Succeeding in the family business requires me to be able to predict someone's move five minutes before it happens." He pulls my folded legs apart, wraps them around his waist, and tugs me close. "What's your next move going to be, Sharky?"

I trace the face tattoo across his abs. "I don't know yet."

"That's the right answer."

"Why?"

“Because it tells me you care what happens, and this isn’t some bullshit fuck.”

“Love the poetic way you described the last couple of hours we spent together.” He tips my chin, and I blink at what I see in his gaze.

“Words don’t exist for what we just did.”

The soft glow of lamplight washes over the bed, and for a split second, I get a glimpse of a future that is impossible. “Let’s try the double lift.”

I demonstrate the technique, deftly lifting two cards as one, revealing the card beneath. “The key is to make it look seamless as if you’re only handling a single card.”

“Seamless, huh?” Enzo muses, his deep voice sending shivers down my spine. “Let me give it a try.”

He attempts the double lift, his large fingers fumbling slightly as the cards slip apart. His brow furrows in concentration, and I can’t help but smile at his determination.

“Remember,” I guide him gently, “it’s all in the grip. Hold the cards firmly, but not too tight. Let them glide between your fingers.”

He nods, taking my advice. The cards move more fluidly, and his movements become more confident. “Maybe I should consider a career change,” Enzo jokes, flashing me a megawatt smile that leaves me breathless.

“My grandfather taught me everything I know.” A wave of nostalgia washes over me. “Not just poker, but about life. How to read people, when to take risks, and most importantly, when to walk away.” The soft flicker of candlelight casts shadows on Enzo’s handsome face. “He believed poker reflected life— full of risks, challenges, and unexpected twists. He used to say that you could learn a lot about a person by the way they played their cards.”

“What about your parents? Did they teach you anything?”

I study my hands. “My father died when I was three. He was in the Navy and killed in the line of duty. My mom...got

over it by getting a job with a cruise line and sailing the high seas.”

“Damn.” He pulls me closer. “No wonder you talk about your grandparents with so much affection.”

“Mom didn’t like life in the North End and told us constantly to stay away from anyone in the *famiglia*.”

“And what did she know about the Cosa Nostra?”

“My brother and I think Nonno laundered money for your relatives through the laundromats.” I look up. “And we have recently come up with a theory that Mom’s vitriol resulted from a broken heart and not some moral high ground.”

“No shit?”

“We could be all wrong. Unfortunately, Nonno’s memory is spotty, so we can’t confirm whether we’re on track.” His gaze meets mine, and the intensity of the emotions swirling beneath the surface takes my breath away. “Anyway...this was the perfect send-off, Enzo. Thank you.”

“Maybe you should put Veagas on hold.” He takes my hand. “We can see what develops.”

I slide my hand away and gather up the cards, knowing there isn’t a future. “Sin City is calling. All the arrangements have been made.”

He takes the cards out of my hands. “There’s no reason to shut the door, Abby.”

The dimly lit suite makes the shadows dance around us like phantom spectators, and I know if they could speak, they would tell me to make a clean break. “There is no door.”

“I could make one.”

“And go against your family?” I shake my head and slide off the bed, tying my robe tighter. The air between us hangs heavy with the weight of unspoken feelings.

“Abby,” he murmurs quietly, the sound barely audible above the gentle hum of the suite’s air conditioning.

“Enzo,” I reply, my voice equally hushed, as if anything louder would shatter what we shared earlier. “Thank you,” I whisper, each syllable laced with longing for something impossible. “For everything.”

His lips curve into a small smile, and I’m struck by the realization that beneath the veneer of the mafioso lies a man wanting some of the same things I do.

I take a step back and drag in a long breath, filling my lungs with his scent. I want to have the memory of sandalwood and spice etched into my memory so that whenever I smell it, I can be transported back to the time we shared.

“I’m going to change and then head out.” I gather my clothes and spin toward the bathroom, knowing that drawing things out will only make the final goodbye that much more difficult.

Some people don’t get a minute of happiness, and I was just afforded a whole night, so I absolutely can’t be sad.

The bathroom door snicks closed behind me, and I remind myself to be grateful for the glimpse of heaven I was given.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Enzo

Everything is the same. And there isn't one thing left unchanged. I'm not sure what I expected after owning every intimate part of Abby, but the whiplash I'm feeling sure as hell wasn't on the list.

How can a handful of hours make me want to upend my life?

Scraping my hand over my jaw, I contemplate adding a tattoo to my collection. I've already got enough to tell a story as colorful as the cast of characters from an Italian opera, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't add one more.

Unfortunately, I have no idea what the perfect piece would be to commemorate the experience I just had.

Rolling my shoulders, I put the idea aside and enter the lobby, seeing my cousin. "Gianna!" I hug her and see the Bratva's avtoriteti standing off to the side. "What are you doing here?"

"Donuts." She rubs her very pregnant belly. "The apple crumble is the only thing that will make me happy."

Yuri tips his chin, and I'm guessing that's sign language for beware. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I have a bowling ball pushing all my organs out of the way while a WWE fight plays out on top of my bladder."

"Sounds like fun." I look around. "Where is Alexey?"

"He's in the food court, buying out Dunkin'." She pushes her hair back. "He told me he was the only one who could pick the best ones, but I know he needs a break because I've been cranky, weepy, fussy, and generally horrible to be around."

“I’m sure that’s not—” Her hand goes up. “Is it worse than when you have the flu?”

Nodding, she bites her bottom lip. “By about a million percent.”

“At least you’re almost there.”

“The princess is already four days past her due date.”

“Five,” Yuri corrects.

“See.” Gianna waves her hand. “I’m a nightmare.”

“You’re growing another human. You can be whatever you want.” I take her hand and lead her over to a sofa. “Do you want to sit down?”

“If I do that, I won’t be able to get up.”

I think about what Abby said about her grandfather and wonder if it might be the perfect thing to distract Gianna. “Do you feel like helping me out with a project?”

“Sure.” She moves closer. “I need something else to think about.”

“I might have the perfect thing.”

Her eyes light with interest. “Is it about Abby Mercer?”

“Geeze, how do you do that?”

“Magic powers.” She hits me in the arm. “I can still read your mind even if we don’t spend all our time together anymore.”

“Good to know.” I lean in. “Abby said something last night about her Nonno possibly being associated with us?”

“Really.” She grips my arm. “If that’s true, it would make things much easier for you.”

“No shit.” I shake my head. “She and her brother think the family’s laundromats were fronts for money laundering.”

She taps her lips. “None of that business is recorded anywhere, so I’ll ask Luna. She knows every woman in the five families and can get answers much faster than I can.”

“Are we talking about old-fashioned gossip?”

“Men share information, and it’s called gathering intel. Women do the same thing, and it’s called gossip. The Patriarchy always tries to keep women down by diminishing our talents and skills, hoping it will distract us long enough to forget that we have more brain cells and can multi-task efficiently.”

“You’re right.”

“I know.” She looks past my shoulder. “Here comes my darling husband.”

I turn and see the ruthless leader of the Volkov syndicate rush toward us with two large white bags. “Did you leave any?”

“Of course not.” He hands one bag to Gianna. “I want my girls to have the very best.”

“I love you, Alexey.”

“And I adore you.” He nods to me. “I better take her home so she can enjoy her treat peacefully.”

“Good idea.” I hug Gianna. “Let me know if you have any luck with the project.”

“Absolutely. I will call you tonight.”

“Thanks, cousin.” I watch the Vor guide his wife toward the doors and hope the baby that will cement the alliance makes her debut soon. Feeling more grounded, I refocus on my responsibilities and stride toward the bustling casino’s main floor. The sound of slot machines clinking assaults my ears, reminding me the reels spin into motion the second someone pulls the lever.

Which is what Abby and I did last night.

We pressed a button and ignited a chain of events that will be impossible to forget.

Bells ring, lights flash, and a cascade of coins fill the payout tray of a happy client as I pass, making me vow to find a way to make a jackpot possible for both of us.

Nico stands near the staircase leading to the high-stakes poker rooms, and I join him. “Is everything under control?”

“I don’t know,” he rocks back on his heels, “anything you want to share?”

“No, so just say whatever is on your mind.”

“Word is going around that a certain card shark was taken home at four in the morning in a resort limo.”

“If people have nothing better to do than gossip, I want you to send them to me.”

“Got it.”

“You shut that shit down immediately. My life isn’t up for speculation.”

“I’ll handle it.” He glances over, opens his mouth, and then shuts it. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. I don’t need a therapist.”

“Guess that means it didn’t go so well.”

“Fuck you, Nico.” I turn, my anger sparking like a wildfire. “This isn’t up for discussion.”

“Oh.” He smooths out his tie. “Good for you.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“This is a useless conversation.” I straighten my tie. The last thing I’m gonna discuss is the shit rolling around in my chest. “Are all the VIP’s taken care of?”

“Yeah. Councilman Reynolds asked for an increase on his credit line, and I gave it to him.”

“That was the right choice since he oversees the city’s commercial water allocation.”

“He reminded me of that when he made the request.”

“Ballsy move.” I study the players filling the table. “If he asks for another increase, tell him he has to speak with me.”

“You want to impress upon him how we feel about people who can’t play responsibly?”

“Absolutely, because I don’t want to be the one to collect when he gets in too deep and can’t pay us back.”

“Got it.”

We climb the stairs and stand at the doorway of one of the high-stakes rooms. I study the players filling the tables – Wall Street hotshots, tech geniuses, and a washed-up rockstar occupy the table near us. If Abby was playing, she would give them an education in humility *and* take them for every last chip they flip through their sweaty hands.

Not that she’ll be around to serve up those lessons since she made it clear she won’t be talked out of Vegas.

A place I’ve never stepped foot in. It’s ruled by the Camorra, and given that the last cease-fire ended in a blood bath, Nevada will never be in my travel plans.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out, praying Abby has changed her mind about staying in town. I see a text from my brother instead. “Fuck.”

“What is it?” Nico asks, tearing his eyes away from the tables.

“Franco needs me on a thing.” I flip him the keys to my office. “I may not be back tonight.”

“I got it handled.”

“Call if something happens.” I stride away, wondering what the cryptic message means. If I’m lucky, it’s about Vargas and shutting him up for good.

The dimly lit warehouse we are standing in is filled with enough crates to make a hoarder break into applause. “The cartels are shitty businessmen.”

“And not just because they welcome anyone who applies,” Franco replies quietly.

I study the man in the chair. “This guy has intel on the Cartels?”

“Sure does,” A deep voice replies.

I recognize Maxsim’s lightly accented voice. Why the hell is the second in command of the Volkov Syndicate making a guest appearance? “Did you put this party together?”

“I heard you were hunting for Vargas.” Maxsim tips his chin toward the man, who looks like a rat cornered by three ravenous cats. “This one is gonna give you everything you need.”

“Perhaps this alliance will finally net something other than dead bodies to dispose of,” Franco bites out.

“The Don riled up the Cartels. We just showed them what happens when they step foot in our territory and play shoot ‘em up in the streets.”

I clear my throat before my brother and Maxsim begin their favorite argument about who started what. “Why is this guy gonna give up Vargas?”

“Because he’s heard what a sick bastard I am.” Maxsim straightens the pristine cuff on his shirt. “Our avtoriteti picked up chatter that Rodrigo has a hard-on for your card girl, and... Ari.”

Franco surges forward. “How the hell does he know anything about Ari?”

“Hell, if I know,” Maxsim says quietly. “Which means that it’s time to get rid of the snake once and for all.”

“The *Serpent* knows all the beautiful women in the city.”

Maxsim strides across the floor and squeezes the man by his neck until his beady eyes dart between my brother and me.

“Where does the bastard hide?” Maxsim demands. “The sooner you tell me, the faster you’ll die.”

“Why is he so invested?” I ask out of the side of my mouth.”

“I have no fucking clue,” Franco replies. “But after we’re done here, I’m gonna find out.”

Sweat trickles down the man’s forehead like a leaky faucet. “Loft. South Side. Cookie factory.

“I’m a lot of things,” Maxsim says quietly, shoving a Glock into the man’s chest, “but I keep my word.” He pulls the trigger, steps back, and allows the man to crumple to the ground. “I assume you will run down the information.”

Franco hands him a handkerchief. “Are you gonna tell me why you care about Vargas?”

“Old score. Needs to be settled.”

“There’s more,” Franco says quietly.

“There always is.” He strides out of the warehouse, and I turn to Franco. “What the hell just happened?”

“Either the Volkovs are keeping something to themselves, or Maxsim is interested in Ari.”

I follow my brother to the warehouse door, and the sun hits my eyes the moment we step outside. “Ari insults him whenever they are within a few feet of one another. Why would he want anything to do with our tempestuous sister?”

“Some people like trouble. Ari and Maxsim have that in common.”

“Maxsim Volkov is barely human.”

Franco looks inside the building. “What he just did was humane. He could’ve made that man bleed for hours before putting him out of his misery.”

“True.” I slide my sunglasses on. “I’m assuming you’re gonna let me handle Vargas.”

“You’re the one he insulted, so you get first right of refusal.”

Franco takes his phone out and sends a text. “You want to tell me what’s happening between you and the card shark?”

“Nothing to tell.”

“Don’t lie to me, brother.” He pins me with a hard gaze. “I can’t handle shit if I don’t know about it.”

“We can talk about it later. Let’s run down Rodrigo and handle the situation.”

“Andre isn’t gonna give his blessing for a marriage to a woman outside the family.”

I nod and open my car door, praying that it won’t be an issue for us. “Let’s focus on Vargas and leave the discussion of marriage for another day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Abby

I feel like one big squishy Valentine heart with stars floating in my eyes. Is it possible that I have become a cliché?

One night of sex, and I'm already buying myself a ticket on the love boat. Enzo is the captain, and I'm about to sail off like a sap, hoping there's some kind of happy ever after in my future.

Jeez, I'm a mess.

Not that I will let it last long.

I'm about to get my groove back and play a few hands before leaving for Vegas. The heavy double doors part before me, and I stride into the private club I haven't been to in a year. My pulse pounds. "I can do this," I quietly remind myself, scanning the room for an enticing poker game.

The room is like many of the other high-end clubs. Rich, deep hues of gold and burgundy drape the walls, while crystal chandeliers cast a warm, honeyed light over the room. The air is thick with the scent of Cuban cigars and the low hum of murmured conversation.

"Abby Mercer," a smooth voice purrs from my left. "It's been too long."

"Francis," I acknowledge him with a slight nod, refusing to be pulled into a conversation. The man is a notorious gossip, and the last thing I need is to be sucked into a black hole of tall tales. "I'm going to find a game."

"Of course," he replies, his eyes sweeping over me as if trying to discern a hidden secret he can twitter about. "The table to the left is running hot."

"Thanks," I tip my chin and walk away before he can say more. I approach a table near the center of the room and see a

few familiar faces as I slide into an empty seat.

Accepting the cards the dealer slides my way, I'm soon lost in the intricate dance of numbers and strategy. My mind whirls with calculations, and I feel like myself for the first time in twenty-four hours.

"Nice play," one of my opponents grumbles as I lay down my cards and claim the pot. Before I can enjoy my victory, the hair on my neck stands up.

I quickly scan the room. *Damn it.* The *Serpent's* piercing gaze is locked onto mine.

A shiver runs down my spine, but I maintain eye contact. Do I dare leave? Or will that fuel his desire to chase me?

Staying as still as possible despite the storm raging inside, I watch the dealer expertly flick cards across the green felt for the next game. I keep my expression neutral as I pick up the cards I've been dealt, my mind calculating the odds of making it out here in one piece.

"Raise," one player announces, stacking chips confidently onto the growing pile in the center of the table. The other players glance at their cards, then at each other, gauging reactions before making their moves.

"Call," another replies, meeting the raise without hesitation.

"Fold." Another player tosses his cards onto the table, letting them slide face-down across the smooth surface.

"Raise," I say, pushing my stack of chips forward. My pulse quickens as the other players size me up, trying to determine whether I'm bluffing or holding a winning hand.

"Call." It's the first player again, his eyes never leaving mine as he matches my raise.

"Fold," the remaining player murmurs, tossing his cards onto the table with a sigh.

The dealer reveals the next card. The numbers align perfectly in my mind, confirming that my calculations were correct. Not that I give a flying fig.

I just want to avoid another confrontation with Rodrigo. “Check,” I announce quietly.

“Bet,” my opponent counters, his voice smug as he piles more chips into the pot.

“Call,” I reply calmly, meeting his bet and raising the stakes even higher.

“Showdown,” the dealer declares, flipping over the final card. As we reveal our hands, the room seems to hold its breath, and I watch my opponent’s face fall.

“Full house,” I announce, laying down my cards for all to see. “Queens over sevens.”

An icy shiver creeps down my spine as Rodrigo stalks across the room and sits across the table.

The sound of shuffled cards and hushed conversations play in the background as I scoop up the chips.

“Deal me in,” he commands, his voice low and dangerous.

“Of course,” the dealer replies, quickly shuffling the deck and dealing the cards to each player.

What kind of distraction can I create?

The last thing I want to do is sit across from this man. I force myself to focus on the game but find Rodrigo’s presence overwhelming. The tension between us crackles like electricity, threatening to ignite at any moment. I glance briefly at my hand, willing my mind to calculate the odds and probabilities. Perhaps I can run up the pot and then lose so he can have the satisfaction of beating me. “Bet,” I say, pushing a stack of chips into the center of the table, trying to appear nonchalant.

“Call,” Rodrigo responds, matching my bet without hesitation. His eyes bore into mine, daring me to make a move.

