

DANGEROUS OBSESSION

VICE CITY,
BOOK 2

VICE CITY TIMES

NEW YORK

And in our world, the Fausti family is considered royalty among killers, thieves, and generally anyone who usually does business in the dark. They are cold hearts while being the warmest of hearts. Being the smallest that I know, the crumbs of the crumbly world of the mazzareno dream to be like them.



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BELLA DI CORTE

DANGEROUS OBSESSION

VICE CITY

BOOK 2

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Editing by: Alisa Carter

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“What we do in life... echoes in eternity.”

MAXIMUS, *GLADIATOR*

“So, I love you because the entire universe conspired to help me find you.”

PAULO COELHO, *THE ALCHEMIST*

“Rome is Magic.”

MARIA GRAZIA CUCINOTTA

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CAST

Because the Fausti Family is so vast—they even have factions! —I put together a detailed list of the cast. The list can be found on my website, but, it's located in a secret area of it. You can find the link in this book under contents, then, *Free Short Stories and More*.

It's an amazingly detailed list, complete with extra facts, and so much more.

I hope you enjoy it! And please don't hesitate to reach out if for some reason you can't find the link.

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

THEY'RE NEVER, EVER GETTING TOGETHER.

That's what the beginning of this book might feel like, like Ava and Nazzareno will never come face to face, but as we know from *Law of Conduct*, they do, in fact, collide. To tell Ava's story, though, I had to give you a glimpse of her life before Italy. You'll need to sit on her couch in New York and settle in for a while to truly understand who she is, and as the story unfolds, so do her layers.

I think Ava Girardi is one of the most...interesting lead women that has ever been featured in one of my books. I knew from the moment she was mentioned on the page (*Law of Conduct*) that her story had to be told. She has an insatiable hunger for all things Fausti, she has a great sense of humor, but deep below it all, she has a complex history that makes her who she is.

And Nazzareno...*sigh*. He's a Fausti, through and through, but he has his own thing going and I love that about him. He brings a breath of fresh air to the page, and that's probably because he belongs to a different faction of the family.

I also feel like I need to mention the new Fausti "discoveries" this book gives us. Places I didn't know existed until I wrote this story. I love how unique this family is and how looking at it from different angles reveals even more of their secrets.

Above all, though, I think the ending of this book is one of my favorites to date. (Strap in tight and be prepared to take a trip back in time...that's all I'm going say!) Nazzareno and Ava truly earned this book. I hope you feel the same way once you reach the last page!

Welcome to Air Fausti. May you earn your steel wings and have a fabulous flight.

Now, prepare for takeoff...

Volare...

Bella

ONE

AVA

THAT WHOLE THING about saying another man's name while in bed with a different man? It's a cliché, but true for me. I had a string of names on the tip of my tongue. *Luca. Brando. Rocco. Dario. Romeo. Ohh, Romeo.* However, since it's considered bad form, I moaned and bit my lip hard enough to draw blood.

It wasn't like the man wasn't hot. He was more mature, with a body that was naturally fit. He smelled like expensive cologne. The kind I wanted to keep inhaling. His skin was tan and smooth. His hair was slicked back and the color of jet stone. He had better hair than some twenty-somethings that I'd gone out with. He screwed better than any twenty-something I'd been with. He knew how to please a woman.

His stamina? I was half his age, or less, and I was covered in sweat, begging for sweet relief to sweep over me like a cool wind. My body needed to snap, and my reality to go spiraling into oblivion. At least for a few precious seconds.

Looking into his eyes, I wasn't sure if he would be offended by me thinking of other men anyway. I wasn't sure if he was truly into me either. This was, for the both of us, a hook-up of convenience.

He was there. I was there. And there was some mutual physical attraction between us. Enough to push us into bed together. The only thing that could complicate things was the fact that he was my sister's uncle-in-law. It also had the potential to make things awkward. Brio was a younger version

of Tigran, and Brio was married to my sister. Again, though, this was all about getting our fixes and nothing more.

I thought of those names again.

All thoughts froze in time when my body finally snapped and gave in. I wiggled like a worm on a hook as reality faded and pure bliss took its place. It was hard-earned bliss, and I reveled in it. From the intense look on his face, he was having the same reaction.

Tigran Macaluso slipped out, resting on his side, a grin on his handsome face. He was half Armenian and half Italian. Some said he was the leader of the Armenian mafia in New York. I agreed. It was my business to know these things. My literal, actual business. I got paid to snoop around the most dangerous men and then write pieces about them for *Vice City Press*. I had moles all around the city, but nothing compared to getting the meat off the bone myself.

“This is the moment we should both light a cigarette,” I said. “And say something profound, like...*well done*.”

He laughed a little, but the quiet after his laughter faded unnerved me some. At this point in the proceedings, I’d already be grabbing my things and getting out. Or starting another round again, especially if the guy was really into it. I felt an obligation to Tigran to a certain degree, though, since he was my brother-in-law’s uncle. Didn’t want things to get awkward at the next holiday gathering or anything.

“Who is she?” I blurted.

Yeah, asking him who he was thinking of while fucking me wouldn’t make things awkward too. Not at all.

He sighed. “You first.”

“Ohh, a game. Fun.” I smiled to cover the wince when he reached out and moved a strand of hair out of my eye. I didn’t play this game. Ever. But he was different. And I didn’t have a problem with being honest with him. I just didn’t want all the touchy feely shit, so I put pressure on his hand to keep it from doing soft things to me. “The Fausti family.”

“The entire family?”

“I have a few favorites. But yeah. The family in general.”

“I’ve heard things about you being obsessed with them. I suppose the rumors are true.”

“Guess so.” I shrugged. “It’s a dream of mine to write a piece on them.”

“Some dream,” he said, his voice rough.

“What? They’re one of the most powerful families in the world. They’re considered royalty in Italy.”

“They’re also considered one of the most dangerous families in the world.”