The other players fold one by one, leaving just Rodrigo and me. As the dealer reveals the flop, I can feel my concentration slipping. My heart pounds in my ears, drowning

out the logical part of my brain that usually guides me through these situations.

“Check,” I mutter, hoping that playing in reverse will give this man what he desires.

“Raise,” Rodrigo smirks, tossing more chips into the pot.

“Call,” I reply, silently berating myself for staying when I should have left the moment I saw him.

“Fold,” I declare when the next card is revealed, conceding the hand. Rodrigo rakes in the pot with a grim smile. “Congratulations,” I say, forcing a smile.

“Thank you,” he replies. “But the night is young, and there’s more to play for than just money.”

I swallow hard, knowing every move and decision could determine not only my fate but those of the people I care about.

The glare from the crystal chandeliers stings my eyes as I push back from the table, the scrape of the chair against the floor barely audible over the din of the club. Rodrigo’s henchmen materialize like shadows. My pulse quickens, and a bead of sweat trickles down my temple.

“Leaving so soon?” Rodrigo’s voice is low and menacing.

“Seems like a good time to cash in.” My heart races as I assess the situation, searching for an escape route. The men smirk, their bulky frames barring the door like a solid wall.

“Tell me, Abby,” Rodrigo drawls, standing abruptly, “how is it that you win so easily?”

I laugh, desperation biting at the edges of my voice. “I just lost a hundred thousand, so it’s clear that I don’t win all the time.”

He moves within inches of me, his breath hot against my cheek. “Perhaps you threw the game so I wouldn’t discover how you cheat the system.”

“There’s no system to cheat,” I reply as my hands tremble. “Some days you win, and some days you lose. I gesture to a

few chips I have left on the table. “It looks like it’s your night.”

“One more game?” Rodrigo’s lips twist into a cruel smile. “I’ll give you a chance to win it back.”

“Keep it.” I grab my purse and stride toward the door, praying he got whatever he wanted. Will the men let me pass, or is *The Serpent* so powerful that no one will stop him?

I force myself to maintain a façade of indifference as I pass the men. Before I reach the street, the larger of the two grabs my arm and plunges a syringe into it. The pain is sharp and sudden, followed by an icy chill that spreads rapidly through my veins.

“Wha—” I gasp, struggling to remain upright as the world spins around me. “What did you do?”

“Consider it a little insurance policy,” Rodrigo smirks as he joins the men. “You may be a skilled player, Abby, but I always hedge my bets.”

As darkness closes in, I hear him issue one last command to his minion. “Bring me, Ari Bianchi.”

My heart lurches in my chest, and I fight to stay conscious – to find a way out of this nightmare. But the darkness is relentless, pulling me under like a riptide, and I can do nothing but surrender.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Enzo

Blood drips onto the marble floor as Fausto stumbles through the doors, his breathing shallow and strained. The sharp scent of iron fills my nostrils as I rush to his side, supporting his weight to keep him from collapsing.

“Enzo,” he gasps, wincing with every word. “Ari... kidnapped. Rodrigo and the Cartels... they took Abby too.”

My heart stops at the mention of Ari and Abby. “What the fuck happened?” Anger slices through my chest as I help Fausto ease into a chair, his face pale and sweat-soaked.

“What the hell is going on?” Andre roars as he walks down the hall with Franco.

“Rodrigo’s taken Ari and Abby,” I announce, my voice calm despite the rage filling every cell in my body. My brain flickers, and I know I can not give in to the fear that wants to take over.

The two most important women in my life are in the hands of a monster.

Franco appears and grips Fausto’s arm. The man’s eyes are fluttering as he fights to remain conscious. “Tell us everything you know.”

With a deep breath, Fausto recounts the events leading up to Ari’s capture. As his words wash over me, I begin crafting the many ways I will make Rodrigo suffer. “Is there anything else you can tell us?” I ask, my voice thick with urgency.

His eyelids close. “Ari... her bracelet,” he rasps, his breaths shallow. “Tracker. Call my sister.”

My heart races. “There’s a tracker in Ari’s bracelet? You’re sure?”

He nods weakly and goes limp.

“Rest. We’ll take it from here.”

The family doctor rushes in, and soldiers lift Fausto and carry him down the hall. Franco paces with the phone jammed to his ear, and I wonder why Fausto’s sister has anything to do with a tracker.

“Carolina will be here in ten minutes,” Franco announces. “How did he talk Ari into a tracker?”

“What the hell happened the other night when you went looking for Rodrigo?” Andre asks as he types on his phone.

“Dry hole,” Franco answers.”

“Damn it.” Andre looks up. “Gianna is about to go into labor. I hope to God Carolina can help.”

My mind trips over itself as it attempts to make sense of the information. My beloved sister is in the hands of a sociopath, and the woman I’m falling for sits at the center of the shit show. And because God has a cruel sense of humor, my cousin is about to give birth to her first child.

Scraping my hands over my face, I do everything I can not to howl.

How did Rodrigo make himself useful enough to the Cartels so they would dare to cross us?

Before I can come up with an answer, a small figure strides into the house with soldiers trailing behind. “Carolina?”

“I’m sure not the Good Witch of the West.” She whips off the hood of her sweatshirt, and a cascade of curls falls down her back. “How is my brother?”

“He’ll live,” I respond tightly, taken aback by the glint of determination in her gaze. “Doc is stitching him up now.”

She lifts a laptop. “I heard you need my expertise.”

“We sure as hell do,” Andre responds as he walks back into the room. “I just got a call from Alexey, and he said Gianna is on standby and can answer any questions.”

“Your sister taught me everything I know,” Carolina announces as she looks around.

I exchanged looks with my brother and cousin. “Did she start a secret society of lady hackers?”

“We’re not a secret. No one bothers to pay attention to the homely ones, so we can get away with just about anything.”

“Really?” Andre asks in a low voice.

“Well...only the things that you would approve of.” Carolina smiles sweetly. “Because we’re good girls and never break the rules.”

“Basta!” He shouts. “You think living with my sister for twenty-five years would allow me to believe that?”

“Should I get to work, or—”

“Go!” Andre shouts.

Carolina steps sideways, the crepe soles of her boots squeaking across the marble floors. “I’ll be in the kitchen. I should have something in fifteen minutes.

We all watch the elfin woman stride down the hall. “Gianna strikes again.”

“My sister never stops striking,” Andre comments. “I wonder how many protégés she’s trained for her coven.”

“If we’re lucky, at least a half-dozen,” Franco replies, his eyes glued to his phone. “We’ve got men in position on the South side. They are awaiting instructions.”

The sound of a vehicle approaching makes me turn and look through the open front doors. A black SUV pulls up, and a tall, imposing figure steps out.

“What the hell is he doing here?”

Maxsim strides into the house, his ice-blue eyes scanning our grim faces. “Alexey told me about Ari and Abby.”

Andre and Franco remain silent as they glare at the second in command of the Volkov Syndicate.

“I have come to offer my assistance.”

Seconds tick by, and Andre finally nods. “Franco will give you instructions when we have a location.”

“Very good.”

He tips his head, and if I wasn't so fucking torn up about my sister and Abby being taken, I would be impressed. Maxsim makes ruthless men look like Girl Scouts and sociopaths appear like they could lead a mega-church. But here he is, in all his madman glory, willing to take orders to save Ari and Abby from the Cartels.

“I'm gonna check on Carolina.” My brother nods before returning his attention to his phone. He has contacts in all of the cities on the Eastern seaboard, and if I had to guess, I'd say he's working them all in hopes someone has something useful.

“Any progress?” I ask, entering the kitchen.

“Working on it,” Carolina mutters, tapping away furiously at her laptop. “Here,” she announces, pointing at the screen where a signal blinks faintly. “I've managed to narrow down the location to this warehouse district.”

Maxsim walks in, jaw clenched. “If you need help, I can call my brother. He's on a plane but reachable.”

“I don't need Grigory's help,” Carolina bites out as her eyes remain on the screen. “I can outmaneuver him any day of the week.”

“I doubt that,” Maxsim says quietly as he rolls his eyes.

Frustration gnaws on my bones like a rabid animal. Waiting for intel pulls me back into the past when Gianna was kidnapped by the Albanians. It took us five days to find her and two hours for me to find a way into the warehouse and pull her out of the cage she was being held in.

“Closer,” Carolina mutters.

My chest tightens as I hover over her shoulder, staring at the screen.

“Personal space,” Carolina snaps sharply.

“Apologies. I step back and wipe away visions of Ari and Abby in Rodrigo’s merciless grasp. Right now, I have to remain focused and not let rage make me ineffective when the time for reckoning comes.

“I’ve got it narrowed down to three buildings,” Carolina mutters, her expression grim.

“How did you manage to get this good and not let anyone know?”

“Easy,” she replies, her fingers flying over the keys. “No one pays attention to Fausto’s homely sister. I skip the parties and pretend like the men’s rejection is painful. Mama bought it and allows me to miss the *famiglia* gatherings.

Code scrolls across on the left side of the screen, and she looks up. “I took a page from Gianna’s playbook and copied her strategy.” She presses her finger against a large wart on her nose. “Prosthetics and all.”

“After we bury the Cartel members, we’ll have to get Andre to give you a job.”

“As long as I can work from home.” She leans forward. “Got it.” She types quickly. “Maps and addresses will be on your phones in a minute.” Leaning back, she sighs. “Do you think the Don will let me buy a fleet of drones? I need eyes in the sky to capture thermal images and monitor the family’s enemies. Hacking into the city’s camera feeds is so 2000. We’re better than that and can’t continue to command power and control unless we arm ourselves with the appropriate technology.”

“I’ll talk to him about it after we bring the women home.”

“Excellent.”

“You’re not blowing smoke. You are faster than Grigory,” Maxsim comments.

“I know...but he can get into places I have yet to crack.” She returns her attention to the screen. “I’ll monitor CCTV and feed you updates.”

“Time to go hunting.” I stride down the hall as my determination to save Ari and Abby becomes a living, breathing force.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Abby

The darkness that claimed me feels like a suffocating shroud, but I force my eyes open, noticing my body feels like it's made of lead.

"Abby, can you hear me?" A voice calls from somewhere nearby – a voice I recognize, though it seems distorted and distant. "Ar—" I try to respond, but my throat is parched, my voice barely a whisper.

"Shh, save your strength," she urges softly as I feel the warmth of her hand on mine. "Wh—where are we?" I manage to croak, struggling to take in our surroundings. Dimly lit, windowless room – a cell of some sort, perhaps.

"Cartel warehouse," Ari replies, her grip on my hand tightening. "And it's a dump." She sniffs. "I'm not one to pile bad news on top of a disaster, but we've been taken by the Walmart of criminals."

"I like Walmart," I mutter quietly.

"If we're talking about the ice cream selection, yes. But as far as the criminal underworld, no."

"Rodrigo," I murmur, pieces of the puzzle falling into place. The syringe, the chilling order to bring Ari to him... it all comes flooding back. "I get why Vargas kidnapped me, but why would he be interested in you?"

"Because Enzo insulted him, and this is his way of getting back." She checks her nails. "It's actually kind of surprising that it's taken this long to get snatched." Looking over, she frowns. "It's almost an insult and could make one think I wasn't worth the effort."

My brain actually stops. The things coming out of the woman's mouth make absolutely no sense. "Why are you so

calm?”

“Because this kind of thing is practically guaranteed when you’re the niece of the Capo di tutti capi.” She smiles. “This is gonna up my street cred and make everyone treat me with respect.”

I force myself into a sitting position despite the protest of my aching muscles. “You are a wild bird, Ari Bianchi.”

“I know. And I’m already compiling the list of demands I’ll make once this little snafu is over. Franco and Enzo will be eating out of my hand and won’t be able to say no for at least six months.”

I try to follow her logic but fail. “Happy for you and your impending golden ticket, but we need to find a way out of this room.”

“Unless you’ve got some superhuman strength to go with that brain of yours, that’s gonna be a little challenging.”

I survey the cell and see only one exit – a heavy steel door locked securely from the outside. “We’ll have to either get the guards on our side or take them out of commission.” I swallow slowly and feel like I’ve eaten the desert.”

“At least they left us with these.” She hands me a bottle of water. “Only drink half.”

“Why?” I twist off the cap and take two giant slugs. “Are we rationing?”

“We might need it for later.”

After I take another slug, I recap the bottle and study Enzo’s sister. “Are you medicated?”

“No!” She smoothes a curl away from my face. “Truth be told, I don’t have much to look forward to, so this bump in the road is a much needed distraction.”

“How is that possible?” I twist from side to side and watch a myriad of emotions cross her face.”

“Eventually, my brother will choose some high-ranking family member to marry me off to.” Looking down, she

frowns. "It will just be another cage with more rules and expectations."

"Geeze, Ari. That's awful."

"Thanks for saying that." She squeezes my hand. "If I complain, most people tell me I'm lucky to live in luxury and should be grateful."

"I doubt designer shoes and bags make up for a life that feels like a prison." I study the steel door. "I'd rather scrimp pennies and live with someone who makes the world feel like anything is possible."

"Same." She scrunches her nose. "Except, I'd be scrimping gold coins."

"Do you think we have a chance of having any kind of future?"

"Absolutely." Winking, she pulls her hair over her shoulder. "Lucky for us, I have the necessary tools." She leans closer. "The guard who brought me isn't the brightest bulb in the criminal pack and was so busy salivating that he didn't bother making me remove my jewelry." Sliding her ring around, she smiles like she's holding two aces. "Rookie."

"Is there any chance of the cavalry showing up?" I watch her twist a thin gold bracelet on her wrist and smile. I mouth the word, tracker and see her smile. "I could kiss you right now."

"Let's save that for when we need to distract the fools standing on the other side of the door."

I fold my shaking hands. "I wish I could be cool about this, but I don't think that's possible."

"That's to be expected. You haven't been trained for this sort of thing since age five."

"And you were?"

"Yes." She looks down. "Not that it worked for Gianna."

"Your cousin?"

“Yes.” She swallows, and I notice she looks a little less confident. “Albanians. No mercy.”

“She survived, though.”

“Thanks to Enzo. He discovered the basement where she was being held and freed her from the cage minutes before she went up on the auction block. Shot everyone in sight and then blew the place to kingdom come.”

“How did he do that? He was a kid.”

“Teenager, actually.” Letting out a sigh, she looks up. “Males born into our world are never kids and train from an early age.”

“That makes my heart hurt.”

“Some people are bakers, some are soldiers. And then there are people from the Cosa Nostra. Ancient rules and customs rule our world, and as screwed up as it is sometimes, we do have a code of honor.”

“I’m assuming that will work in our favor.”

“My brothers will burn down the world before they let someone touch one hair on my head.”

I squeeze her hand. “I’m sorry if my actions had anything to do with you being taken.”

“Meh, if it wasn’t Rodrigo, it would be someone else.”

The door swings open, and I see a tall man in the doorway, looking irritated. He’s wearing a suit like all the other men I see on a daily basis. Buttoned. Sharp pant crease. Shiny, expensive loafers.

He watches us both. Motionless. Almost casual.

“A word of advice: I’m not in possession of a whole lot of patience.”

“Going with the hair trigger, temper thing, then?” Ari asks lightly.

“Yeah.”

I raise my hand as though I'm in school. "Question." He nods imperceptibly. "So, exactly how close is the end of your rope?"

"Close."

"Any chance of a sandwich?" Ari asks with a smile. "Your associates grabbed me after my spin class, and I'm famished."

"Do I look like a fucking waiter?"

"No." She clucks her tongue. "But it's rude not to offer your guests a snack."

"You're prisoners."

Ari pushes herself to her feet slowly, and I watch our captor slide his hand inside his jacket. I'm down for the whole ballsy princess act but think she might be taking it a smidge too far.

"We both know that the level of retribution my family will rain down on your perfectly coiffed head depends solely on my review." She reaches out and straightens his tie. "Kinda like Yelp. Five stars means your family gets to live. Three stars will result in losing half of those who share your blood. But two," she shakes her head slowly, "is scorched earth. Not one person will remain."

"That act may work on some men, but it means nothing to me."

"I've done what I can." Ari steps back and shrugs casually. "Tell the men I prefer turkey, no mayo."

"How about I let them have an hour with you?"

"Clearly, you know nothing about Sicilians...and what happens to men who dare to try and take something from a *Strega* that she doesn't willingly give." She gives him a slow once over and then rejoins me on the ground. "I wish people would educate themselves before running willy-nilly into the fray." She waves her hand. "Raw dogging it doesn't work in our world." She sighs dramatically. "Unfortunately, you won't survive and make better choices on the next go around."

Turning on his heel, he strides out of the room, letting the door slam behind him. “That went well.”

“South American. Cartel.” She leans against the wall. “The cologne he’s wearing is favored by all the Columbian drug dealers. Probably middle management. Definitely not the brains of the operation. He must be an enforcer or something equally unimportant.”

The cold concrete sends a chill up my back. “Is that good news or bad news?”

“Good news. Lots of money. Little influence. The Columbians have product that probably needs to be moved through the family territory. Whoever talked him into this farce didn’t give him a full picture of what happens when you cross the Bianchis. He’ll be dead before the sun comes up.” She crosses her legs. “I’m guessing he was sent up here to make a deal and somehow got talked into this shit show by Rodrigo.”

“I think we try a life-saving sleight of hand and see if we can at least make it out of the cell.”

“Lucky for us, I’m fully prepared. She tilts her head slightly, and I see a glint of gold beneath her hair. “Poison,” she says with a grim smile. “Enough to kill a half-dozen men.”