“Exactly.” I pointed a finger at him. “Who wouldn’t want an exclusive look behind their gates?”

He went to bite it, but I snatched it back. “Most people, actually. Especially if they value their hearts.”

I waved a hand. “That little thing? The heart stealing? It only happens if they’re double crossed, and not to women—that I know of. I’ve done so much research, but their secrets are like gold. They hide them well.”

“Remember this, Ava Girardi: to some people, like the Fausti family, secrets are worth more than gold. You go digging around? You might find yourself without a heart—woman or not—for a gem that’s not even worth your time, much less your life.”

“I can tell the difference between fool’s gold and the real thing. It’s what makes me so good at what I do.”

“Uncovering secrets from the underworld and exploiting them?”

“It’s a dangerous job, but someone’s got to do it.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is *dirty*,” he said, “not dangerous.”

“I’ll talk to my editor about it, but it sounds like a personal opinion to me.”

Our eyes held. He had a tight look on his face, like he was holding back. He wanted to say more, to give me advice, but I think we both knew it would be a waste of time. The moment he broke eye contact, he sighed and sat up on the edge of the bed. His back faced me for a second before he stood.

I turned over and studied the ornate ceiling as he walked toward the bathroom. “Who is she?”

I could sense his smile before the door closed to the bathroom. It only took a second before I rolled out of bed and went snooping. He knew I would. I was *Vice City’s* top investigative journalist when it came to digging up the darkest secrets. Love shouldn’t be something to hide from the world, but most of these men kept that part of themselves hidden.

Love was as dangerous a game as any in the life.

My phone chirped. I ignored it as I dug through his drawers. All of them. Nothing. Not a man to keep his secrets buried in his underwear drawers then. His leather wallet sat with his expensive gold watch. It was probably worth thousands. It had diamonds on the inside. They were nothing compared to the treasure I found inside his wallet.

His eyes met mine as he stepped out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Kettle,” I said, holding up the picture.

It was a photo of Rocco Fausti’s wife, Rosaria Caffi. She was a world-famous opera singer from Italy. They both had marital affairs. I was sure there was an agreement in place, but if Tigran was sleeping with her, or more, his life was at stake. One wrong move and they would steal his heart. No questions asked.

The Fausti family was one of the most powerful families in the world. Behind their “royal” facade, a den of ruthless lions lived beyond the golden gates. I knew everything about them. Because, as some claimed, I was obsessed.

It was true. I was. But I preferred the word *passionate*.

“Kettle?” he asked, not understanding.

“You were just giving me a lecture on how dangerous they are.” I pushed the picture closer to his face. “And I find this in your wallet? Kettle meets pot.”

“It’s a picture.” He shrugged. “A piece of paper.”

“Is this really the hill you want to die on, Macaluso? Rosaria Caffi?”

Although she was beautiful and talented, there was something about her that screamed *true bitch* to me. *True bitch* meant not just bitchy on the surface, but truly a bitch. I never thought she deserved Rocco Fausti. She definitely didn’t deserve Tigran.

“Have you ever met her?”

“No,” I said, refusing to lie. I hadn’t met any of them, but I would. It was the only dream—no, life purpose—I ever had. “Wait. Have you ever met her?”

Maybe Tigran was like me. Obsessed—*passionate*—with the idea of her. Of that family.

He laughed and flung my T-shirt at me. “Get dressed, Ava.”

“Is that how you treat family around here?” I slipped on my shirt, then caught my jeans when he threw those at me too. I had to go anyway, and he knew it. The only place I ever hung around was my office. Crime didn’t take a day off, and neither did I.

“We’re only family during the holidays.”

“Should I call you Unc from now on?” Brio (or as his family called him, Lilo) didn’t have a close relationship with his uncle because of Michele, his father. But things were changing. I could feel it. Especially after Lilo and my sister, Lucila, were banished from New York for a while.

He shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“I’m going to take that ‘we’ll see’ and—” I stuck my thumb at the door.

He nodded, and I slipped on my blazer as I headed toward the exit of his fancy penthouse. I was rolling up one of the sleeves when he stopped me. Suddenly, I was ready to go, to be free to do whatever I wanted.

“Ava. Remember what I said about the Faustis. It would break your sister’s heart if something happened to you. They’re not worth it.”

“See you around, Unc.” I waved and left.

His words swirled in my head as I dodged foot traffic, hunting down coffee and a bagel. An hour later, after I took both to go, I realized New York was too quiet. The insistent chirping from my phone was silent. “Son of bitch!” I yelled in the middle of the sidewalk after I patted my pockets.

I never left my phone anywhere, especially given the sub rosa nature of my business. There was a reason why so many in the underworld trusted me with their secrets. I held my tongue because I valued it. Even though Tigran could snoop all he wanted, I still didn’t like leaving my cellphone. Especially if he answered and someone he didn’t like was on the other end.

Or what if my sister called? It wasn’t something she needed to know about. That I’d just screwed her uncle-in-law.

By the time I reached his penthouse, I’d ditched my coffee cup and bagel wrapper and was out of breath. It wasn’t because of the walk. Being lost in my feels had me off balance.

“Tigran!” I banged on his door. “I know you’re in there. Let me in!”

At first, I thought he’d opened the door, but the door was already open when I’d hit it. It slowly moved, and I let myself in. Right away, a chill moved up my spine. I’d been around this life long enough to know when to listen to my gut. It was screaming at me. And besides, my gut couldn’t come up with that smell. It wasn’t rotten, but fresh.

Blood. And lots of it. It’s hard to put into words the scent of it when gallons of it has been spilled.

I covered my face with part of my blazer. “Tigran,” I whispered, taking slow steps toward his room, my heart stuck in my throat. If it beat any harder, it would have jumped clear out of my mouth. I could usually detach myself from these situations. And had on many occasions. I knew this man, though. I’d just slept with him. The smell of his cologne and sweat still wafted off my body.

My hand reached out to grasp the doorframe when I came to the bathroom. The scene was a literal bloodbath. I couldn’t even see the tile floor. Tigran lay in the middle of it, his sightless eyes staring at the ceiling, his face contorted into a frozen mask of pain. Steam wafted in the air, carrying the scent, making it stick to me like perfume created from a massacre.

A knife had split his chest open, and where his heart should have been, there was a void. Except it wasn’t totally empty.

The picture of Rosaria Caffi took its place.

TWO

AVA

OKAY, Ava, you've been around dead bodies before...nothing to be bothered about. Take a deep breath and take control of the situation.

But...I knew this man, and outside of being intimate with him, he was my sister's uncle-in-law. That made him family. And whenever I took a deep breath, it felt like the smell of his blood clung to the inside of my nose.

What was making me feel even worse?

I couldn't stop thinking about the picture of Rosaria Caffi that had been left in the space where Tigran's heart should have been, which meant I was thinking indirectly of the Fausti family.

They had probably been there only minutes after I left. Knowing I was standing where whoever had stood and done this sent a sudden thrill through me. Anytime I came close to them, the same thing happened. It was a natural reaction. I couldn't seem to help it.

My meek conscience was getting rowdy on me, though, because of Tigran. He didn't deserve the death he was doled out. His face was frozen mid-scream, all twisted and nightmarish, and his hands had turned into claws. Even with the steam from the bathtub, he couldn't relax, not even in death.

The Fausti family was known to steal the hearts of enemies who had personally wronged them, and if Rosaria Caffi's

photo has been left in its place, they were sending a clear message.

Tigran had gotten too close to Rocco Fausti's wife.

My mind went into journalist mode while I considered a few different scenarios.

Was he in love with her?

Had an affair with her and was setting her up for some reason?

Even though Tigran was a decent man, he was still part of a dark world, and the Faustis were a huge target.

Did he sleep with her and become as obsessed as I was with that family?

Rosaria wasn't my favorite character, but she was beautiful and talented. Then again, she also seemed high-maintenance and a bit manipulative. From all the research I'd done, I knew most of their marriages were arranged, and like a royal family, Rocco had been first in line to the bloody throne. Rosaria was supposed to be the queen on his arm. Even though everything about her appearance was warm, all I got was a cold feeling from her.

No one really knew what was going on behind closed doors, but I was willing to bet Brando Fausti threw a wrench in the family plans.

Brando Fausti was the first-born son of Luca Fausti, therefore Rocco's older brother, but Brando had been estranged from the family as a child. Everyone always assumed Rocco was the oldest, but Luca had hidden his oldest son for years.

The Luca-Brando-estrangement situation was a riddle. I had a feeling it had to do with a woman I'd located in Louisiana through my research. Margherita Granchio. She was Brando's mother, and if my gut feeling was correct, she had probably been Luca's mistress. Brando was born only a few months before Rocco.

All of that was why I was so curious about them. The Fausti family had a long and twisted history. Enough to fill books with factoids and stories about them. They had this thing about being both ruthless and romantic. Part of their legacy was that they revered women. Which was why Tigran was killed the way he was. It was in Rosaria's honor and out of respect for her husband.

I was getting too far ahead of myself, though, and being sidetracked by the Faustis again. I had to be in the moment and think like a professional.

There was a dead body on the floor, and it was missing its heart.

It felt cold to think of Tigran that way, as a body, but it was even colder to keep thinking of him as he was before. Because I was a firm believer that as soon as a heart stops beating, all that's left behind is the shell we inhabit. Tigran was long gone.

Here, on earth, I had to think fast. It had been a while since our morning tryst, and someone from his criminal family was going to come looking for him. I wasn't in the best position, my hands and feet covered in the boss's blood.

Especially after I took the photo, and it looked like he just had a gaping hole in his chest with no obvious reason for it.

Yeah, I was going to take the picture. It was obvious to anyone who knew the Faust family they had done this. Not many criminal families stole the hearts of their enemies. But I still didn't want to be the one to explain that to a man who came looking for his boss. Because I knew for a fact Tigran was loved and respected among his men. They might think I'd set him up.

My phone chirped.

I stuck the picture in the hidden pocket of my blazer and washed my hands. The steady, slow drip of water from the bathtub was grating on my frazzled nerves as I went in search of my phone. It was right where I'd left it. I had three missed calls and a bunch of unread text messages. I couldn't worry

about any of those, though. I found a number I'd favorited and called it.

He answered on the second ring. "Ava."

"Joe."

Joseph Fabretti was a young detective with the NYPD. I'd met him when he was only a beat cop, and I had established a relationship with him. I respected what he did, and *sometimes* he respected what I did. I went to bed with him a few times, but when he started wanting more, I knew it was time to cut off whatever we had completely.

There was also the line between us. His side was the law. Mine was getting in good with the guys who broke it and reporting on it. Which meant...sometimes I did some shady shit to get the info. I was also hell-bent on reaching a family who were known to step right out of the bars they were locked in—someone like me slipping them the key, hoping to get even closer to their wildness.

Joe once told me, though, that if something ever happened to me, I didn't have to worry about anyone forgetting about me. He'd bring me roses every week. I knew then he'd be a favorite in my contacts, even if our relationship could never leave the bedroom.

I gave him the address. "I'm already here. With a dead body." I hung up.

Fifteen minutes later, he arrived with a crew. They started doing what they do to secure the scene.

Joe set his hands on his hips and stared at the body. "I'm sure you have a story to tell me about this, Girardi."

I stared at the profile of his face. He was tall, dark, and blessed with warm, Italian good looks, along with so much charm, it should be illegal. Even though he was in his mid-thirties, the job was already starting to get to him, streaking the sides of his hair with a few strands of silver. It worked for him, though. It made him seem wise and mature. So did the shiny new gold wedding band on his left hand.