She pulls a heavy gold chain from under her shirt, and I notice a large stone hanging from it. “Wow.”

“Nonna believes in ensuring the women of the family can defend themselves no matter the circumstance.” Wriggling her finger, I notice a large gold ring. “There’s a blade inside that is enough to end a man’s life if I can get close enough.”

Seeing the deadly weapons fills me with a strange mix of hope and dread. It’s terrifying to think of the lengths we might have to go to in order to survive, but if it means finding a way out of here, then so be it.

My mind unwillingly drifts back to the high-stakes poker game where I first crossed Rodrigo – a mistake I’ll regret until the last day of my life. “This is all my fault.”

“No, it’s not.” Shaking out her hair, Ari straightens her back. “Let’s decide on a plan.”

“We need something to distract the guards.” I reach into my pocket and smile when my fingers close around the worn metal of my lucky lighter. “We can start a small fire in that corner,” I suggest. “That should cause enough confusion for us to get a head start.”

“Perfect.” She looks around. “But what are we going to use as fuel?”

Standing, I pull the hem of my dress up. “I knew wearing double Spanx would come in handy one day.”

Her strained laugh fills the room. “You don’t need one pair, much less two.”

“My figure shouts that I leave no fry behind, and wearing these only whispers it.”

“When we get out of here, I will teach you about false narratives that suggest smaller is better.”

“My brother is a chef, and I’m half Italian, so I know better than to let medium ugly men dictate how I feel about myself.”

“Good!”

I hand her my lighter and then do the complicated wiggle dance that allows me to peel one pair of the Spanx off. Once it’s pooling at my feet, I take a big breath. “So much better.”

“I suggest you get rid of them when you get home.”

Leaning down, I pick them up. “Are we going to make it home?”

“Absolutely.” She moves her wrist from side to side. “Fausto made me wear this, and when I see his stupid face, I’m gonna kiss it and tell him that he was right.”

“I’ll buy him a million-dollar gift card to Dunkin’.”

“Perfect.” She grabs a bottle of water. “I’ll pour a little poison in, just in case we can get one of the men to drink it.”

I watch her click a hidden latch. “That is so cool.”

“I’ll get you one for Christmas.” She pours a few drops into the bottle. “And don’t look so skeptical. Enzo and Franco will be here before you know it.”

“I hope so.” My hand trembles as I dip one end of my shapewear into a puddle of murky water on the floor. “If we’re lucky, this has some nasty chemicals.”

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to make a fuse so it lights.” I press the soaked cloth against the lighter’s flame, watching the fire slowly take hold. “Once they’re distracted, we start moving.” I throw the Spanx in the corner and watch the fire begin to spread, creeping hungrily across the damp floor. As the smoke billows upward, I hear the first shouts of alarm from the guards. “I hope this works.” I pull Ari close, and the door swings open as two guards rush in. We move silently along the wall and then dash out the door as they try to douse the fire.

The basement air is stale, and Ari’s chest rises and falls in time with mine as we run down the hall, our eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of movement.

Smoke billows behind us. “I guess that stuff on the floor was flammable.” The sound of something crashing reverberates over our heads.

“Keep moving,” Ari urges. “That could be someone looking for us.”

We slip through the shadows of the long corridor, and my hands tremble with adrenaline. The reality of our situations slams into me as the guilt slides along my skin.”

“Get out of your head, Abby.”

“It’s just—”

“Save it for later.” She grabs my hand. “Cause we may still have to kick some ass.”

We round a corner, finding ourselves face-to-face with a guard. His eyes widen in surprise.

“Hey there,” I call out, my tone unbelievably flirtatious and light as we slow our pace.

Startled, the guard instinctively reaches for his gun. “Easy there, big guy,” I coo, slowly lifting my hands in surrender. “I’m not here to cause any trouble.”

“What are you two doing here,” he growls, suspicion clouding his eyes.

“Us?” I reply with a coy smile, tilting my head to one side. “They said we could stretch our legs.” The guard’s gaze roves over my body, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his head, weighing the potential risks and rewards. “But we’re kinda lost. Can you help us?”

“Maybe,” he says finally, his voice heavy with implication. “But it’ll cost you.”

“Cost me?” I feign innocence, batting my lashes. “Whatever could you mean?”

“Take off your jacket,” he orders gruffly, his eyes never leaving my ample cleavage. I comply without hesitation, acutely aware that every second counts. As the guard’s attention shifts, I catch Ari’s eye and give her a barely perceptible nod.

“Is this what you had in mind?” I ask, my voice dripping with honey as I slide my jacket off my shoulders. The guard’s eyes widen greedily as Ari moves slowly to his side.

“Should I take off my sweatshirt?”

He glances over and licks his lips. “Sure.”

I watch Ari rub her body against his as she lifts her hand, pressing the blade from her ring into his carotid artery. It pushes into his flesh like a knife into a ripe melon.

The sharp metallic scent of blood fills my nostrils, and I choke as the man’s eyes open in horror. His body goes limp, collapsing like a marionette with its strings cut.

“He didn’t suffer,” Ari announces as she looks at the man at her feet. “That’s important.”

The horror of what just happened threatens to pull me under. I sway and feel Ari's finger dig into my arm.

"Don't." She pulls me, and I barely avoid tripping over the man, bleeding out on the cold cement. "There will be plenty of time for therapy and making confession at your church of choice."

Following her like a lost puppy, we move down the hall toward a metal door. Once we push through, we find ourselves in another dimly lit corridor.

"It's fine," Ari whispers. "We just keep moving. Right now, they don't know where we are."

"Okay," I mutter quietly as the panic threatens to take over. The musky scent of dust and stale air fills my lungs as shadows dance on the walls, forming eerie patterns.

Uncertainty gnaws at my frayed nerves. "Can I be scared yet?"

"You can give into every single one of your feelings the second we're driving away from this hell hole."

"I hope that's soon."

"Me too." She glances over her shoulder. "I wasn't kidding about being hungry."

A hysterical laugh bubbles up from my chest, and I know that Ari Bianchi is the only person I ever want to be kidnapped with.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Enzo

Rain drizzles down from the inky sky above as I grip my gun tightly; its cold steel is a reminder of the men I'm about to put into the ground.

"Plan?" Maxim asks as we wait for the men to get into position. "Normally, I'd suggest shock and awe, but that won't work in this case since Vargas likely has itchy fingers and doesn't plan on letting the women live."

"Between losing a half mil to a woman and the public dressing down I gave him, he's looking to make us pay and show the world he's not a joke."

"Too bad he won't live long enough to make it possible."

"I should've put him down when he dared to insult me."

"If we eliminated everyone who did that, the cemetery would have a waiting list."

"True." I hear a text alert and study the new map Carolina sent. "It looks like the tunnels are still the best option. According to this map, there's a hidden entrance on the East side." I study the warehouse looming ahead. "It's risky, but it's the only way to go in undetected."

"Dark and rat-infested it is," Maxim replies quietly.

Franco appears out of the shadows. "Ready?"

"Absofuckinglutly," Maxim responds with a smile.

Shaking my head, I stride toward the supposed secret entrance and decide all the rumors about the Russian madman are true. Lucky for us, he's playing for our team tonight.

Ten minutes later, the darkness of the underground tunnels envelops us, oppressive and suffocating. I can hear our breaths echo off the damp stone walls as we navigate the maze.

“This walk is reminding me why I love blowing shit up. This slinking through the bowels of the building is bullshit.”

“Showmanship isn’t always the answer,” I reply, flicking my Maglite along the walls.

“True, but at least it’s expeditious.”

Stopping abruptly, I hear the muffled sound of a game. “We’ve got company.”

“Wouldn’t be a party without it,” Maxsim mutters.

I study the dim glow of light ahead and see several Cartel soldiers looking at a phone. “Shit.” I curse under my breath, my pulse racing. “We can’t risk a firefight because it will alert everyone we’ve arrived.

“Agreed,” Maxsim whispers, his eyes dancing. “Lucky for you, I came prepared.” He twists a silencer on his gun and steps forward. “One.” The first man goes down. “Two, three.” The other bodies crumple to the ground as the sound of fans cheering fills the space. “Someone made a goal.”

Franco strides ahead, steps over the bodies, and makes sure not to get blood on his pants. “Are you two coming or what?”

“Right behind you.” I follow my brother, with Max trailing behind. “Are we going in circles?”

“It seems like it,” Maxsim mutters.

Eventually, we round a corner, and I spot a massive steel door standing ajar. “Either the Cartel is filled with sloppy soldiers, or someone expects us.”

“Maybe it’s both” Franco responds as we slip through one at a time.

The moment we enter the hallway, I feel the weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders like a physical force. This isn’t just about rescuing Ari and Gianna – it’s also about proving that messing with the Bianchis has only one result.

We all move cautiously through the dimly lit hallway, careful not to make a sound. My heartbeat quickens as we

approach the large warehouse floor.

Taking a deep breath, I move along the wall and see Cartel soldiers playing cards at a small table at the far end.

“Not real worried about impressing the boss,” Maxim mutters.

A door to our left bursts open, and all the soldiers look up when a man in a suit enters. “The prisoners escaped. Get off your asses.”

“That means Ari remembered every lesson Nonna gave her,” I mutter quietly.

“I hope like hell that’s true,” Franco responds.

“Guess it’s time for a little shock and awe,” Maxim says as he pulls a small frag out of his pocket.

“Where the hell did you get one so small.”

“I have them custom-made.” His mouth lifts into an evil grin. “My suites are not the only thing that’s bespoke. These are powerful enough to take out a few enemies but not rattle our brains enough so that we become ineffective.” He pulls the pin and rolls it toward the center of the warehouse. “Fire in the hole, boys.”

“He couldn’t help himself,” Franco replies as we move back toward the wall.

“Find cover!” Maxim instructs.

We dive behind a row of steel shelves for protection. Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I watch several bodies fly into the air. Once the deafening sound ends and crates ignite, filling the space with smoke, I shake my head, wondering how long the ringing in my ears will last.

Franco holds up his phone, and I see the picture one of the soldiers sent. “Rodrigo, The *Serpent* Vargas, is entering the loading dock looking like it’s his fucking birthday.

“Is our guest of honor on his way in?” Maxim asks.

“Yes. Get your party hats. The confrontation is about to begin.”

I glance over my shoulder and notice a few low-level soldiers run in and pull the men away from the burning crates. “Women first, Rodrigo second.”

A door bursts open, and Rodrigo enters. His cold, calculating eyes catch mine across the empty space, igniting my fury further. “Or we kill the snake first.”

“It’s nice to see the Russians and Italians getting along so well,” he sneers. “Guess you can thank me later.”

“With a bullet,” Maxsim drawls, looking bored as he points his gun at Rodrigo’s chest. “You look like a sissy, so I gotta ask, how many plates are you wearing?” He lowers his weapon so it points toward the man’s thigh. “Femoral artery works. Slow and painful.”

“I say the word, and the women are dead.” He taps his earpiece and smiles. “You insulted me in front of everyone, Enzo. I can’t let that stand.”

“You can tap that piece of plastic in your ear all day, but the women are in the wind, and our soldiers have wiped out whoever you talked into this stunt.”

“Bullshit.” A sinister smirk dances across his lips while he tries to feign nonchalance.

He pulls his gun and I glance over at Franco. He nods, signaling that our soldiers have taken care of the trash. I release the bullet from my chamber at the same time Maxsim does. They collide in midair, sparks flying like fireworks caught in a deadly dance. Time slows, and I watch my brother shake his head and place a shot in Varga’s thigh and then his hand, making the gun clatter to the ground.

Blood quickly blooms on his leg as his eyes widen, and he stumbles backward, blood pooling rapidly beneath him.

“Why does he look surprised?” Franco asks as he looks around. “We’re men of our word.”

“Maybe he thought some of his minions survived,” Maxsim comments.

“The place is gonna blow,” Rodrigo chokes out.

I move closer. “What did you say?”

“Boom!” Rodrigo swallows slowly, color leaching from his tan skin. “There’s a bomb. The timer’s ticking.” His eyes close. “I’ll see you all in hell.”

“Look forward to it,” Maxsim comments.

I glance at my brother, who tips his head to the left. “You picking up a signal.”

“Yeah, and it better be the right one.”

“Let’s fucking go!” Maxsim charges ahead, and we all move toward the dimly lit corridor. The scent of sweat and gunpowder lingers in the air as tension coils in my chest like a tightly wound spring.

Throwing open door after door, we curse as each room comes up empty. “Check the signal, Franco.”

“We’re right on top of it,” he replies in a low biting growl.

A door at the end of the hall opens slowly, and we all raise our guns. Holding my breath, I step closer and feel my heart stop when Ari and Abby step out. Bloody and bedraggled.

Franco surges ahead. “That better not be your blood.”

Ari accepts Franco’s hug and pushes her face into his chest. “Like a Sicilian woman would let that happen.”

Abby stares at me like I’m an apparition as she moves slowly in my direction. I pull her into my arms and hug her tightly, vowing to find a way to...something. My brain is too scrambled to come up with an answer.

“Should we get out of here before this place blows,” Maxsim asks, his eyes never leaving Ari.

“Like fireworks?” Ari asks as she hugs me.

“More like no one survives, kinda thing.”

“Why are you always so dramatic?” Ari asks as she stalks toward the large Russian, looking at her like she’s the most valuable painting in the museum. “And what are you doing here anyway?”

“I never miss a good party.”

“Enough!” Franco moves toward the door. “You two can fight in the car.”

“Ready to get out of here?” I tuck Abby under my arm and see her nod. Whatever happened in the last several hours must be more than her system can handle.

We make our way through the dark corridors, and a faint rumble echoes through the building, causing the walls around us to shudder. Abby stumbles slightly, and I reach out to steady her.

She meets my gaze, her eyes wide and vulnerable. “We’re gonna make it.”

I tug her along as we run for the door and push through. A full moon still hangs in the sky as it lightens and our men stand ready, guns drawn.

“Almost there.”

Ari stumbles. Maxim scoops her up, holding her close as the building explodes behind us.

My ears ring, and I squint through the dust and debris swirling around us. “Is everyone alright?” I ask, my voice rough and strained.

“Y-yeah,” Ari stammers, brushing soot from her face. “I think so.”

“Thanks to you,” Abby adds, her grip on my arm tightening. The intensity in her eyes is undeniable, and I can feel the strength of our connection despite the chaos surrounding us.

The doors to the SUVs are thrown open, and Franco enters the first car with his phone pressed to his ear as Maxim follows with Ari in his arms.

Abby and I climb into the second SUV, and we rocket away from the burning building. As our driver navigates the debris-littered parking lot, I feel Abby’s fingers curl around my arm.

“Thank you, Enzo.” Her breath is warm against the side of my neck. “For everything.”

“Always.” I kiss her head and know I mean it in the depths of my soul.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Abby

I step inside Enzo's luxurious loft, my heart still pounding from the danger we escaped. The opulence of the surroundings is a shock to my system – the floor-to-ceiling windows with city views, the modern art adorning the walls, and the sleek Italian furniture that seems too beautiful to sit on.

"Make yourself at home," Enzo says, his voice deep and soothing like a balm to my frazzled nerves. He gestures to the plush velvet sofa, but I can't bring myself to sit down yet. My guilt weighs heavily, making it difficult to breathe.

"Enzo, I'm so sorry," I blurt out, unable to contain my emotions. "I never meant for any of this to happen. I didn't want to bring danger to your family."

He approaches slowly, gently placing his hands on my shoulders. I can feel the warmth radiating from his touch, and it's a stark contrast to the cold dread that has settled in my bones. His beautiful eyes are full of concern as he studies my face.

"None of us could have predicted any of this," he assures me. "And you're not responsible for Rodrigo's actions. Don't blame yourself."

"Still," I whisper, my voice cracking under the weight of my guilt, "your sister was put in danger."

"Abby," Enzo says firmly, locking his gaze onto mine, "you didn't ask for any of this. Rodrigo's been nursing a grudge against us for years after we refused a shipment. He tried to sell us an inferior product, and word got around. He lost a lot of business after that and blamed us." He kisses my head. "And we protect those we care about."

I see the conviction in his eyes and the unwavering loyalty to those he loves. Would he ever include me in that circle?

Do I want to be?

“Thank you,” I manage to say, swallowing back my tears. “I promise I’ll do everything possible to make this right.”

“You and Ari are alive, so everything *is* right.”

The kindness in his voice is enough to break me, and I finally allow myself to collapse onto the plush sofa. As I sink into the cushions, I realize how exhausted I am, both physically and emotionally. Guilt gnaws at me, whispering that I don’t deserve this sanctuary or Enzo’s kindness.

The doorbell rings, and I startle, a testament to my frayed nerves. Enzo walks toward the entrance. “Hey, Doc.” An older man with salt-and-pepper hair, clad in a crisp white coat and carrying a black medical bag, enters quietly.

“Buonasera, Enzo,” the doctor replies, his voice gentle and professional. “I heard about what happened tonight. Is everyone okay?”

“Physically, yes,” Enzo says, glancing over his shoulder. “But I want you to check on Abby.”

The man nods and crosses the room, settling beside me on the sofa. His eyes are warm but analytical as they study my face, taking note of every bruise and cut.

“Let’s take a look at you, Abby,” he murmurs, opening his bag and pulling out a stethoscope. As he checks my vitals and examines my injuries, I try to focus on the rhythmic ticking of the expensive clock hanging above the fireplace, anything to avoid dwelling on what just occurred.