It was the oddest thing. As soon as any man I was with accepted my forever-wild status, he seemed to marry right after. Joe told me it was because I pulled out the lonely in them. Whatever the fuck that meant.

I blew a piece of wayward hair out of my face. “Sonny was assaulted and ended up in the ICU.” Sonny was my sperm donor, or as my sister Lucila called him, our father. “A few guys broke into his house and almost killed him. You can make a call and confirm he’s there. It’s also where I ran into Tigran. My sister, Lucila, is married to Brio Valentino—he’s Tigran’s nephew. But you know all of this.” I waved a hand. “Tigran came to check on things at the hospital. Not long after, Lucila and Brio left New York for unexpected reasons.”

I gave him a look he knew meant *that’s all you’re getting out of me*. Brio was ordered out of New York by the head of one of the Italian families, and he couldn’t return for a certain length of time. He took Lucila and my younger sister Minnie, and they split. Probably headed to Italy or wherever he had a place ready. Lilo liked to prepare and had safety nets. Lucila promised to call me once they were settled.

I continued after Joe nodded. “Tigran offered me a ride home, and one thing led to another. We slept together. I left not long after. As I was grabbing a cup of coffee and a bagel, I realized I’d left my phone at his place. Came back and found him like this.”

Joe planted his hands on his hips, closed his eyes for a second, and took a deep breath. He opened them. “You slept with Tigran Macaluso?”

“Yes.”

“The head of the Armenian mafia?”

“Yes.”

“And your sister’s uncle?”

“Joe, we both know who he is. Going at him from different angles is not going to change that.”

“There’s no changing *you*.” He took another deep breath. “And you have some damn good luck, Girardi. My gut is

telling me you were only minutes from being here when he was killed, if your story checks out.”

I doubted the Faustis would have touched me, but yeah, he was right. The proof was stashed away in my hidden pocket. I nodded, dug in my pant pocket, and handed him my receipt from the coffee and bagel place. It was a habit to keep them. I’d found myself in a few situations like this and learned my lesson early on.

With the receipt in his hand, he nodded to the door. “Go clean yourself up. Eat something. Take a nap. I’ll be in touch.”

I turned to go but paused when he called my name.

“You know the Fausti MO better than anyone. Doesn’t it strike you as odd that nothing was left behind where his heart should have been?”

I shrugged. “Depends on what you call strange.”

“You,” I could have sworn he muttered, but I was too quick out the door.

THREE

AVA

VICE CITY PRESS buzzed with people who were eager to take a picture of the famous building. It was one of New York's most photographed places. It even had an extremely popular video game named after it. It was built in the early 1900s after Salvatore Giannini had founded a bank and decided to invest in real estate and the news business. It was one of the first skyscrapers in New York, and it looked like something out of Gotham City, complete with glowing clock and gargoyles with wings.

Giannini had known he was going to dedicate the newspaper to fighting crime, in his own way.

Coming from Italy, he knew how criminal worlds worked, and he wanted to report on them. His mission was to keep tabs on the underworlds coming together in his new home—America. Some say those dark figures had gotten to him, because the newspaper started to send messages to one family from another by subtle meanings behind the words being printed.

If a calling card was left, the newspaper would report on it, and the family who should heed the warning would read it. Sometimes they would even send a message back through us. We'd been caught in wars before.

Edna Giannini, who had inherited the newspaper, never confirmed nor denied this, but all her staff knew it to be true. It was just unspoken, like so many rules in the underworld.

I stopped on the step, looking up, absorbing it all. As with the Fausti family, a sense of euphoria surged inside of me at the thought of this place existing. It was followed by a sense of thick pride. I was one of the few who worked here—who actually got to enter the doors and had an office of her own.

I just fit here.

Joe was right about me being lucky. I'd come to rely on it. I always had content to share. And I was damn good at it.

I was also lucky that Edna accepted me into her world. Not everyone was allowed access. She hand-picked her staff, and we were a small family. I practically lived at Vice City, which my sister, Lucila, hated. I knew she missed me and worried about me, but I'd found my purpose, and I refused to let go of it for anyone.

I'd never forget climbing these steps for the first time after I'd ditched a field trip I was supposed to be on. I'd rushed up to a man with a briefcase, talking his ear off, while he entered the building. The security guard thought that I was with him. After all these years, I still wasn't sure what his business was that day, but I split from him as soon as we were inside.

I'd been in fucking awe at the entire place. It bustled with people who seemed to have a purpose. I couldn't wait to find out what happened in those rooms. I wandered a bit, unnoticed, until I found a long hallway with a bright light spilling out of the end of it.

A black-haired woman with a blunt haircut, including short bangs, sat at a wide desk, phone in one ear, a pencil tucked behind the other, a cigarette dangling from her lips. Her square black glasses were thick, and she was dressed in all black, pulling out the color of her blue eyes and making her seem deathly pale. A line of smoke blew from her mouth when she'd talk to whoever was on the other end.

I'd been so engrossed in her that I jumped when a man put his hand on my shoulder. When I started fighting him, the woman swiveled in her seat, told whoever she was talking to that she'd call them back, then turned to face us.

“Let her go, Barry,” the woman said in an exaggerated New York accent. She sounded like she was straight out of an old black and white movie from the 1920s. Once Barry did, she narrowed her eyes at me. “What are you doing in here, child?”

I’d rolled my shoulder, because I wanted Barry to know he’d never leave a lasting mark on me. I narrowed my eyes back. “I wanted to see what was going on in here.”

She lifted her thick eyebrows. “Figured it out, Peps?”

“You’re reporting on things.”

I looked around at her office. She had an ancient looking typewriter on her desk, and framed pictures of yellowed articles hung on the walls. I walked in, barely catching the lift of her hand when Barry took a step in after me. A picture, poster size, took up most of one wall. A man in a suit and hat from decades ago was staring down at the camera, like he was too good for it or something.

He was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen.

“Who’s that?” I chucked my chin toward him. After a second of no response, I turned to find the woman sitting on the edge of her desk, studying me.