“Everything seems to be in order,” Dr. Moretti announces after a thorough examination. “You’re quite fortunate, considering the circumstances.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Take some time to rest and recover,” he advises before gathering his things and bidding us goodnight. Once the door

closes behind him, Enzo turns, his concern etched upon his face.

“Abby,” he says gently, “why don’t you shower?”

“I need to go home and tell everyone I’m okay.”

“Word was sent to your family. Your brother knows you’re okay,” he sits beside me, “but it might be better if you don’t show up covered in blood and soot.”

“Good point.” I walk toward the far end of the loft and step into the lavish bathroom, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror – bruised and in shock.

“Alive,” I mutter. “And grateful.”

I flip the handle, and the shower comes to life with a whoosh, steam quickly filling the room as I strip off my clothes and step under the spray. The water cascades over me like a baptism, cleansing my body and, for a brief moment, my guilt.

As the water sluices away the dirt and dried blood, I wrap my arms around myself, seeking solace in the soothing heat and the steady thrum of the showerhead.

Taking a long breath. I allow myself to feel the fear, pain, and overwhelming regret.

Why didn’t I just walk away from the game?

I know there isn’t an answer, but I doubt I will ever stop asking it.

Twenty minutes later, I step out of the shower and hear the door snick open. Enzo lays a stack of clothes on the counter. “Thank you.”

“Here.” He grabs his bathrobe and wraps me in it, running his hands up and down the material.

Swallowing heavily, I watch him grab a towel and gently dry my hair. I feel like one big exposed nerve and tell myself not to fall apart.

His serious expression is reflected in the steamy mirror, and I know this isn’t something he does regularly. “Thank

you.”

“I take the towel from his hand and wrap my hair up. “I’m feeling a hundred things and don’t yet have the words to express how grateful I am for the save.”

“I will find you no matter where you are in the world.”

He presses a kiss to my head and then steps back. “Come out when you’re ready.”

Nodding, I watch him walk out of the room and know that it is more than I deserve.

Dressed in Enzo’s oversized T-shirt and sweatpants, I make my way to the table next to the open kitchen where he waits, a steaming plate of pasta before him. The aroma of garlic and tomatoes permeates the air, mingling with the faint scent of his cologne still clinging to my borrowed clothes.

“Sit,” he says, his voice warm. “You need to eat.”

I slide into the soft chair beside him, feeling the weight of the past twenty-four hours catch up. My stomach growls in agreement as I take in the sight of the meal – freshly made spaghetti topped with Bolognese sauce, accompanied by two glasses of red wine. “Thank you,” I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Ma makes sure I’ve got enough sauce to outlast the apocalypse.”

“It sounds like she and my brother would get along.”

“It does.”

He hands me a fork, and we eat silently for a few moments. The food is delicious, and each bite feels like a small victory, a reclaiming of normalcy.

“Abby,” Enzo begins, his voice tinged with concern. “You have nothing to worry about. Rodrigo met the consequences of his actions, so you never have to worry about him again.”

His words send a shiver down my spine. “If I apologize a million times, will that begin to convey to your family how

much I regret my actions?”

“Hey,” he says softly, reaching out to place a hand on mine, sending warmth through my body. “Rodrigo just needed an excuse, and you happened to be convenient.”

“I’m having a hard time accepting that.”

“The man wanted revenge and to prove he’s more than an outlier that no one wants in their organization.”

“But I...”

“Played a game of poker and won. That’s not an invitation to rain down, holy hell.”

I nod, swallowing hard. “That sounds nothing like the story circling my head.”

“Because you don’t live in my world.” He moves his chair closer. “Every move an enemy makes requires a counter move. What happened is nothing more and nothing less.”

“I stood by while a man bled out.”

“If he had lived, would you be alive?”

“I don’t know.”

“Which means that if you survived whatever horrors he had in mind, you probably wouldn’t have.”

“Enzo,” I say, hesitating momentarily, my heart pounding. “I can’t make sense of it.” My voice trembles, and I look down at my plate, ashamed of my actions.

“Look at me,” Enzo urges. I lift my gaze to meet his, finding kindness in the intensity of his eyes. “Eventually, you will. Give it time.”

“I hope you’re right,” I mutter, my voice barely audible.

A sharp pang of realization hits me as I watch Enzo across the table, his broad shoulders filling out the T-shirt he changed into. I study his strong hands effortlessly holding the wine glass and know that I can’t stay in the city and run into him and whatever Mafia princess he ends up marrying.

“What are you thinking?”

I ignore the ache in my chest and shake my head.
“Everything. Nothing.”

“Is that woman speak for none of my business?”

“My mind resembles this plate of pasta. It’s jumbled up, and the last thing I want to do is try and untangle it.”

He holds my gaze. “The *famiglia* is my life, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a way to make you a part of it too.”

I trace a tattooed letter on his finger. “I can’t recommend the odds of something like that working out.”

“I don’t need good odds.” He squeezes my fingers. “My will of steel is more than enough.”

“Okay, Superman.”

“It’s good that you finally recognize my superpowers.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “You saved my life and will always be my superhero...no matter where I end up.”

“We. End up.” He leans forward and presses our heads together. “Got to use the correct pronoun so God knows what you’re thinking. You and me...we’re gonna find a way.”

The weight of his promise hangs in the air like a fragile thread connecting our lives. My romantic soul wants to believe him, to trust that he’ll find a solution to the seemingly insurmountable obstacles. “I want to say something sharp and witty so I don’t have to deal with what’s happening between us.”

He lifts our joined hands and kisses my knuckles. “Retreating behind a wall of wit isn’t going to change anything.”

“But it might make it easier to handle.”

I press my face into his arm. “I’ve loved getting to know you...and will undoubtedly think of you long after you’ve forgotten me.”

“How will I forget the woman who lies beside me night after night?”

I don't bother protesting since he seems invested in the fantasy of the Bianchis accepting me. I swallow my emotions and take comfort in the fact that I can see the future clearly. Before too long, I will be nothing but a distant memory to him.

“Abby—”

I kiss him firmly so he won't make promises he can't keep. “I should go.”

“Not yet.” He lifts me into his arms and strides down a short hallway. “We need to celebrate that you are alive.”

I press my face into his shoulder and decide to take one last moment of joy. No matter how fleeting.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Enzo

I push away the pictures of what could've been and lay my angel on the bed. Primitive feelings of possession cloud my vision as I see her curls fanned over my pillow.

This woman. How did I fall so fucking fast?

The world spins with all its bullshit, but when we're together, it falls still.

"What are you thinking?"

I slide my clothes off and then remove the sweatpants she's wearing. "You. Me. Us."

Her eyes close, and I know that the time for conversation has passed. I need to make the last twelve hours disappear and show her that she can always trust me.

I press my hand against her knees and watch her legs fall open like she knows exactly what I need.

Taking her panties with my teeth, I drag them aside, hooking them with my forefinger to expose her pussy. I sink into her, pulling at her clit with my teeth and reach up with my other hand to pinch her nipple.

She responds with a shudder, and I feel satisfaction zip through my veins. "You trust me to do what needs to be done?"

"Make me yours."

Put a fucking crown on my head, because I am a king and this woman is my queen.

I drag my hands down her body, trying to cover every inch of her skin with my touch. I want her mind to associate

pleasure with me. No one else.

“From this day forward, no one touches you except me. And no man will look your way without receiving my permission first.”

Her eyes widen. “Possessive much?”

“You have no idea, Sharky.”

I stand at the foot of the bed and watch her laugh as she turns her cheek to the sheets. Every line of this woman is gorgeous. I study her throat and know that I want to mark it.

“You look feral.”

“I am.” I run my hand down my stomach and take a mental picture.

“Maybe I am too.” She presses her feet against my thighs, pushing her ass off the bed. Her back bows and makes her stomach curve outward in an unbelievably sexy way.

My mind goes to the only place it can as I run my hand over the tightly stretched skin of her belly button.

I get a preview of what could be and know that I’m not gonna be real patient about making it happen.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“I doubt that.”

She opens her legs wider, and I take a full fucking breath, pushing away pictures of what could’ve happened had we not gotten there in time.

Dropping down on the bed, I sink into her without even needing to guide my shaft.

Home.

My body knows where it belongs. The moment I’m balls deep, I pull her closer, needing to cover her as much as possible.

Not because I need to devour her but because she needs to know that I will always protect her, and I’m more than ready to become her everything.

She gives me a ball-busting squeeze, making me greedy for more. I want to take her to the limit and then ask for more.

I press my lips against her ear and taste my soap on her skin. “Maybe we’ll add to the family tree tonight.”

“Not yet,” she whispers back.

The fact she didn’t hit me upside the head for such an audacious statement is more encouragement than I expected. “Soon.”

She presses her head into the mattress, and I grab her ass, digging my fingers into her perfectly soft flesh. Her legs wrap around me, and I get down to business.

I drive into her and feel like I’m in a room full of strobe lights.

“That, Enzo.” Her nails dig into my arm. “Exactly that. Make everything disappear.”

Like a falcon going in for the kill, I shift and make sure every thrust of my hips makes her body pulse. Dropping my head, I run my stubble against her cheek and then fuck her harder. My arms shake as the telltale sign of my release zips down my spine. “Let me have it, Abby.”

Her expression softens, and I can feel her body begin to dissolve. “I’ve got you, Sharky.”

I drive into her and feel her cling to me as I work my hips like a magician.

There is nothing on this earth that is better than a primal fuck, but seeing Abby’s orgasm is damn close to a spiritual experience.

I stay with her all the way through the mind-bending explosion and know there is nothing more beautiful.

Her body is surprisingly strong, and I can feel her contractions trying to push me out. Ignoring it, I grind my hips into hers, making sure to compress her clit. Her perfect pussy is strangling my grateful cock, and I do what I can to stave off my release.

I think about menial shit, and it does no good.

I'm lost in this woman. The warmth of her skin, the silkiness of her hair, the way my name is repeated like a prayer.

She's casting a spell, and I have no interest in stopping it.

I slow my pace and feel her legs tighten around my ass. I'm as deep as I can be in her tight heat and know nothing will untangle us.

Her eyes open slowly, and I smile like the smug son of a bitch that I am and feel the flutters slow. "Have you returned to earth?"

"Barely." She kisses my arm. "I didn't think better was possible, but I couldn't have been more wrong."

"Just imagine what will happen the tenth or hundredth time."

"I'll be dead."

"No way, sweetheart." I begin moving again and feel like my cock is bathed in honey. After grasping her ass with both hands, I fuck her so nothing separates us.

With every ounce of passion in my soul, I drive into her and feel a wave of cum spill into her, knowing that binding us in the most primal way wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Fifteen minutes later, I hear her groaning in exasperation as she tries to pull out of my arms again. "Running away won't make what happens between us any less powerful."

"Let me go, Enzo."

"No." I trace her jaw and wish for the thousandth time she wasn't so damn self-possessed. "Trust your feelings and what's happening between us."

"All we're ever going to have is this. Tomorrow or next week, someone in your family will tell you who to marry."

I tip her chin. "Do you trust me?"

“With my life,” she whispers quietly.

“How about your heart?”

“That’s an impossible question.” She presses her face into my chest, and I know I could spend a thousand lifetimes in this position, and it wouldn’t be enough. “Do you believe I would ever let anything happen to you?”

“Not knowingly.”

“Despite our short history, you must know I would sacrifice my own life if it meant saving yours.”

“Enzo.” Her small hands dig into my arms. “Why are you saying these things.”

“Because sometimes you find forever in a kiss.”

Silence.

There are things you can push. Demand even. But making a person confess what’s in their heart isn’t one of them.

“If you had a different life...I would make a hundred promises of forever. Ironclad statements about how I would never let you go. Missives with my name scrawled at the bottom telling you that it’s you and always will be.”

“I will always love you harder. There isn’t a problem that can’t be solved by that.” I kiss her head and then let her roll away.

I know the truth, and soon, she will see what happens when I deliver on my promises.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Enzo

As I pull up to Gianna and Alexey's estate on the outskirts of Boston, I ignore the restlessness that has become my companion. I know there's a way to have a future with Abby, and hopefully, my cousin will give me the intel to make it possible.

I step out of my car, nod to the soldiers on duty, and approach the front door. The sound of my shoes echoes in the still air, my heart beating steadily with every step.

Before I can knock, the heavy wooden door swings open, revealing the familiar foyer bathed in warm light. I step inside, immediately noticing Gianna's changes to the home. Gone are the cold, lifeless walls that once greeted me; now, vibrant artwork adorns the space, infusing it with warmth and personality.

"Enzo!" Gianna exclaims, hugging me tightly. "It's so good to see you."

"Likewise," I reply, returning the embrace. The familiarity of her hug makes the edginess momentarily disappear. "How do you feel?"

Stepping back, she presses her hand to her heart. "Good. The pain of childbirth disappeared the moment the nurses put my sweet angel in my arms."

"Sweet?" I kiss her head. "I doubt you and the Pakhan could produce an heir with that quality."

"Mother nature loves a good joke, so we've probably created someone who will make up for every single one of our family's deadly sins."

"And where is my goddaughter?"

“Napping.” She takes my arm and leads me toward the library. “The nurse will bring her down as soon as she wakes up.”

I follow my cousin and notice the family photos lining the walls. Gianna’s touch is evident everywhere. She’s always had an eye for detail, and it shows in every nook and cranny. As we pass a newly installed aquarium, I can’t help but smile at the memory of our childhood trip to the New England Aquarium, with her eyes wide in wonder as she gazed at the aquatic life.

“Sophia will love the fish tank when she gets older.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

“How did you talk Alexey into an Italian first name?”

“It’s actually one of the most popular Russian names.”

“No shit.”

“We spell it in the American tradition,” Alexey calls out as he strides down the hall.

I study the man who was once an enemy and take his extended hand. “Congratulations. You two have cemented the alliance like nothing else could.”

“A side benefit,” he responds before kissing his wife. “Let’s have a drink to celebrate.” We walk into the library, and he pours two glasses of whiskey, handing me one.

I take it and notice the golden liquid catches the light. “To new beginnings.”

“За ваше здоровье!” Alexey toasts, his light Russian accent evident. We each take a sip, the rich flavor of the whiskey warming my insides like a slow-burning fire.

Gianna watches us with a smile, and I know she’s telepathically sending me a message of *I told you so*. I wasn’t her husband’s fan during their first year of marriage, but she told me to be patient, and eventually, I would see they were a good match. And per usual, she was one hundred percent correct.

“Here she is.” Alexey sets down his glass and takes the tiny bundle cradled in the arms of a nurse.

“Is that—” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper as I study the tiny infant, her curly black hair and bright blue eyes a perfect blend of her parents’ features.

“Your goddaughter,” Gianna confirms with a proud smile.

I’m instantly struck by a wave of awe. My heart pounds like a drum in my chest as Alexey carefully transfers the baby into my arms. She’s tiny, and I’m suddenly terrified of doing something wrong.

“She won’t break, Enzo.”

I look up and see Gianna holding back a laugh. I cradle the infant gently against my chest and watch her study me with curious eyes. “Hey there,” I murmur, smiling down at her. “I’m your godfather, Enzo.”

Her tiny hand grasps one of my fingers, and a bolt of electricity shoots through me. I press a kiss to her forehead, then to each chubby cheek. The protectiveness I feel is overwhelming, and I know that I’ll do anything for this little girl.

Except handle whatever is happening in her diaper. I watch her tiny face scrunch up and turn red. “Gianna, your lovely daughter needs your attention.”

“Such a good job,” Gianna coos as she takes the baby. “I’ll be back.”

“How many diapers have you changed?” I turn toward the feared leader of the Bratva and notice his eyes never leave his wife and daughter. “I’m guessing it’s in the single digits.”

“And you would be wrong.” He moves to a comfortable chair and drops down. “I’m on night duty and handle the two and four a.m. changes.”

“If only your enemies could see you now.”

“We’re aligned, so my enemies are the Cosa Nostra’s as well.”

“Yeah...thanks for the Cartel bullshit.” I take the chair next to his and look out the window.

“We took out half of them when they attacked Yuri and his wife.”

“There were enough left to snatch my sister and—”

“The woman who has bewitched you.”

I drain the rest of my drink. “Why are criminals such big gossips?”

“I heard it from my wife.” He crosses his leg over his knee. “After you asked her to run down the possible link to the *famiglia*, she told me with complete conviction that you had found the one.”

I study the whiskey in my glass. “Is it possible to upend your life after a handful of encounters?”

“I made a decision about my future after a ten-minute conversation. Your cousin captivated me in less time than it takes to make a sandwich.”

“I saw how you looked at Gianna at that charity thing, and it was evident to anyone who bothered to notice.”

“I had never experienced anything like it.” He straightens his cufflink. “I knew I would destroy anyone and anything that stood between us, so agreeing to the alliance with your family was easy.”

“Gianna always told me that love isn’t fact. It’s faith. Uncomfortable, addictive, beautiful, and the craziest thing a person can do.”

“And she is absolutely correct.” He leans forward. “I don’t know the particulars of your situation, but I do know something about relationships and the challenges they bring.”

“Alexey, it’s not necessary—” I start to protest, but he cuts me off with a shake of his head.

“Hear me out,” he insists. “When Gianna and I first got together, I had no idea how to balance our relationship with my responsibilities to the syndicate. But I found a solution,

and if there's one thing I've learned, there is always a way to have what you want."

"Why do you two look so serious?" Gianna asks as she returns with my goddaughter. "Are you planning to overthrow a small country or something?"

Alexey stands and takes his daughter. "You two catch up. I'm taking our princess on a walk around the garden."