“Marzio Fausti,” she said. “Heard of him, doll?”

“No.” I turned back to him. “Besides being *too* beautiful, what’s so special about him?”

I could almost sense her grin. “He’s the head of the Fausti family, and he steals hearts.”

“Fausti,” I’d repeated. “Steals hearts.”

That was good enough for me, since the only thing mine was good for was hurting. I wished this Marzio Fausti would find me and take it out, like something inside of me I didn’t need.

After that, I became obsessed—read *passionate*—about who he was. I wasn’t sure if I’d find anything, but I checked my local library for any information on him. I’d fallen down a dark rabbit hole filled with enough history to fill numerous

books. There were *so* many Faustis, and they were the most interesting family I'd ever read about. I clipped pictures and made cards with stats for each member, like baseball cards. I'd even laminated them.

A week or two later, I'd arrived at the door of Vice City Press again with my arms full of books about the Fausti family, my collection of cards, and an insatiable curiosity.

Recently, I'd asked Edna why she allowed me back inside—looking like a drowned rat in the pouring rain—all my things pressed to my chest, trying to save what was suddenly so important to me.

“You showed potential even back then,” she'd said. “Fate brought you here, and I decided to keep you where you belonged.”

She gave me an outlet, a place to channel all my energy and passion. She kept me off the streets and out of trouble for as long as she could. But this job had to get physical. I had to make contacts and gain trust.

It didn't take me long to do both, and before either of us knew it, Vice City Press had become my home. Most of the time, my office was where I woke up in the morning and went to sleep each night. Everything I needed was there.

And every day, I moved closer and closer to my purpose: finding the Fausti family, specifically Marzio's line, and learning everything about them that books couldn't tell me. I wanted them to absorb me into their fold and keep me there, a part of the monster's body.

An invisible vein pulled me forward with the thought. I dodged a cluster of people trying to fit themselves and the building into their photos, then climbed the steps. When I reached the massive entrance, I dug in my secret pocket and pulled out the picture of Rosaria Caffi, her image soaked in blood. I stared at it a minute before I put it back and pulled out my electronic keycard.

The door beeped, and I pushed it open. Just as it was years ago, the place was alive. People hustled and bustled, all with a

clear purpose—acquire information and report on it. Underneath it all, the smell of ink still lingered from long ago.

Even though I got lost in the chaos as I moved toward my office, I was completely found and at home.

My office was my sanctuary.

The walls were slate gray, my desk black, and surrounding me was a collection of pictures of the Fausti family. Even my cat, Hoffa, was lounging on my small sofa, as chill as she could be.

Before Sonny had been attacked, Lilo had convinced him to rent out his house and live someplace smaller. Lucila thought Hoffa would be happier with me. Sonny wasn't a cat person. He wasn't even a people person. I could tell Hoffa was loving her new digs already. She was basking in the sun's rays from my window, licking her paws like the predator she was. I was glad Edna agreed to let me keep her in my office.

I gave her a quick scratch behind the ears, fed her, cleaned her litter box, and then opened a cabinet I had stocked with personal items. I grabbed my shower caddy and some clean clothes from the two racks with wheels I had pressed against the wall, then headed toward the showers.

Vice City was fully equipped. It was almost like a city unto itself. There were times when two families would be at war, going to the mattresses, and the journalists covering it would get less sleep than they did. Giannini had prepared for everything.

On my way, Neil Clarke stopped me. He was another journalist and, inside and outside of work, one of the few I called friend. His husband, Andrea Ricci, was an editor. They both practically lived here too.

Behind his stylish black spectacles, his bright blue eyes took me in. "Shower essentials. Blood on your shoes. What happened?"

Neil dabbled in all crime, just like me, but he was especially intrigued by both the Irish and Armenian mafias.

There was nothing I could tell him about either that he didn't know. Except for this.

“Off the record—for the time being?”

He nodded.

“I believe the Fausti family stole Tigran's heart this morning.”

He stared at me for a second or two, then blinked and fixed his glasses, which were straight on his nose. “Are you sure it wasn't a copycat?”

I shook my head. “Yes.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I just know.” The proof was in my locker. The bloodied picture of Rosaria Caffi that was in Tigran's wallet *before* he was killed.

“Damn.” He took his glasses off and scrubbed his eyes. “He was one of the best bosses the Armenians ever had. Fair but still ruthless. It'll be interesting to see who takes his place.” He studied my face and then set his hand on my shoulder. He looked around once, and noting no one else was around, said, “He was your sister's uncle-in-law. I'm sorry, Peps.”

Edna, Neil, and Andrea called me Peps after my pseudonym, *Pepper Nash*. Because of the nature of our work, we all had them. Edna was fiercely protective of our real names. She was the only one who knew them. Even Edna had one, writing under the name Ed Ninni.

My sister even assumed Edna was a guy. I didn't correct her because less was always more with Lucila—she worried too much. Edna had told me that when she'd started working, it was easier to write under a guy's name, since they were more respected in journalism back in the day.

Neil and I had exchanged our real names since we were so comfortable with each other. We traded information a lot and had a relationship outside of work.

“Thanks,” I said. “I still need to tell them.”

“Drink in my office after your shower?”

“Yeah. I need it.”

Parker Bowles walked toward us, and we both grew quiet. He wasn't a favorite in the office. If this place was a home and everyone in it a work family, he was the sleazy uncle-in-law everyone wanted to kick out but couldn't. He was someone to Edna, though no one of us knew how they were related.

Edna's respect was hard earned, but the rest of us thought she had more of a tolerate attitude toward Bowles than the rest of us. Especially because we all knew she knew he didn't bust his ass or put it on the line like everyone else. He tried to snoop around our offices to gather intel for his articles.

“Edna wants to see you in her office, Nash.” He looked between me and Neil. “Something's going on. Care to share?”