Gianna kisses her husband and watches him walk out of the room. "I didn't have a chance to dig into your question too deeply, but Luna confirmed the Amatos have been part of the family for two generations. Abby's grandfather was a loyal money man."

I close my eyes. "Good news."

"What are you going to do?"

"Talk to Andre and get his blessing, and then see if I can talk this woman into pledging her life to me."

"She would be a fool not to agree immediately." She sits in Alexey's abandoned chair. "Maxsim said the kidnapping was over before it began. How is Abby doing?"

"We haven't spoken since I took her home three days ago. I'm giving her a little space while I put things in order and make sure I have something to offer."

"I heard my protégé was a rockstar and located Ari and Abby in record time."

"Between Fausto getting Ari to wear the bracelet and Carolina, we found them within hours of being snatched."

"So lucky," she says quietly. "Just like me when you showed up in the nick of time."

"I had no choice because no one else in the family shares my passion for rare comics."

"True."

Taking a deep breath, I feel like two tectonic plates are pushing against each other as my brain processes the fact a

future with Abby is possible without shirking my responsibilities and pissing on every tradition I hold dear.

“Tell me about this woman.” She leans forward. “What makes her the one?”

“She burns brighter than anything I’ve ever seen.” I look down and study the tattoo covering my hand. “But not in a flashy, look-at-me way. I’ve seen her lose a quarter of a million dollars and win a half million with the exact same expression. The kidnapping put her off her game for obvious reasons, but she didn’t lose it. Which tells me she’s the person I want beside me when the devil knocks on the door.”

“I’m all for not giving into hysterics, but it’s important that she deals with the trauma and sees a therapist.”

“Since when do we share our personal business with outsiders?”

“Since my husband found someone we can trust.”

“I’ll mention to her and see if she’s interested.”

“Good! She zips the charm on her necklace back and forth. “Our world requires people who are unafraid of a fight, but it’s important not to pretend like it doesn’t come with a cost.”

“True enough.”

“Alright, enough about that.” She stands. “Let’s go find your goddaughter so you two can get to know one another.”

“Sounds good.” I follow her out of the room and appreciate the road ahead isn’t quite as rocky as I imagined.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Abby

The door creaks slowly open, and I sit up in bed. “Who goes there?”

“The only person brave enough to deal with your stench.” My brother holds his nose with one hand and sets a tray on the end of the bed. “If you don’t shower today, then I’m hosing you off in the backyard.”

“Dramatic much?” I smooth out my favorite Einstein T-shirt. “Skipping a shower for two days isn’t illegal.”

“Are we sure about that?” Marco strides to the window and opens it. “Better.”

I push myself out of my nest of covers and grab the tray. “My favorite panini sandwich.”

“I will spoil you for one more day, and then,” he snaps his fingers, “it’s back to normal.”

“I was kidnapped four days ago.” I pick up my favorite turkey and brie sandwich and take a bite. “I’m traumatized and may never leave this room.”

“You have a shift tomorrow night at the restaurant.”

“No way.”

“Way!” Marco responds, squeezing my leg. “The longer you hide out up here, the more difficult it will be to leave.”

“Did Nadia stop by earlier? I thought I heard her voice?”

“Yes.” He shakes his head. “And I did as you asked and told her you were napping.”

“Thanks.” I set the sandwich down and nibble on one of Marco’s famous homemade parmesan potato chips. “I can’t take another lecture.”

“The girl does excel at them.” He smooths out the blanket. “I admire her loyalty and everything, but she needs to find a hobby and back off the pulpit.”

“I know she’s coming from a good place...but I can’t hear her repeat the same thing again and again.”

“Speaking of people who repeat themselves, did you finally talk to Mom?”

“I did.”

“And?” Marco rolls his hand.

“She’s still stuck in the Bahamas because of the storm, and I told her that she didn’t need to come because my trip to Vegas is on hold.”

“Oh.”

“Are you relieved?”

“That you are staying put and will become a star employee of the restaurant?”

“I own half the place, so I’m already a star and not because I’m free labor.”

“True.” He leans over and grabs a chip. “Are you sure about skipping Vegas?”

“For now.” I study the quilted blanket my grandmother made for my sixteenth birthday. “I want to stay in our little corner of the world until I feel a little stronger.”

“Fair enough.” He straightens the blanket. “Maybe the poker thing is over, Abs. Perhaps it’s time to find a job at a brokerage firm or a venture capital startup.”

“I’m not saying no to the idea, but I’m not ready to make any major decisions.”

“Is there a little part of you hoping the Mafia prince will show up on our doorstep with a glass slipper?”

My heart suddenly feels like it’s being dragged at the end of a heavy chain. “He won’t break every rule and turn his back on the Bianchis.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I push my tray aside. “Why are you asking? I thought you were dead set against me getting involved with the Cosa Nostra.”

He puts up his hands. “I’m not suggesting marrying into the *famiglia* would be good for your health, but I would be a fool to miss the fact you’ve fallen for him.”

“It’s unwise to want impossible things.”

“I could argue with you, but I won’t.”

“Thank you.” I squeeze his hand. “And I appreciate that you didn’t tell Mom about the kidnapping. She would’ve made a big deal and never stopped saying I told you so.”

“Thankfully, Enzo got you out of there in the nick of time.” He crosses his arms. “Can you imagine delivering the dead daughter speech to Mom?”

Laughing, I fall back against my pillows. “Leave it to you to make a morbid quip.

“It’s better than allowing myself to consider the possibility of you not coming home.”

Shivering, I pull the quilt around my chin. “Ari Bianchi was like a superhero. She barely blinked an eye and—”

“I’m guessing she went through Mafia Princess school and was trained from an early age how to handle the enemy.”

“She was indeed.” A picture of the soldier’s blood spurting everywhere fills my mind. “And I’m pretty sure she graduated at the top of her class.”

“Note to self: always get snatched with a qualified cohort.”

“If I stay away from the tables, I may not have to worry about it.”

“True.” He tilts his head. “But you love the game.”

“Right now, I’m not sure if that’s enough.”

“Then it’s good we have a restaurant to run.” He pushes himself to his feet. “I’ve got some biscotti in the oven. Come down after you shower, and we can have coffee with Nonno and listen to him tell us how to run the laundromat.”

“Okay.” He hesitates at the door. “What?”

“I love you and wouldn’t have survived a world without you.”

“I love you too, Marco.” He nods and then slips out the door. “And all I have to do is find a way to live in a world without Enzo.”

An hour later, the doorbell rings, and I slowly move down the stairs and open it. “Oh.”

Enzo fills the doorway with his tall frame. A mixture of happiness and sadness washes over me as my heart skips a beat. “Enzo,” I breathe, unable to disguise the surprise in my voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you think I would rescue you and then disappear?”

“Well...no...but—”

“I have good news,” he replies, his mesmerizing eyes filled with mischief. “Is this a bad time?”

“Who’s there?”

I turn and see Nonno’s eyes filled with curiosity. A rare occurrence these days. “A friend stopped by.”

“Don’t keep them on the doorstep. Where’s your manners?”

I step aside reluctantly and lead him into the living room. “Nonno, this is Enzo.”

“Don’t be silly, *cara mia*. That is the Don. Leonardo Bianchi.” He extends a shaking hand. “I’m sorry not to stand, sir. My legs don’t work so well anymore.”

Enzo takes my grandfather's hand and shakes it gently. Not missing a beat, he tips his head. "It's nice to me...er, see you."

"I hope the numbers are correct." He looks toward the kitchen. "My grandson has been taking care of the laundromats. If Franco has any questions, we will make it right."

I watch the confusion in Enzo's eyes clear. He sits on the chair beside the couch. "The numbers are perfect. I just came by to see how you're doing."

Nonno waves his hand. "For an old man, I'm okay."

"Good. You are loyal, and we appreciate that."

I watch my grandfather press his hand against his heart. "Always."

Marco walks in with a plate of biscotti. "Nonno is just catching up with the Don."

"Is that so?" Marco says, looking at me in confusion.

"If you have questions, Marco can answer them," Nonno adds. "He's very good with numbers."

Enzo stands and shakes my brother's hand. "We have every confidence in you."

"Good to hear," Marco replies as he studies Enzo.

"Carlo, are you ready for your afternoon excursion through the neighborhood?"

Nonno's caretaker rolls in the wheelchair, and Enzo moves aside to make room. "I'm gonna walk En...I mean the Don out."

"Of course." Nonno tips his head. "It's an honor to have you in our home."

"Thank you, Carlo."

I grab Enzo's hand and pull him toward the door before my grandfather can begin genuflecting. Once we're outside, I let out a breath. "I guess that confirms our suspicions."

“It sure does.”

“Do you really resemble your grandfather that closely?”

“Minus the tattoos, I could be his twin.”

I lean against the door and let out a gust of relief. “That makes me feel better since it means parts of Nonno’s memory still work.” Looking up, I notice he doesn’t seem surprised by the revelation. “What is your good news?”

“Let’s go for a walk and talk about it.”

I step back toward the front stoop. “I may not be a hundred percent yet and—”

“We took care of the threats, Abby.” He wraps his arm around my shoulders. “Everyone knows you are under my protection, so there’s nothing to fear.”

“Is that like some kind of invisible force field that keeps dark forces away?”

“Yeah. It’s like Spiderman’s web. Only better.”

Rolling my eyes, I let out a rusty laugh. “Are you a Marvel fan?”

“Gianna and I have been collecting rare comic books since we were kids, so I don’t know if the word fan is strong enough.”

“So many interesting layers.”

“I bet you can’t wait to discover every one.”

He tugs my hand, and I reluctantly follow, knowing I’m not ready to sever our connection.

No matter how big a fool that makes me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Enzo

I ignore the looks Abby throws me as we walk toward the park. “Are you hungry? Do you want a gelato or something?”

Stopping under an enormous tree, she looks up. “Are you going to draw this out or tell me what’s happening?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“You came over for a reason, so just tell me what it is.” She stomps over to a bench and sits down, crossing her arms. “There is no need to torture me and make me wait.”

“Where is the patient woman I’ve seen at the tables? The one who can outlast any of her opponents?”

“Gone.” She snaps her fingers. “Vanished.”

“I can see you’re going to be a lot of fun on birthdays and anniversaries.” I join her on a bench, unbutton my suit coat, and see her eyes lock onto the holster against my chest.

“Neither of which we’ll be celebrating together.”

“About that...I spoke with my cousin – the Don. To ask for his blessing.”

“For what?”

“To marry you?”

“Marry?” She stands abruptly and presses her hand to her mouth. “We haven’t had a date yet!”

“Men in my world don’t date. It’s either fucking around or standing at the altar.” I take her hand and pull her back down on the bench. “And you’re sure as hell not a side piece.”

“Why would he agree to it?”

“Your Nonno was a loyal man and valued member of the family.”

“Family?”

“*Famiglia*. Not blood related but bound by the oath he made.” Conflicting emotions cross her beautiful face. “So that future we never talked about is possible.”

“We don’t even know if we would get along.” Shifting away, she looks me over slowly. “Maybe we’re not compatible.”

“We’re compatible.” I take her hand. “In all the ways that matter.”

“What if you hog the remote, eat crackers in bed, and make me watch horror movies every Halloween?”

I shake my head. “You’re just grasping at straws.”

“Of course I am.” She looks around. “A man I barely know just suggested we should bind our lives together after only a few short weeks of acquaintance.”

“Do you love me?”

“What?”

“Forget logic.” I press my fingers against her chest. “What is your heart telling you in this moment?”

“I’m not listening to that unreliable organ.” Crossing her legs, she presses her mouth together. “It’s sending unrealistic messages about falling into your arms and making crazy promises.”

“I’ve fallen for you, Abby Mercer, and think we have what it takes to make an incredible future together.”

“Shouldn’t we go on a date before we say things like that?”

“Sure.” I pull her against my side. “Our first date will be my goddaughter’s christening. That way, every one can meet you.”

“I was thinking of dinner and a movie.”

“Dinner’s good, but the movie thing is a hard no.”

“Dark places with a door at your back, not a good idea?”

“Yeah, that’s something I definitely avoid.” I cover her hand. “But we can watch one at home.”

“Home,” she repeats, looking up. “How can you be sure so sure about us?”

“Because the thing inside me matches up perfectly with the thing inside you.” The afternoon sun filters through the leaves above us, and I turn so we face one another. “You are my person. It’s you or no one else.” Her emerald eyes search for something deep within me as uncertainty lurks beneath her confused expression. “You know what we are. And what we can become.”

“My mom spent most of my childhood reciting the ills of the Mafia. She railed against it like it was a religion and told us never to fall prey to promises of glamorous life.”

“According to my cousin Luna and her sources, your mother was dumped by a captain who wanted to marry up the ladder.”

“Really?” She twists her hands together. “That explains a lot.”

I stand and pull her up. “Let’s walk.”

The sun dips lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the park as we walk side by side. Her grip on my hand tightens, and I can feel her turmoil without looking at her face.

“Enzo,” she begins, her voice shaky, “I care about you, but I don’t know if I can handle life in the Cosa Nostra.”

“I could tell you not to worry, but that would be an insult.” Her eyes widen, and I see the surprise flicker across her face. “But know that I’ll stand between you and anyone who wants to harm you.” I can feel her tremble and move closer.

“Enzo,” she begins hesitantly, her voice wavering. “I won’t deny my feelings, but I need you to understand that I may not be able to handle the danger and uncertainty.” She

clears her throat. "I've been in my room since I got home. The kidnapping is very difficult to process, and it may take me a while to work through it."

Her words cut through me like a knife, but I remain quiet.

"You have become my heart," she continues, tears welling in her eyes. "But at the same time, I'm terrified. I don't want to live in fear of losing you or being taken again."

I wish I could assure her that life will be peaceful, but that would be a lie. "Your fears are completely justified," I admit, swallowing hard. "Because being with me means accepting a certain level of risk."

A tear rolls down her cheek. "I wish I didn't love you."

"But you do," I reply quietly, letting her confession fill every corner of my soul. "And I promise to never make you regret it."

Sniffing, she laughs quietly. "Is that a gold-plated promise?"

"It's the only kind I make." I press my mouth to hers and taste our future. "It's not going to be an easy life, but it will be filled with love."

"I'm counting on it." Burying her face in my chest, she holds me tightly. "But before I commit, we must go on at least one date." She pulls away and looks up. "No...make that two dates."

"You drive a hard bargain, woman." I take her hand and think about what kind of ring I want to slide on her finger. "The christening will count as date number one." Her nose scrunches up, and I tell myself not to smile. "Date number two...let's see...how about a trip to the Bahamas."

"Bahamas?" she echoes, her eyebrows arching in surprise.

"Yes. Your Vegas trip didn't happen, so this might be a good option."

"Atlantic City is an option...the Bahamas is a glamorous hot spot."

“Then we should go.” I rub my hand over my jaw. “I haven’t had a vacation in at least five years. We’ll take the jet and spend a few days working on our compatibility.”

“That’s insane.”

“Maybe, but we need to have some interrupted time and talk about our future.” I trail my finger down her arm. “If we’re gonna spend our lives together, it would be a good idea to see if we’re compatible...outside the bedroom.

“Let’s not go crazy...no need to eliminate the one thing we seem to excel at.”

I pull against my chest. “Soon, we’ll have a hundred things. Her hand strokes my cheek, and I understand what having everything I want feels like for the first time in my life.

“The proof will be in the pudding.”

“That makes no sense.”

“If you liked chocolate pudding as much as I do...it would.”

“Is this a situation where nodding my head in agreement is a good idea?”

“Honey, agreeing with your girlfriend on a somewhat regular basis is always a good idea.”

“Is that a yes to the Bahamas?”

My heart hammers against my ribs as I wait for her response. The joking seems like we’re heading in the right direction, but you never know. I’ve spent my life around Sicilian women, and know that one minute they are smiling, and the next they have a knife to your throat.

Finally, Abby sighs, her eyes searching mine. “Yes, Enzo. I would love to go with you.”

“Good.” She offers me a tentative smile. “I’ll make the arrangements.” I reach into my pocket and pull out a small, wrapped package. “I have something for you.”

Her eyes widen in surprise as I hand it to her. “What’s this?”

“Open it and see.” She unwraps the package carefully, revealing a brand new deck of cards engraved with our entwined initials. Her fingers run over the crest, an expression of confusion lighting up her face.

“Enzo, these are beautiful,” she breathes. “But why?”

“Because they’re a symbol, sweetheart,” I explain, my heart pounding steadily. “Our fate will be what we make it, no matter what hand we’re dealt.”

“I love that.”

I lean in slowly, giving her time to close the gap between us. She meets me halfway, her lips brushing against mine.

It’s a soft, gentle kiss until her arms wrap around my neck, and I deepen it. My hands find their way to her waist, pulling her body closer until I can feel the heat radiating from her, mixing with the warmth of the setting sun.

Some people are afraid of heights, and some are afraid of never flying.

Lucky for me, I might’ve found the one that’s willing to see how close we can get to the sun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Abby

The sun casts a warm glow over the expansive courtyard as I step out of the sleek black car, my heart pounding. Laughter and lively conversation fill the air, and I don't know why I find it surprising.

Did I expect our faces and men standing around cleaning their guns?

"Don't spin out," I quietly instruct myself as I study the massive Bianchi Estate. Hearing my name, I turn and see Enzo strides across the courtyard with a warm smile. He's dressed impeccably and looks every inch the powerful and successful mafioso, and a part of me wonders why he's chosen me. "I made it."

"You did." He takes my hand, and I'm suddenly aware of the dozens of eyes on me.

"This isn't just a family gathering." I see dozens and dozens of people filling the lawn and wonder exactly how big the Bianchi family tree is.

"Sure it is," he replies, leading me into the middle of the party. "Do you want to take a lap and get a lay of the land or dive in and meet my Ma?"

"Your mother?" I squeak. "On the first date?"

Leaning in, he puts his mouth against my ear, and I shiver as his warm breath coasts down my neck. "Sweetheart, we both know this is much more than a first date."

Groaning quietly, I move closer. "That doesn't make me feel better."

"It should, since this is the first step into our new lives."

“It won’t be if you keep saying things like that, and I keel over from anxiety.”

“You’ve looked an arms dealer in the eye and told him he was outplayed, so I’m doubting that a little family time is a big deal.”

“I knew that would come back and bite me in the butt.”

“And what a fine butt it is.”

“Enzo!”

He tugs me toward a woman with silver hair and a regal bearing. “Let’s get this thing started.”

“Might as well.” I follow him and see the woman smile faintly.

“Ma, this is Abby,”

“Benvenuta, Abby,” she says, extending her hand. “I am Donatella, Enzo’s mother.”

“Thank you, Signora Bianchi,” I reply, taking her hand gently, trying to appear confident despite my nerves. Will this woman give me a chance, or will she tell her son to choose a more appropriate woman?

Her expression tells me nothing, and I know that if she ever decides to play poker, she’ll win every hand.

“Please, call me Donatella,” she insists. “My daughter has sung your praises and said that you handled the little mishap well.”

Swallowing, I nod and wonder if she considers that a good thing or not. “Ari was incredible, and I deeply admire her strength.”

“All she has to do is use it for good and not—”

“We’ll talk more later, Ma. I’m gonna introduce her to Franco.”

Before I can say anything, Enzo pulls me away. “That was rude.”

“Neither of us needs to hear my mother’s speech about my sister flushing her reputation down the toilet and how it will ruin the family name for generations to come.”

“I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

“There are a lot of people for you to meet. You can talk to her more later.” He guides me toward an imposing man standing near the bar. “Do you remember my brother?”

“Barely.” The consigliere nods curtly as we join him. “Hello, Franco. It’s nice to see you under less stressful circumstances.”

“Yes, it is.”

I feel the weight of his scrutiny and wonder if he blames me for his sister’s kidnapping. He and Enzo talk about Encore briefly, and I glance around, wondering if I’m the biggest fool for thinking this is possible.

Enzo’s arm wraps around my waist, and I take a breath, appreciating the gesture. Franco gives me a slight nod, and I pray that’s his way of telling me that I wouldn’t be here if he didn’t approve of our relationship.

A striking woman with dark hair cascading over her shoulders moves in our direction with a radiant smile. “Hello.”

“You must be Abby,” she exclaims, pulling me away from Enzo into a warm hug. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Take it easy, G,” Enzo says as his brother stalks off. “Sweetheart, this is my cousin, Gianna.”

Relief washes over me as she holds my hands and stares at me with kindness. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“I’m sure you’re feeling overwhelmed right now, but don’t worry,” Gianna assures me, placing her hand on my arm. “Eventually, this circus will feel completely normal.”

Enzo shakes his head. “Not the selling point I would’ve gone for, but it’s true.”

I lean into Enzo and wonder if Nonno was ever invited to a celebration over the years. “Congratulations on your

daughter's christening, Gianna." I open my purse and pull out a small wrapped package. "This is for Sophia."

"How lovely." Gianna hugs me again, and I hope I will eventually have a chance to become friends with the woman Enzo so clearly admires. "Speaking of my princess, I better go find her before her cheeks get kissed off. The aunts are a little too enthusiastic, so I better save her."

"We'll catch up later." Enzo turns to me. "You knocked out the big three in less than ten minutes. This is gonna be a breeze."

"Probably more like a storm," I say quietly as he leads me to a terrace overlooking the enormous lawn. The soft murmur of conversations and laughter from the people filling the tables under large pink umbrellas drifts toward us. "I didn't ask my grandfather about his association with your family." Looking up, I press my lips together. "He never said anything to us, and it doesn't feel right to bring it up now when his cognition isn't what it used to be."

"That seems fair."

Enzo looks across the lawn, and I have no idea what he's thinking. "This is where you give me some details about what he did for the family."

He turns slowly. "According to my uncle, your grandfather was a reliable numbers man for nearly forty years. He never was interested in becoming more and was happy with his place."

His brow furrows, and I move closer. "Why do you look uncomfortable?"

"I'm never uncomfortable."

"Really?" I slide my hand away. "Does Mafia blood run so thick it's immune to normal human emotion?"

"No, but Sicilian blood allows me to ignore feelings that are not useful."

"How convenient." I turn toward the railing and lean against it, wondering if I want to spend my life with someone

who thinks the macho silence thing is acceptable.

“I’m trying to protect your feelings, Abby.” He lets out a frustrated breath. “Carlo was a low-level money man, and I don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“Why would I feel that way?” I turn and trace the face that’s tattooed on the back of his hand. “My grandfather was happy running his laundromats. He was never bitter or said anything to suggest he was frustrated with what he had. Every night at dinner, he told us we needed to be grateful for such a good life.”

“Oh...okay.”

“Not everyone is meant to be a general.” I let out a small huff. “Some people are content being a soldier.”

“The famiglia is as strong as it is because of the many loyal men.”

“So why would I be disappointed that Nonno was just that?”

“I was born inside the castle and assume everyone wants what I have.”

I turn and study the enormous house. “Your life comes with a price that not everyone is willing to pay.” I play with a ring on my finger. “Your sister, for example.”

“Fuck, don’t get me started on that one.”

“Where is Ari the fireball?” I scan the crowd. “We’ve been texting, and she told me we could catch up today.”

He waves his hand toward the tables under the large tree. “She’s probably torturing some capo and pretending he has a chance of becoming her fiance.”

“And you’re doing nothing about it?”

“I’m letting Franco handle her because she pulls the kidnapped card whenever I suggest backing off the dangerous road she seems intent on pursuing.”

As the last rays of sunlight disappear, the terrace lights flicker on, casting an ethereal glow around us. Tumbling

briefly back into the hours when I didn't know if surviving was possible, I shiver. "She may just be trying to not only outrun her destiny but the inevitability of it happening again."

"No one will ever get their hands on my sister...or you."

Before I can respond, I see an imposing man who looks like a fallen angel approaching. His expression leaves no doubt that he's in charge and writes all the rules. "Is that the Don?"

"Sure is." He steps away from the railing. "Andre."

"Enzo," the Don greets, his voice commanding yet smooth. "May I have a word with Ms. Mercer?"

"Of course," Enzo replies, giving me a reassuring squeeze before stepping away.

The Don studies me closely, and I do my best not to squirm. "I understand you've been a big draw for the casino. According to my cousin, all the big whales are lining up to play with you."

"And even some arms dealers," I add quietly. "It was never my intention to put Ari in danger."

"That's obvious." He tilts his head. "You wouldn't be here if that was the case."

My pulse quickens. The message is clear, and I know that no matter how Enzo feels about me, it won't protect me if I'm disloyal to the family. "I understand."

"Your grandfather is an honorable member of the *famiglia*, so I have no reason to believe you don't have the best intentions." He pauses, leaving me hanging on his every word. "Don't disappoint me."

"I have no plans to," I assure him, swallowing against the tightness in my throat. "My loyalty is unwavering."

"Good," the Don says after a moment's consideration. "Just make sure that before you agree to marry Enzo, you understand how seriously we take the *until death do us* part of the vows."

His statement sends a shiver down my spine, and I nod, understanding the gravity of his words.

Enzo returns and takes my hand. “How are you doing?”

“I’m still in one piece,” I reply, trying not to fall apart. “The man is intense.”

“Comes with the territory.” He shakes his head. “The weight of the five families rests on his shoulders.”

“Guess that doesn’t leave much room for levity.”

“Sure as hell doesn’t.” He leads me toward the open doors of the house. “Let’s grab something to eat before we tackle the rest of the family.”

As I follow him, the weight of the Don’s words rests heavily on my shoulders. Trust is earned, and I know navigating the complexities of a relationship isn’t something I should agree to lightly. No matter what my heart is telling me to do.

The soft glow from the chandelier casts flattering light on the faces of the Bianchi family members as we enter a room filled with tables of food. “I’m gonna grab us drinks.” Enzo kisses my head. “Be right back.”

Before I can take a breath, I hear my name.

“Abby!” Ari calls out, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief as she saunters over, a glass of wine in her hand. “There you are.”

I embrace her tightly. “You look gorgeous.”

“She doesn’t need to hear it again,” Fausto comments as he joins us with a plate filled with food. “Everyone has been fawning over her for the last two hours.”

“And that’s a problem?” She turns and frowns. “Should I hide in a corner and pretend to be a simpering wallflower?”

“Sure would make my life easier,” he mumbles before popping an olive into his mouth.

“I’m still recovering from being held against my will and trying to celebrate the fact I’m alive.”

“Me too, Ari.” He presses his hand against his chest. “I have a nice souvenir from the occasion.”

“Is that your way of saying you want to sneak off to the library and watch the game?”

“Only if you want to take a load off and give the capos a chance to regroup and gather the shreds of their dignity.”

“What do you think, Abby?”

“The regrouping thing sounds like a solid plan.” I look around and see a half-dozen men with hopeful expressions. “You want to see their best efforts, after all.”

“You’re right.” She kisses my cheek. “Let’s have lunch this week.”

“I’d love that.”

Fausto gives me a grateful smile, and I watch the pair wander off, bickering like an old married couple.

“What was that all about?” Enzo asks as he hands me a glass of champagne.

“The Fausto and Ari show.”

“Always entertaining.” He pulls me against his side, and I let out a quiet sigh. “This is what it’s all about,” Enzo murmurs in my ear. “Love, loyalty, and commitment to family.”

“Am I the right person for you?”

“You are the only person.”

Children’s laughter mixes with the soft murmur of conversation, and I silently pray that we can build something that makes us both happy.

Several hours later, I wave goodbye to Enzo and watch him roar off in his sleek black Maserati. “Is this going to be life now?”

Shaking my idea at the idea of becoming a Mafia wife, I open the front door and step inside, hearing a familiar voice. “Mom?”

“I’m here, darling.”

Darling? The woman has never called me that in my life.

I stroll into the living room and see Nadia and Mom ensconced on the couch with two glasses of wine. “Did I miss the party?”

“Surprise!” Mom yells as she stands and embraces me tightly. “I decided to make the trip.”

I return her hug and see Nadia looking guilty. Did she have something to do with this trip? “I bet Nonno was happy to see you.”

“He wasn’t sure who I was, but I’m sure after a full night’s sleep, he’ll be right as rain.”

“He has dementia, Mom. Sleep has nothing to do with it.”

Waving her hand, she sits on the couch and raises her glass. “It certainly won’t hurt.”

Too tired to get into it, I collapse on the chair and slide off my pumps. “How are you, Nads?”

“Good.” She sips her wine and frowns. “Even though you’ve been avoiding me.”

Something in her tone tells me she is about to embark on a crusade that will leave nothing but hurt feelings. My friend’s tenacity can be a beautiful thing, but it can also be dangerous because she doesn’t know when to stop. “I’ve been a little under the weather.”

“You were kidnapped by an arms dealer and held for eight hours until your Mafia boyfriend rode to the rescue.”

Silence.

The kind that happens just after someone drops a bomb.

“Kidnapped?” Mom says quietly. “Really?”

“It was over before it started,” I reply, staring at someone I’ve considered a friend for twenty years. “All’s well that ends well.”

“Is that why you called me and encouraged me to come?” Mom turns toward Nadia, frowning.

“You did what?” I ask quietly, feeling anger fill my chest. No one knows my fractious relationship with my mother better than she does. Why would she intentionally stir up a storm that will leave so much damage in its wake?

“You won’t listen to me, so I thought Elena might have some luck.”

Lies. Every single word. The only person I listen to is my brother, a fact she knows too well.

“Abby, what have you done?”

Frustration gets the better of me, and I turn to the woman who was barely around after my father passed away. “I take care of my family. I’m one of the city’s best players, and my winnings have allowed Nonno to have the best care and stay in the home he loves. The money also funds Marco’s dream. He’s building a restaurant that is becoming more successful every day, and I couldn’t be prouder.”

“That is your choice. No one is forcing you to play poker. You could’ve had any job after college.”

“I have the one I want.” She drains her wine glass, and I know that I shouldn’t be surprised that she cares more about how I make my money than the fact I was held against my will for a half dozen hours.

“You don’t have to play in those awful clubs.”

“You know nothing about where I play.”

“You took too big a risk,” Nadia blurts out. “You never should’ve played with the arms dealer.” She closes her eyes. “I told you it was dangerous.”

I take a long breath. “I’m going to assume that all of this is coming from a good place, but Nadia, you have crossed a line.”

“Dating made men doesn’t end in a love story.”

“Are you really seeing a man from the famiglia?” Mom asks quietly, disapproval filling her eyes.

“Yes, I am.” I cross my arms and look between them. “Enzo Bianchi is the Don’s cousin.”

“How could you?” Twisting her hands, she lets out a frustrated breath. “I have told you countless times how dangerous it is.”

“Nonno is part of the *famiglia* and he and Nonna gave us a very good life after you took off to pursue your dreams.”

“I hated the life. Why do you think I left?” she retorts sharply.

“You knew nothing about it because Nonno never spoke about it, and the only reason you hated it so much was because your heart was broken by a capo.”

Her hand flies to her mouth. “How do you know about that?”

“Enzo looked into me before asking the Don for his blessing. Turns out Nonno is well respected, and the only reason you don’t care for the *famiglia* is that the man you fell in love with wanted to marry up.”

“Really?” Nadia asks.

“Yes.” I cross my arms. “And my love story isn’t going to end like yours or Mom’s.”

“We’ll see about that,” Nadia replies, her face filled with anger.

“Why are you so angry about this?”

“Because you’re a smart woman making a stupid choice.”

“No, I’m not. I’m just not making the one you approve of.” I stand. “And if that’s how you feel, I want you to leave.”

“You’re picking a man over me?”

“No. But I won’t have you poison my relationship before it begins. I’ve always supported you and hope you can

eventually do the same with me.”

“Right now, I can’t.”

I watch her stand and feel a little corner of my heart crack. “I love you, Nadia. But you can’t dictate how I choose to live my life.”

“It’s a mistake.” She walks past me, and I hear the door open and close with a final click.

“What about you, Mom?”

“I don’t like this new you.”

“I haven’t changed. I simply opened my heart to someone who makes me feel like the center of his world.” I pick up my coat and purse. “I’m going to head to bed. If you want to talk about this in the morning, we can.” I shake my head. “But I’m not going to stop seeing this man, and I hope you can eventually find a way to support me.”

I kiss her cheek and head upstairs, knowing that giving this relationship a chance is my only choice. No matter how it turns out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



I watch Abby hesitate at the foot of the stairs leading to my family's private plane. Her long, blond curls catch the sunlight, creating an almost halo-like aura around her. "Welcome aboard, sweetheart."

I reach for her hand and feel her grip my fingers tightly. "I never asked how you feel about flying."

"I enjoy it." She smiles tentatively as she looks around the luxurious interior. "Damn Enzo. This is going to make flying Spirit Airlines a little tough."

"I've never heard of Spirit."

"Not surprising." She looks up and bites her lips. "We are so different."

"Something that will no doubt work in our favor."

"I hope so," she mutters, following me to a set of chairs and dropping her bag on a table.

The flight attendant approaches, and I glance at Abby. "Do you need something stronger than champagne?"

"No." She kisses my cheek before sitting down, and I notice her smile isn't quite as bright.

I nod to the attendant and then take a seat as the engines roar to life. After taking her hand, I feel her grip it tightly as we begin moving down the runway. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

Seconds later, the plane lifts gracefully into the sky, and we both gaze out the window, watching the shrinking cityscape of Boston disappear below us.

"Goodbye, Boston," she murmurs, her voice barely audible over the hum of the engines.

“Hello, new beginnings,” I reply firmly as I watch her tuck a loose curl behind her ear. “How are you doing? Have you spoken with Nadia since your disagreement?”

“No.” Her mouth pinches together. “She texted me and said she’d help me pick up the pieces when things fall apart.”

“Damn. She’s sticking to her guns.”

“When she takes a stand on something, she rarely changes her mind.” Her fingers rub an invisible spot on the armrest. “And she is dead set against me getting involved with you.”

“That’s bullshit.” I shake my head. “She’s dated a bunch of our soldiers.”

“And it didn’t work out for her.”

“That has nothing to do with their job.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It sure as shit does because she’s your best friend.”

“Which means she should support my happiness regardless of my choices and not make it contingent on me following her rules.”

I want to say something but keep my thoughts to myself, knowing there isn’t much I can do to make her feel better. People are either accepting of our way of life or they’re not.

There’s no middle ground, and the sooner you find out how a person feels, the better. “Did your mom head back to Florida?”

“Yes, she’s assigned to a new ship and pretty excited about it.”

“I guess I’ll meet her next time she’s in town.”

“Probably.”

I sit back and take a long breath. As much as I want to push the family thing, I know it’s the last thing Abby needs right now.

“Can I ask you something?”

Her voice is hesitant, making me wonder if she's having second thoughts. "You can ask me anything."

"What do you dream about?" She waves her hand around and chuckles. "I mean, beyond this super lux lifestyle."