We both declined. No one shared with him because he wasn't a family member, he was a user. Parker Bowles only watched out for Parker's bowels. That was a running joke between all of us, except for him.

“You're both assholes,” Parker said. “If no one has told either of you lately.”

“Whew!” Neil turned to me. “My heart was almost crushed. I forgot today is mirror day, Peps. Parker's seeing his own reflection when he looks at us. Dodged a bullet with that insult coming from such a *pristine* mouth.”

Parker mimicked him in a whiny voice.

Neil rolled his eyes and shooed Bowles in the other direction. “You better bolt back to your office. The sun will be going down soon, and you'll be turned back into your rodent state.”

Parker's cheeks heated and he blew a hot breath in my direction. I made my hands into paws and made rat noises with my teeth.

He pointed at me. “Better watch your step, *Peps*. You have enough enemies salivating at your door.”

Neil stood a little closer to me, and Parker turned and headed back to his office. Parker made threats like that sometimes, but only to the people he loathed. He disliked Neil, was jealous of him because he was a better...everything. But he loathed me. I didn't take it personal. Whatever it was that makes two people just instantly dislike each other, growing into something worse than hate over time, we'd had since the moment we met.

"That fucker brings out the worst in me." Neil sighed and pulled a piece of gum out of his pocket. He squeezed my shoulder. "How about I make that drink a double later?"

I smiled as I parted from Neil and headed back to my office. I set my things on my desk and unlocked my locker. The blood-soaked picture of Rosaria Caffi had turned hard, and I knew if I bent it, it would crack. I slipped it back into my secret pocket and headed for Edna's office.

She didn't answer when I knocked, so per her instructions, I let myself in when I knew she wanted to see me. Her office was empty. The same smell that had entranced me years before—old ink, old papers, and cool, fresh air—swirled around me. The picture of Marzio Fausti still hung on the wall, looking down on me.

"*Ciao*," I breathed, stepping into his line of sight. And just like the smell of this place, something about him seemed to swirl around me too, putting me in a Fausti trance.

Maybe that was why Edna understood me so well. We both shared that same obsession—*passion*—when it came to that family. Except where hers was focused on Marzio, I took a wider lens to his faction.

Edna wasn't much of a sharer, but one night, over Chinese takeout, too many drinks, and of course, a long-winded conversation about the Faustis, she confided in me that she'd cried over Marzio's death. She'd met him once (a quick but powerful conversation, she'd said), fell in love (*one sided, of course*), and never got over him.

It was the entire reason I believed she was still in her Marzio era and always would be. She dressed the part in her

usual uniform of a collared blouse with the sleeves rolled up, tucked into flowing slacks. Sometimes she'd put on a long, fancy dress from his time, like she was going to a ritzy event. Edna was tall and thin, willowy, but there was nothing soft about her face. It was all business, all the time. Her speech was even exaggerated in that old New York way.

Basically, because of Marzio Fausti, she always seemed to look like she stepped out of a Glenn Miller song.

“You might have more luck asking him questions than I have.”

I turned at Edna's voice and watched as she made it to her desk in a few long strides. She seemed to pour into her seat, like she was made of water instead of flesh, blood, and bone, and set her long, slender feet on the desk, one ankle crossing over the other.

She nodded to the picture. “He has always been so quiet for me.”

“If only dead men had tales to tell.” I took the seat across from her.

“Oh, *Peps*,” she said, as if she was exhausted by me, “haven't I taught you anything? Dead men *always* have tales to tell, if we follow the right clues. It's up to us to tell their stories.”

“Sure, but when it comes to the Faustis, they bury their secrets too deep.”

She grinned at me. “Touché, my young apprentice, but nothing is ever buried too deep, not when we have the tools to find them.” She studied me for a second, her shrewd eyes taking in every inch of me. “Tigran Macaluso.”

I nodded, because *one*, I already knew she knew (she had moles all over the city), and *two*, I didn't feel like going into detail again. I was still too close to the scene. His blood was still on the bottom of my shoes, and the smell of it was trapped in my nose.

“I take it you haven't told your sister yet?”

“No. They just left.”

“*Ah.* Joe Messina banished Brio Valentino for a while because of the situation with the Russians and Paul Gallo.”

“You got it.”

“Sonny?”

I sighed. “Still in ICU.”

She set her feet on the ground and lit up a cigarette. She took her glasses off, cleaned them, then set them back on. Her assistant, a young Italian man everyone knew she was sleeping with, came in and handed her a manila envelope. She watched him walk out of the room, her eyes on his ass.

She whistled low before she turned to face me and slid the envelope across her desk. I opened it, and my heart started beating so fast, I almost thought I was having a panic attack.

I lifted the first black and white photo.

She nodded. “Marzio’s coronation, if you care to call it that.” She waved a hand, and a surge of smoke wafted toward me. “When a new king is appointed to the Fausti throne, they will induct him as though he is royalty. There are usually pledges of fealty from those closest to the new king among the family, usually his brothers and sons, since the Faustis are known to have more sons than daughters.

“Since their word is considered as good as their blood, these are serious oaths taken. And it shows the rest of the family, who might try to challenge the new king to a death duel for the throne, that the new king has support.”

I looked up at her and we both smiled. It was like something out of a fairytale—kings, queens, knights, serifs... lions and tigers and bears...*oh my!* You could even say we got our kicks by talking about them. They were so fucking ruthless *and* romantic.

My eyes fell to the next picture. A young Marzio, dressed so dapper that it gave me goosebumps, sitting next to his wife, the famous Italian actress, Grazia Angeli. They were in a

gondola in Venice, cruising the canals, while reporters scrambled to get a shot of them.

The Faustis behaved like a royal family would. They gave back to their country, serving them in ways that gained favor. They married into families who were rooted in Italy. And they were entirely too good looking.

What made them criminal, though, was what went on beyond the golden gates they lived behind. They were like a pack of wild lions. But because of how charming they were, that part of the truth always seemed to get swept under the rug.