I pause, considering her question. "My dreams have always been centered around my responsibilities and protecting my family." The plane reaches cruising altitude, and the flight attendant delivers our drinks along with a small plate of cheese and crackers. The world outside fades away, and we finally have no distractions. A few days away is going to be the best thing for our new relationship. "What about you? Tell me your dreams?"

"Beyond becoming the best player possible, I don't have many." She looks out the window. "Which is kind of sad."

"There is nothing wrong with focusing on your career." She traces the letter tattoos on my fingers. "We'll add new ones together."

"Like what?"

I see her uncertainty and shift closer. "Family." Her mouth lifts, and I let out a silent breath. "Lots of them."

Her head whips around. "You're not talking double digits, are you?"

"No!" I let out a loud laugh. "I'm thinking two."

"I've always liked the number four."

"Then that's what you'll always have." I lift her hand and press it against mine. "Four houses, four cars, and at least four adventures every year."

"You forgot about the pets," she teases. "Four llamas, four pandas, and at least four cats."

"No cats." I lean my head against the seat. "They are sneaky bastards and can never tell what they're thinking."

"We'll see." She turns and gives me a smile that I know will make me give her whatever she wants. "Do you think fate brought us together?"

“Something powerful did, but I don’t know if it was fate.” I take our clasped hands and rest them on my leg, feeling the connection that was there from the moment we met. “I knew right away that you were the one for me.” The hum of the plane’s engines surrounds us as we cut through the night sky. “From our first encounter, you were tattooed on my heart.” I lean across the seat and kiss her gently. “And I’m never going to let you go.”

“Show me,” she whispers. “I want to fall into you... feel all of you.” Her hand grips my shirt. “I want to know this thing is real and that no matter what or who comes along, nothing will break us.”

I flick open my seat belt and do the same with hers. “Your wish is my command.” As the plane speeds through the night, I lift her into my arms, knowing that Abby Mercer isn’t a one-in-a-million kind of girl but a once-in-a-lifetime kind of love and that I am the luckiest bastard in the world.

The door to the bedroom snicks shut, and I peel off Abby’s clothes like cards off a new deck and then get rid of my own. “You don’t hold back with me.”

Trailing my hand along her stomach, I spin her around and press my hips into hers, ensuring she can feel how hard she makes me. “I expect you to give me everything.”

“Two commands in less than five seconds.” She purses her mouth. “That might be a record.”

“Sweetheart, I’m just getting started.”

She drops to the bed and glances over her shoulder with a smile that dares me to do every filthy thing I can think of.

“Good girl.” I pin her against the mattress, and she slides down on her elbows and groans when I play with her clit. Her whole body goes slack as I apply just enough pressure to make her body know who’s running the show. “My dreams are filled with you. The sounds you make. The way you move. How good it feels when I fill you with my cum, and you suck out every last drop.”

“Always you,” she whispers as I tease her opening and compress my shaft against her until it hits her clit.

“Quit playing around, Enzo.”

“You’re not in charge, Sharky.”

I flip her over and roll her nipples between my thumb and forefinger and watch her whole body respond. Brushing my balls across her stomach, I watch her pink tongue pop out as she stares at my rock-hard cock. “You want it?”

“Yes.”

I shift my hips, and she slides her tongue down, ensuring I will never have another sane thought again. “Don’t kill me, woman.”

She responds by cupping my balls and taking me a little deeper. My body moves on its own, and I thrust gently, feeling my balls tighten. A low moan builds in my chest, and I pull away. “Nope. Not going to happen.”

I move down her body as I play with her nipples. I watch her shimmer as I find the right pressure. “There. That. More.”

Loving that she can’t utter more words, I push my cock deep into her heat and feel her body bow off the mattress. Her teeth sink into my shoulder, and I move my fingers away from her nipples and apply a little pressure to her throat. Her pulse beats against my hand, and I drive into her and feel like I’m plugged into a socket.

Her mouth curves up, and I slow my pace, so deep inside her, I think we’re one. “Are you with me?”

“Yes. Always.”

I cup her face with my hands and begin thrusting again as I hold her gaze. “You and me.” I thrust deeper, caging her in with my arms, and roar off the cliff, taking her with me.

Minutes later, when I finally return to earth, I kiss her neck and inhale the scent of us. “I have a lot more planned. That was just the appetizer.”

“You can do them all in about twenty minutes.”

I pull my head away from her body and see her eyes close. “Okay sweetheart. We’ve got the rest of our lives to make one another happy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Abby

I walk into the luxurious suite at the BahaMar Resort beside Enzo and feel like I've slipped into another world. The breathtaking view of the white sand beach and the elegant flamingos strolling along the shore look like a postcard. "This is incredible," I breathe, momentarily forgetting everything that led us here.

"Only the best for you," Enzo replies, his green eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Trying to impress me, Mobster?"

"Every day for the rest of our lives." He takes my hand, leading me towards the balcony.

"Is it working?"

I let a small smile escape my lips before answering him. "Maybe just a little," I admit, knowing it's much more than a little. "But you better be careful because flying private and staying in a super glam suite is something I could get used to."

"I'm going to spoil the hell out of you, Abby. Make no mistake."

"You already have." We step onto the balcony, the warm ocean breeze wrapping around us as my curls tangle.

"Are you ready to take me on?"

Laughing, I give him a once over and twist my hair into a knot. "I just did on the plane an hour ago."

"I'm not talking about sex." He shakes his head and tries to look stern. "I'm talking about my life."

I study his beautiful profile and know that beneath his mobster exterior lies a man who genuinely cares about those he loves. “A life together,” I say quietly, wondering how we’ll make it work. “How exactly does a marriage succeed in the criminal underworld?”

“By trusting one another.”

“Trust,” I echo, letting the word linger in the air between us. “I haven’t always been very good at that.”

“Do you think you can do it with me?”

The breeze brushes my cheek, and I know that taking a leap of faith is my only choice. “I love you, Enzo, and I will do everything I can to make it possible.”

“What more can I ask?” He steps back, drops down on a lounge chair, and takes me with him. “I’m going to love every piece of you, Abby. On good days and on bad ones.”

“What kind of percentages are we talking about?” I tap my chin. Is it a fifty-fifty kind of thing or a thirty-seventy?”

“Just know that my goal every day will include making you a hundred percent happy.”

“That right there is why I’ve fallen for you.” I trace his sharp cheekbone and know that beneath his beautiful exterior lies a much more impressive interior. Enzo Bianchi is the kind of man who will love me through any storm and make sure we love each other through it. “You don’t believe in half-measures.”

“No, I fucking don’t.”

I press our mouths together and feel like complete for the first time in my life. “You are going to be the biggest gamble I take and my best chance at life filled with love.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

The sun dips below the horizon, painting the sky in a kaleidoscope of colors, and I see him reach into his pocket and pull out a small velvet box.

The palms sway in the breeze as he opens it, revealing a stunning ring. “Enzo!” A massive diamond catches the last rays of the sun, casting a kaleidoscope of light around us. “Is that a friendship ring?”

Laughing, he holds it up. “This ring is my way of asking you to trust me with your heart and take a leap of faith to build a future together.”

“Honey,” I begin, swallowing hard, trying to put my thoughts into words. “I’m not a leaper... but how can I say no to you?”

“I’m a grown-up version of Cookie Monster. If you let me hold your hand for the rest of your life, I will make the world feel right.”

I take his hand and link our fingers. “I would love nothing more.”

“I love you, Abby Mercer.” He slips the ring on my finger, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart.

The ring feels heavier than I’d expected, but not nearly as heavy as the weight of our commitment to each other. Our love feels like this ring. It’s genuinely tangible and something we can hold onto when danger knocks on the door.

“We’re going to have a good life, Abby.”

“I’m counting on it.” Leaning up, I kiss him tenderly and feel the world fade away. “Because you’re stuck with me, Mobster.”

“That was the plan all along.” A fierce smile spreads across my face, and I wonder exactly how diabolic my future husband is.

“Are you ready to show the world what we’re made of, Sharky?”

“Absolutely, Mobster.” His mouth curves into a smile that matches my own, and I know that no matter what happens, Enzo will do everything possible to twist the stars in the sky and make our future gloriously bright.

Epilogue



Four Years Later

Golden rays of sunlight stream through the large, open windows, casting a warm glow on the polished wooden table where I sit with my daughter. Eyes that match her father's sparkle with curiosity as she gazes at the deck of cards in my hands, her tiny fingers fidgeting in anticipation.

"Alright, sweetheart," I say softly, "I'm going to teach you how to play a card game." Her face lights up, and I hope she will always be eager to learn something new.

"First, we need to shuffle the cards." I demonstrate by mixing the deck, my movements smooth and precise despite not playing as often as I used to. My daughter watches intently, her small brow furrowed in concentration.

"Can I try?" she asks, her voice impatient. I nod and hand her the deck, guiding her as she attempts to shuffle the cards. She struggles initially, dropping a few onto the table, but gets more confident as we practice. "Good job, honey."

"Okay, Mommy, what's next?" she asks, her excitement palpable. I take a deep breath and begin explaining the rules of the game. As I speak, I watch her taking in every word and detail. She's intelligent and seems to have the same love of numbers that I do.

"Remember, sweetheart," I say, stressing the importance of strategy, "the key is to think about the cards you have and make decisions based on that."

"Okay, Mommy," she nods enthusiastically, her eyes filled with determination. As we settle into our game, I still can't believe this little girl is ours. It took us a minute to get here, and I never want to forget to appreciate the blessing.

I shuffle the cards one last time and glance at my daughter's eager face. "Alright, sweetie, we're going to start with a simple game called Go Fish," I explain. Her eyes light up as she nods in anticipation.

Her tiny hands reach out for the cards I deal her. She fumbles a bit but manages to hold onto them. "Ready to play?" I ask, raising an eyebrow playfully. She nods vigorously, her blond curls bouncing along with her excitement.

"Go fish!" she yells out, clearly misunderstanding the rules. I suppress my laughter. "Not yet, honey. You need to ask me for a card first."

"Okay, Mommy. Do you have any... threes?" she asks hesitantly, peeking at her cards. My heart burst with pride as I see her actively trying to understand the game.

"Good job, sweetheart! That's how you ask," I reply, handing her one of my threes. "Now it's my turn."

As we continue playing, I watch her face scrunch in concentration, her small fingers gripping the cards tightly. She's a quick learner, no doubt inheriting that trait from me. But right now, I'm just grateful for this moment – a reprieve from the dangerous world outside these walls. A chance to connect with my daughter and share something I love.

"Mommy, do you have any sevens?" she pipes up, interrupting my thoughts. I shake my head, trying to stay focused on the game.

"Go fish, sweetheart." She grins triumphantly as she pulls a seven from the deck, her enthusiasm infectious. And as I look into her sparkling eyes, I know that no matter what challenges life may throw at us, she's worth every gamble I've ever taken.

"Okay, sweetie, now that you've got the basics, let's practice thinking about what cards you might want to ask for," I advise. My daughter nods determinedly, her eyes scanning her hand with intensity.

"Mommy, do you have any... eights?" she asks, her voice growing in confidence.

I hand over my eight of hearts. “Great job, honey! Now remember, sometimes it’s not just about asking for the card you need, but also trying to figure out what your opponent might have,” I explain.

She bites her lower lip, a habit she picked up from me when deep in thought, then looks up with determination in her eyes. “Do you have any... fours?”

“Go fish,” I reply, impressed by her bold choice. She pulls a card from the deck and, with wide eyes, reveals a four.

“Wow, Mommy! I did it!”

“Amazing, sweetheart! You’re a natural at this game,” I praise, feeling a surge of pride.

Our laughter fills the spacious room, bouncing off the walls and echoing back to us.

“Mommy, do you have any... eights?”

“Go fish,” I reply, trying to maintain a straight face. She reaches for the deck, and I watch her draw an eight, her eyes lighting up with triumph.

“Ha! I got one!” she exclaims, placing the pair on the table. Her laughter fills the room, and I join in.

“Alright, smarty pants, it’s your turn again,” I tease, tickling her sides gently. She squirms and giggles, swatting my hands away playfully.

“Okay, okay! Let me think...” she says, scrunching her nose in concentration. I can see her mind working, analyzing the cards in her hand and trying to remember which ones have already been played. “Mommy, do you have any... fives?” she asks hesitantly, her eyebrows raised in anticipation.

“Actually, I do,” I admit, handing over the card and watching as her face breaks into a grin. She places another pair on the table, and I can’t help but marvel at her progress.

“Wow, sweetheart, you’re really getting the hang of this!”

“Thanks, Mommy! I’m learning from the best,” she says with a wink, mimicking my earlier gesture. We both burst into

laughter again, the sound echoing throughout the room.

“Abby? Everything okay in here?” Enzo’s deep voice resonates from the doorway, and I look up to see him standing there, his tall frame filling the entrance.

Hey, honey,” I greet him, feeling my heart skip a beat as our eyes lock. “We’re just playing some Go Fish.”

His gaze shifts to our daughter, his eyes filled with love and pride as he studies the table littered with cards.

“Look, Daddy! I’m winning!” our daughter exclaims excitedly, waving her cards in the air for emphasis.

“Is that so?” Enzo chuckles, walking over to the table and kneeling beside her. “Well, I don’t doubt it for a second. You’re learning from the best, after all.”

“Thanks, Daddy!” she beams, her cheeks flushed with happiness.

“Alright, you two,” Enzo says, rubbing his hands together with a glint in his eye. “How about I join you ladies for the next round? Let’s see if I can give you a run for your money.”

“Bring it on, Daddy!” our daughter challenges, her eyes sparkling excitedly.

“Sounds like fun,” I agree, smirking as I shuffle the cards and deal out a new hand.

“Remember, love,” Enzo tells our daughter, leaning in conspiratorially. “Don’t let Mommy’s poker face fool you.” He winks at me, and I feel my heart flutter in response to his teasing.

“Okay,” she nods, her determined expression making me burst into silent laughter. It’s remarkable how much she resembles her father when she’s focused like this.

“Ready?” I ask, looking from one to the other. They both nod, and the game begins. We exchange cards and take turns asking for matches, each trying to be strategic while simultaneously attempting to keep our plans hidden.

“Got any queens, Mommy?” our daughter asks, her voice steady and sure. She’s getting better at this – not only in terms of skill but also confidence.

“Ah, you got me,” I say, feigning disappointment as I hand over the card she requested. She grins triumphantly, clearly pleased with herself.

“Your turn, Daddy,” she prompts, looking expectantly at Enzo.

“Alright, let’s see,” he drawls, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Do either of you lovely ladies have any… eights?”

“Sorry, no eight here,” I reply, trying to keep my face neutral as I watch him shift his attention to our daughter.

“Me neither,” she says, shaking her head solemnly. Enzo raises his eyebrows in mock surprise before drawing a card from the deck.

“Looks like I’ll have to try my luck with the deck,” he sighs dramatically, and I know I am the luckiest woman in the world.

Enzo has kept every promise to me and made my life beautiful despite the danger we live with. I take his free hand and squeeze it. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“This.”

“Eew. Don’t start kissing. You two do it too much.”

“No such thing.” Enzo leans over and kisses me deeply.

“Cards.” She waves them around. “Focus Dad.”

“Alright.”

We start another game, and our banter grows more animated, each of us playfully trash-talking the others in a lighthearted attempt to gain the upper hand. The room is filled with teasing, creating an atmosphere of love I wouldn’t trade for the world.

“Watch out, Mommy,” Enzo warns me, his voice dripping with faux menace. “I’m coming for your cards.”

“Bring it on,” I challenge, giving him a saucy wink. “But just remember – I taught you everything you know.”

“True,” he concedes, grinning. “But you haven’t seen all my tricks yet.” His words send a thrill down my spine, reminding me of the many layers of this man I have come to love so deeply.

“Mommy, Daddy,” our daughter interrupts with an impish grin. “You’re both going down!”

“Big talk for such a little shark,” I tease, ruffling her hair affectionately.

“Exactly,” Enzo agrees, his eyes twinkling with pride as he watches our daughter hold her own against us. “But don’t underestimate her, Abby. She’s got her mother’s brains and her father’s cunning.”

“Indeed,” I murmur as I watch my daughter’s eyes dart between Enzo and me. She giggles, mischief dancing in her gaze.

“Okay,” she declares, her little voice filled with determination. “I’m going to ask...Daddy! Do you have any threes?”

Enzo feigns surprise, his eyes widening theatrically. “Why, yes, I do!” he exclaims, handing over a single card. “But don’t get too comfortable, kiddo.”

“Your turn, Mommy,” she reminds me, and I take a moment to scan the cards before deciding.

“Sweetheart, do you have any sevens?” I ask, trying to keep my tone light despite the competitive fire burning inside me. She grins and hands over two of them, and I can’t help but be impressed at her ability to read the game so well already.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a prodigy here,” Enzo teases, his eyes shining with admiration for our little girl.

“I think you’re right.” After the final cards are played, Enzo sweeps our daughter into his arms, showering her with

praise and affection.

“Well done, sweetheart,” he tells her, his voice warm and proud. “You were amazing!”

“Really, Daddy?” she asks, her eyes wide and innocent.

“Absolutely,” he confirms, kissing her forehead gently. “You’ve got your mom’s smarts and talent for cards, that’s for sure.”

I pull them both into a hug, the love I feel for my family threatening to overwhelm me. In this moment, I am reminded of how far we’ve come and how precious these moments truly are.

“Mommy, did I really do good?” My daughter’s voice is small, but her eyes are hopeful.

“Sweetheart,” I whisper, gently kissing her cheek. “You did more than good. You were incredible. And I am so, so proud of you.”