Not for people like Edna and me.

Instead of being blinded by the charm, we wanted to walk deeper into it even with our eyes closed. We just outstretched our hands, feeling our way behind the gates to experience firsthand who this family was.

“My father was there when Marzio was crowned the new king of the pride. To outsiders, it looked as if it was just a charity banquet, but the event has always had two faces, like the people of Venice wear masks during carnival.”

“Ah,” I breathed. “Always so symbolic.”

“What do I always say, Peps?”

“The same thing your father did, and his before him. Always go deeper than words—go so deep that you hit paper.”

She gave me a look of approval and motioned to the pictures. “Marzio didn’t go without challenges during his rule, but for the most part, he had the respect and support of the entire family. His word and ways were law. However.”

I looked up from the pictures and met her eyes.

“I do not believe his sons are going to share the same fate.” She lifted a finger. “Luca, Ettore, Lothario, Osvaldo, and Niccolo. There is too much strife among them to make the transition easy. Marzio’s death was unexpected. Luca is in jail, so Marzio would have left it to Ettore to act as ruler, unless he specified otherwise, until Luca is released. All good. But then we hear that Ettore is the cause of his own father’s death. That

will not go over well with his other sons or the rest of the family.

“Therefore, we can assume either Ettore has been banished, or he has been killed. We don’t believe he has. But someone must run the family, and Marzio’s sons will fight the rest of the family to keep it in their line, even if it means banding together against the rest of the family to prove they are capable. Will they fight behind the scenes amongst themselves? Of course. But we know it goes something like this: a faction might be weak, but they will hide the weak leg from predators.”

“Brando or Rocco could step up to claim it.”

“Ah, yes, two of Marzio’s grandsons from Luca. They could, but it doesn’t seem they have. They would have to challenge Marzio’s third son for it. Lothario. And Lothario, by no means, is who the family is expecting to rule for a length of time. He’s no Marzio. He’s no Luca. He’s not even Ettore. He’s the son lucky enough to get his chance at the throne because the cards worked in his favor.” She stubbed her cigarette out. “Have you heard from your anonymous caller again?”

“No.”

The anonymous caller she was referring to was either a man or a woman distorting her voice. The caller would give me information on the Fausti family. He or she claimed to know where all their properties were located.

That kind of information in the wrong hands?

It could be catastrophic for them, and for whoever handed over the information.

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” Edna said. “Whoever called is feeling the same thing we are—a shift in power. Luca has been released from jail, but Lothario is the son who has something he thought he never would. Pure power. Lothario is not going to relinquish it so easily. Believe me, there is a power struggle going on among them as we speak, and whoever called is going to try to use it to his advantage.”

“What makes you so sure the caller is a *he*?”

“Women usually want to make babies with them, not war.”

“Touché, my well-seasoned mentor.”

She gave me a small grin. “Mark my words. Coming soon, in Venice—the City of Masks—we’re going to get another charity banquet held by Luca Fausti.”

“His coronation.”

She nodded. “And if Lothario does not relinquish control...”

I met her eyes, and the same thought seemed to pass between us.

The blood on the bottom of my shoes would seem like nothing compared to the river of it that would be spilled.

FOUR

NAZZARENO

THE WHEELS of my Boeing 737 touched down on the private runway with next to zero bounce. The bird landed as smoothly as it flew in the air. Even a king would have to send his regards to the captain. My father was the equivalent of an acting king on this flight, but the most I'd get out of him was a nod in acknowledgement.

After we shut everything down, Beniamino turned to me and smiled, his teeth bright white in the dark cockpit. "You are a smooth operator, *cugino*."

Beniamino was my cousin. His grandfather was my grandfather's brother. We were close in age, and we had both served in the Italian Air Force together. After we stepped away, we invested in a fleet of planes and worked for the private sector. Mostly for our family. I flew my father the most.

He'd had a bad experience years back and would only fly with me afterward. He accused the pilot of attempting to kill him, but after I investigated it, it turned out it was due to severe bad weather.

Beni was known to say that most men in our family had a bad case of paranoia. Rightfully so. We all had targets on our backs, whether we were in the forefront of the family or not. And with my father acting as the current leader of the Fausti *famiglia*, he had more cause to feel paranoid than ever before.

"What do you say?" Beni removed his cap, ran a hand through his hair, then stood and stretched. "We grab our bikes

and race to Aroma?”

Aroma was a rooftop bar in Rome we frequented. Its views of the Colosseum were unparalleled. But even though Beni enjoyed racing to wherever we were going, he enjoyed lounging once we arrived. Our night wouldn't end at Aroma. We'd find a place with good music—Beni was an American music aficionado—and beautiful women to help us forget the time.

I checked my watch. “Not tonight, *cugino*.” I stood and fixed my cap, then grabbed my bag. “I am meeting Elettra and her family.”

“*La regina della pasta?*”

I barked out a laugh, squeezing his shoulder. “*Sì*. Except she is a princess of pasta. Not queen yet.”

Elettra Buratti was the heiress to a pasta fortune. Her family's roots were deep in Italy, down to the flour, but their product made it into America. It was one of the most well-known and trusted pasta brands in the world. Elettra was taking the company into modern times. She'd gone to school in America to learn marketing.

I hadn't even met her yet. I was going to marry her.

Our marriage was arranged by our families. For generations, my family had married into prominent families to become who they are, and after, continued to do the same to keep safe the status quo.

Even my father's marriage was arranged. My mamma was an heiress to a garlic fortune.

Beni pulled his phone out and squinted against its light. He typed something in, and then his eyes widened. He showed me his phone. He'd searched for her on the internet.

Elettra Buratti was a beautiful woman. More than that...I had been told how smart she was. I wanted to get intimate with her mind. Find out what kept her up at night.

Was she passionate about pasta? Or did she have aspirations that went higher than semolina and shapes? Would

we be able to have long conversations about deeper meanings? Could we ramble on about insignificant things that were just enjoyable to talk about? Would our silence be comfortable when one of us found it?