As Enzo sets our daughter back onto her feet, I watch her race across the room and lie beside the four cats, napping in the window.

Enzo wraps his arm around me, and I lean against him as he rubs my very pregnant belly. “She really is something special, isn’t she?” he murmurs, his eyes never leaving our daughter as she pets the cats gently.

“Definitely,” I agree, leaning into his warmth. “She’s got the best of both of us.”

Our eyes meet, and I feel my two small elbows ripple across my stomach. “Your boys must be playing soccer.”

Leaning down, he presses a kiss on my belly. “Behave boys. You still have another two months.”

“If I make it that long.”

“We’re getting closer to our number, sweetheart.”

“About that,” I look up and grimace. “I may be done after this. Three kids is probably enough.”

“It’s up to you.” He pulls me against his chest. “Because your happiness is all that matters.”

“Does that mean we can get one more cat?”

“No!” He steps back and slides his hand on his hips. “And no more of those squawking birds either.”

“They’re singing, honey.”

“Lies,” he replies with a small laugh.”

I pull his hand so the tips of our shoes touch. “Thank you, Enzo. For this life, you have given me.” He presses our heads together, and a silent understanding passes between us, an acknowledgment of all the obstacles we’ve overcome to reach this point.

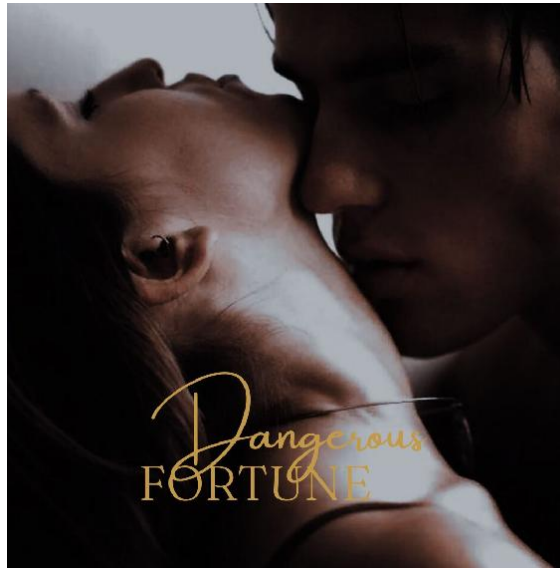
Our journey has been far from easy, but there’s no denying that our love for each other has made it all worthwhile.

“Who would have thought,” I muse, my words quiet yet full of emotion, “that a card shark and a mobster could find happiness like this?”

Enzo presses a kiss against my temple. “I did,” he says, his voice filled with love. “From the moment I saw you.”

I think about how our love story began – and know I’m the luckiest woman in the world since a day doesn’t pass without my mobster making me feel like I’m holding four aces in my hand.

Stay in touch



I hope you enjoyed the third book in the Demons and Angels series.

Look for Ari and Maxsim's story in 2024

If you haven't read Alexey and Gianna's story, I've included a preview.

Xoxo

Lea

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CHAPTER ONE



Gianna

My ancestors glare at me from the paintings on the wall, and I can't help but wonder how many of them consider me a freakish misfit. Given that most of the Cosa Nostra does, it wouldn't be surprising if my dead relatives agreed.

"Gianna!"

Lifting my gaze, I see my brother standing in the office doorway, looking every inch the Mafia boss. "I'm coming." I trail my hand along the frescoed wall featuring a replica of *The Creation of Adam* and pray he isn't about to inform me about some horrid marriage proposal.

"Before the end of time?"

"Yes, Andre." I follow him into the office and smell the lingering scent of my father's cigars. "Are you going to start smoking when the crown is handed over?"

"Probably not." He sits behind the massive desk. "Too many people are trying to kill me, so the last thing I'll do is help them by filling my lungs with tar."

Pushing things around on the desk, I line up several gold pens. "So why did you drag me down here?"

"To offer my congratulations."

"Really?" Fear sloshes in my stomach. "Because your face isn't saying, I'm so proud of my sister." He shoots me a wordless glare, and I pray he's been too busy with his new responsibilities to uncover my most recent hack. My little band of marauders scored a victory earlier, and the last thing I need is for him to discover that I reneged on my promise.

“But perhaps I’m misreading things, and your perma-scowl has nothing to do with me.” I pick up a picture of my beautiful mama, wipe off a fingerprint, and then set it down carefully. “Did you hear about the almond cake I made earlier? Despite Nonna’s warnings, I added extra amaretto to the frosting, and it was delicious. The men devoured it before I could save a piece for you.”

“This isn’t about dessert,” he barks out. “Try again.”

I drop into a chair and decide to prolong the guessing game since annoying Andre is still one of my favorite hobbies. “Does it have anything to do with the thirteen million I made on the tech stock this morning?”

“No.”

The sound of the pendulum swinging in the large wall clock breaks the quiet in the room as hope flares in my chest. “Did Aldo rescind his courtship offer?”

“Yes!” He leans forward. “Whatever you did makes Dayton seem like a better option.”

I study the pattern on the ancient rug beneath my feet and silently sing a chorus of hallelujah. Another suitor bites the dust. “Don’t knock the city. They have a lively arts scene.”

“Something a *caporegime* will be sure to appreciate.”

“It can’t be all blood and bullets, twenty-four-seven.” I wave my hands. “Even mobsters need a night off occasionally.”

“What did you do to the man? He was sweating when he told me about his decision.”

“That’s weird.” I picture the shy, oversized *capo* who stumbled over his words and momentarily regret the full crazy lady performance I made him endure. “Isn’t he one of your most merciless soldiers?”

“Yes!” Leaning back, Andre rubs his temples. “Even the Albanians avoid him. But two coffee dates with you, and he’s ready to run off to Ohio.”

“Perhaps he foolishly bought into the rumors swirling around and decided being married to a *Strega* wasn’t for him.”

“Despite your oddities, you can hardly be considered a witch.”

“Tell that to Nonna.” His frustrated growl fills the large room. “Don’t get your shorts in a twist. I behaved during the dates and made sure to display my delightful personality and perfect Mafia princess comportment. I can’t be blamed for your soldier scampering off like a scared squirrel.” I rearrange the folds in the skirt of my vintage Dior and watch my brother stand. “What are you doing?” He slowly walks around the desk and plucks the piece of hair that sits between my eyebrows. “Hey!”

“Perfect Mafia princesses usually don’t include a unibrow as part of their makeup routine.” He lifts off the mole, sprouting two long hairs that decorates my chin, and flicks it toward my lap. “I have enough shit going on without dealing with your antics.”

I pocket my accessories. “Then leave me be. I’m worth more to the family if I stay home and continue to launder money. No one matches my skills or abilities, so let me remain the *Crazy Bianchi Spinster* and live in my tower peacefully.”

“I doubt anyone would describe the west wing as a tower considering you’ve decorated it like a Medici palace.” Regret fills his eyes. “*Cara*, what happened when you were younger won’t be repeated. I will destroy anyone who dares to consider it.”

Ignoring the painful flashes of memory, I concentrate on how soft my sweater feels against my arms. Pictures I can’t control ricochet around my mind, so I grab a lemon candy from the jar on the desk and pop it into my mouth. Once the tart flavor rolls across my tongue, I feel more grounded and raise my eyes. “I’m an anti-social weirdo that shouldn’t be foisted on anyone.” I press my hands against my lap. “Even a loyal Cosa Nostra soldier.”

“You’re not a weirdo.” He returns to his chair. “But you must keep your end of the bargain if you want the keys to your

golden cage to remain in my hands.”

“I promise to behave.” He responds with a disbelieving snort, and I’m reminded how different the room will be once he’s anointed Boss. “Is there anything else you want to discuss? Enzo told me that Papa has returned from treatment, and I want to make him a cup of tea.”

“We’re in talks with the Russians and considering an alliance.”

“No way!” I sit forward. “Why would we get in bed with our mortal enemies? You always say that you wouldn’t trust them to look after a donut from Dunkin.”

“The cartels are becoming aggressive, and the peace we negotiated with the Irish fell apart faster than the shit soda bread they love.”

My mind spins as I sift through our shared interests, matching and discarding scenarios. “Do you need me to do anything?”

“Other than your usual duties, you’ll need to attend a charity event with me. The Attorney General is hosting one on Friday at the Ritz Carlton.”

Leaning forward, I frown. “You do remember that I’m the one who flails in large groups, right? Our baby sister is much more adept at those kinds of things. I just make people run away, screaming with frustration.”

“The AG adores you and is a big fan. After you fixed his portfolio, he asked for half the usual contribution to his reelection campaign. You will accompany me, and I don’t want to see fake facial hair or teeth anywhere on your person.”

“Spoilsport.” I push myself up and think of other ways to ensure my reputation remains intact.

“And Gianna—”

The lines on Andre’s forehead deepen, and I hold my breath. “Yes?”

“Did you and your hacker buddies have anything to do with the breakdown of the FAA’s Notice to Air Missions

system?”

“*Moi?*” My stomach dips, and I pray the sudden sweat on my brow doesn’t become evident.

“Yes. All flights were canceled in the US for several hours this morning.”

“I would never—”

His hand flies up, and I snap my mouth shut.

“You must stay out of trouble to escape walking down the aisle. That’s our deal, and I expect you to keep your word.”

“Yes. Absolutely.” I scurry out of the office before he can say more and hold my breath until I enter the kitchen. “Too damn close.” Admonishing myself for taking the risk, I vow to behave because being pawned off to solidify power for the *Famiglia* isn’t something I would survive.

I lean against a cabinet, notice a slice of afternoon sun streaming across the polished wood floors, and picture the good Samaritan who helped me all those weeks ago. Why does his face come to mind any time marriage is mentioned?

“Did you just see a vision of your future?”

Startled, I turn and see Nonna sitting at the small table in the alcove. “Of course not.”

“I don’t know why you bother lying.” She smooths out the linen napkin beneath her teacup.

“We can talk about it later. Andre just informed me that I must attend a benefit on Friday. Can I borrow the Black Givenchy for the torturous event?”

“Dear girl, I have told you a hundred times to take all those old things and put them in your closet.”

“Nonna, you have a multi-million-dollar fashion archive.” She waves her hand, and I walk over to kiss her cheek. “And I like visiting your rooms to dig through your treasures and eat up all the orange candies that Zia Sofia sends.”

“And I love seeing the strange outfits you put together.”

“It’s called a unique fashion sense.”

“Basta.”

I smooth out her chignon and then stroll to the cabinet, feeling her hawkish focus. “Aldo rescinded his offer.”

“Of course he did.”

I place a matching cup and saucer on a tray. “I wonder how many more suitors there will be. At least a dozen have turned tail, so there can’t be many more.”

“They could send an army, and it wouldn’t matter. Unless ___”

“What?”

“Whoever you met weeks ago ends up being a viable candidate.”

Sputtering, I grab a napkin and fold it. “I barely leave the house, so how could I have met anyone? And we both know that if someone drags me down the aisle, it will be because it benefits the family.”

“When you came home from the museum, you were glowing.” She clucks her tongue. “Perhaps whoever caught your eye will somehow bring you happiness and an alliance the family will celebrate.”

“Is that wishful thinking or a premonition?”

“Perhaps a little of both.”

Shaking off the full-body chill that occurs whenever I think of the stranger’s face, I remind myself that romantic fantasies are for those not bound to life in the Cosa Nostra.

CHAPTER TWO



Alexey

Sending a bullet into the heart of my enemy never fails to fill me with bone-deep satisfaction, and watching the Albanian collapse against the concrete is no exception. “This is what happens to people who cross me.”

I catch my brigadier’s eye while sliding my gun into the holster against my chest. “Yuri, add this one to the pile when he’s done bleeding out.”

“Of course, Pakhan.”

Tipping my chin to my most valued soldier, I silently acknowledge my good fortune to have so many ruthless men at my side. No man can remain in power without loyal soldiers, and I have more than enough to ensure the Volkov Syndicate flourishes.

“You have a bit of blood on your cheek,” my brother says, holding out a handkerchief.

I swipe the fine cotton over my face and then hold it up. “Fuck, Maxsim. Even your handkerchiefs are expensive.”

“Civility is the details, and let’s be honest, those billions we’ve amassed won’t spend themselves.”

“Which must be why you chose to wear a Brioni suit to a blood bath.”

“I take my work seriously, and my wardrobe reflects that.”

Dismissing his self-satisfied smirk, I focus on the problem at hand and why an enemy would choose to risk my displeasure.

“This attack makes the alliance with the Italians look more appealing, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” I reply reluctantly. “Is this the second hit we’ve taken this month?”

“Third.”

I carefully fold the handkerchief. “Why would the Albanians suddenly feel emboldened to intercept a shipment?”

“They had a shakeup in management. Perhaps this was the leader’s way of making a name for himself.”

“If he was going for Grim Reaper, he succeeded.” I count the corpses littering the warehouse and know we wiped out half his crew. “Perhaps we should remind our enemies that I’m more unforgiving than Papa and much less patient.”

“There’s nothing I love more than crafting the perfect memorandum.”

“Make sure it costs them more than soldiers.” The deadly gleam in his eye is unmistakable. Most people consider me the most vicious monster in the Bratva, but little do they know that my brother beats me by a mile. “Just don’t light half the city on fire when you do.”

“Is it really a good idea to tell an artist how to do his job?”

I lean in and grab the back of his neck. “Don’t do something crazy.” Squeezing, I press our heads together. “I won’t do this alone and need you at my side because too many people would like to see us fail.” He pulls away, and I pray he heeds my words.

“Don’t worry, big brother.” He straightens his jacket. “I’m under control.”

“I’m counting on it.” I return his handkerchief and then stride toward the warehouse doors.

When we stand shoulder to shoulder facing the water, I pop a peppermint into my mouth and stare at the ships cruising through the harbor. “What do you hear from the *Vory V*

Zakone? Are they still grumbling about the changes we've made?"

"The old men cling to tradition since it's the only thing that makes them feel relevant."

"That doesn't answer my question. Is there dissent that I need to be aware of before we make a formal arrangement with the Cosa Nostra?"

"Dissent is a strong word."

"Then share a more accurate one."

"Frustration."

"I have more blood on my hands than the entirety of the state penitentiary. You would think they would be appreciative of my efforts." A frigid breeze blows off the water, and I allow it to quell my anger. "And what the hell is there to be frustrated about?"

"Our modern approach makes them uncomfortable, and a few still believe an older Vor would be a better choice."

I'm certainly not the youngest man to run the syndicate, but not considered seasoned at thirty-four. "Their pockets are overflowing. What else could they possibly want?"

"A leader that is married."

"A woman in my home won't change how I do business." I rub a spec of blood off my thumb. "Should I guess who is pushing the agenda?"

"If you feel like wasting time." Maxsim shakes his head. "You have no one to blame but yourself. Getting involved with Sasha Belkov was a bad move because Kirill thinks the sun rises on her shiny blond head."

I picture the daughter of the man who desperately wanted to be crowned king. Kirill Belkov runs guns for the syndicate and is not only greedy for power but a straight-up psychopath. Which makes bedding the princess of the family one of my more regrettable choices. "She convinced me we were on the same page and that it was just a friendly fuck."

“And, of course, your dick bought the lie.” He straightens his cuffs. “The Krupins and Zolotovs are banging the marriage drum too.”

Many responses fly through my head, along with a shit ton of rationalizations, but I know none will make much difference in the end.

“We can’t spit on every tradition and expect them to applaud.” He rests his hand on my shoulder. “It’s time to take a wife.”

Rolling my neck, I try and ease the sensation of a noose tightening.

“When you took over, many thought you were too aggressive and volatile. The blood bathing the streets for the last year suggests some validity to the argument. Stability. An eye to the future will show the syndicate that you are the right choice for pakhan.”

“I’m the only one.” I slide my lighter out and flip it over several times. “This old-world nonsense is bullshit. Why do they think a settled man makes a better leader?”

“It’s not about your leadership skills but longevity. A wife will let everyone know the young Vor values stability, and there will be heirs to lead us into the future.”

Running my hands through my hair, I let out a frustrated sigh. “Fuck me.”

“If we find the right candidate,” Maxsim laughs, “I’m sure she’d be happy to.”

“A part of me knows this is inevitable, and I hate that the old bastards think they can dictate the timing.” Flicking my lighter, I watch the flame come to life. “But hesitating will only make me look weak, so find me a politically advantageous bride. Anyone but Sasha Belkov. She is as psychotic as she is beautiful, and I would rather die with a bullet in my back than be knifed in the middle of the night by my wife.”

“Such a romantic.”

“There’s no time for fairy tales. We have a legacy to secure.”

He slaps me on the back. “If we come to an agreement with the Italians, a Sicilian wife could be an option.”

“Because nothing says, let’s do business together, like an arranged marriage.” Returning my lighter to my pocket, I hear his deep chuckle ricochet off the concrete. “Enjoy your freedom because soon it will be your turn.”

“I’m well aware of that and plan on bedding many beautiful women before it happens.” He buttons his coat. “And don’t look so gloomy. You could soon be handed a Renaissance beauty to warm your bed. That alone should make the prospect of matrimony more palatable.”

An unwelcome picture of the woman I rescued a month ago fills my mind. How can an encounter that lasted less than a few minutes haunt me? “I don’t care who walks down the aisle as long as it’s not Sasha. Whatever union I’m chained to will succeed because it’s politically advantageous, not because fucking my wife won’t be a hardship.”

“Always the realist.”

“I’ve never had a chance to become anything else.” One of our ships comes into view, and I remind myself that personal happiness is for those who don’t sit on the throne of an empire.

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