I love the shape of a woman's body.

Respect it.

Revere it.

Crave it.

Even down to the scent of it.

But I had yet to meet a woman who challenged me in other aspects—mind, heart, soul. If those things were in line with mine, her body would blow me to pieces in the bedroom, then she'd collect them and tuck them away deep inside, so I would always come back for them.

We were told as children that we all had lions inside of us. *This is who we are—the Fausti famiglia. We are a family that balances on a sword. One side is ruthless. The other side is romantic.*

Ruthless came as easily to me as breathing. That half of the lion was awake since I was a boy. We opened our eyes and took our first breath at the same time. But the woman who would stir the romantic part of him...she had yet to make my heart roar.

She would feed the ruthless.

She would make me more bloodthirsty.

I would kill to have her. I would welcome death to keep her safe.

Beni lifted the phone, and Elettra's gorgeous face seemed to gaze at me. "Does she make you roar, *cugino*?"

My heart was quiet, not even a double beat, but I decided not to say anything to Beni. It did not matter if my heart roared or not. My father had made the deal, and my future was set. Even more so than it would have been before. After a stray bullet from *Zio* Ettore's gun had struck my *Nonno* down, and

my father rose in ranks to king, life was moving in a direction I had never anticipated.

My father was out to make a name for himself in our world and beyond the boundaries he reigned over. He was headstrong about solidifying his position and keeping the crown until he passed it down to me. This marriage was a play out of that book. He knew it would please the *famiglia*. And being the third spare to the heir, he was almost desperate to keep them entranced by a rosy glow.

Beni and I were quiet as we made our way together into the cabin where my father and his guards were just rising from their seats.

My father fixed his suit and met my eyes. I could feel Beni stiffen next to me and straighten his shoulders. My father's eyes flicked to him before they came back to me. He had no interest in Beni, who was tall, a bit lanky, and didn't have the Fausti "look" about him. Some even said he didn't belong to his father. He was nothing like him.

Unlike me and my brothers, Aristide and Leandro. There was no doubt we belonged to Lothario Fausti. Mamma did not even seem to have a hand in creating us. When my father looked at us, he looked into three mirrors. We were younger versions of him and his father. Except I resembled Marzio Fausti the most.

"Nazzareno." My father took his long coat from the stewardess and slipped it over his wide shoulders. He mostly spoke in Italian. "We will not be late for the dinner with the Burattis."

I nodded. It was easier that way. He could not confuse or question a nod with anything else but what it is—acceptance.

"You will ride with me."

I nodded again.

"Walk with me."

I barely nodded at Beni as I left the aircraft with my father. He took the steps as though he was a king about to set foot on land he ruled. His eyes reflected the lights around him,

burning in their depths, like he continually stoked the fires of the eternal city. His cologne wafted in the air when a breeze swept past us. It matched my scent, purposely done or not.

One of his guards opened the door to a waiting SUV and he slipped inside. Another guard opened the other side for me, and I slid in next to my father.

He sighed and ran a hand down his face. In all the years I'd known him, he'd never looked so tired. He was at odds with his older brother, my *Zio* Luca, and it was wearing him down. My father knew if he didn't concede power to him soon, it was going to spark a war. A war that would take place in a private place between the two of them. Small battles might erupt here or there, but it would come down to the two of them eventually.

Zio Luca was no fucking joke. He was formidable. And he wouldn't hesitate to kill my father, brother or not, for what was rightfully his. The entire kingdom.

More than once, I felt an urgency to sit down with my father like this and tell him to step away, that the kingdom had never truly belonged to him, and it never would. But to speak the truth out of turn meant I lost my tongue. If it came down to my tongue or what would come of my father's bullheaded pride, it would be his bullheaded pride. It did not help that Mamma and Leandro stoked his ego and urged him to go to war. Aristide stood on the fence.

The outcome was clear to me.

My father's reign wasn't going to end well.

Leandro and I rammed heads because of our differences of opinion. He craved power as much as my father did. But holding that much power in the Fausti *famiglia* never appealed to me like it did to them. We had enough of it. Men would cower when my father would walk into a room, or if our surname was even whispered.

"Your uncle is settling back into his small kingdom. You remember it. It is between Florence and Lucca."

“Yes. *Zio* Luca is in the hills. The Vincio di Brandeglio Valley.”

He nodded. “He is not hiding. He is on the hunt. The game has begun.”

“Did you expect anything less?”

His head turned slowly toward me, and our eyes met. Our difference of opinion when it came to this power struggle silently clashed from across the seats.

“Who is your alliance with, son? Your uncle or your father?”

“My love for you is greater than my love for the rest of the family.” That answered his question, but it also touched on how I felt about all this. In this family, words had to have double meanings, or one wouldn’t last long in it.

“If you looked any differently, I would question your Mamma’s faithfulness to me,” he said. “You are not like me.”

I was like him in certain ways, but our biggest difference was that we placed our values on different things. It wasn’t an argument I could have with him, though. Besides, if I was going to argue, I had to do it in a way that was not coming across as challenging or disrespectful.

Son or not, he would not hesitate to treat me the same as one of his men if he felt I was being either. Speaking to him was like walking a fine line. Our world was made of them. Some were short fuses.

He turned back to the window, watched as Rome flew by us in a blur, before meeting my eyes again. “I will not allow him to take what belongs to me.” He punched his chest. “Not after all he put this family through. Setting his mistress before us! What message does that send? She is a witch and weakens us in the eyes of the world. Her blood runs through his son, and now he has taken a witch as a wife as well. That blood strengthens them while it thins ours.”

I looked toward the window. I did not want him to see the truth in my eyes and challenge it. My father was from a different time, and he believed such things were true. The

superstitions of the past still clung to him. I was not a firm believer that such things did not exist, but I had never personally felt that from a woman. And when my father could not make sense of something, he reverted to beliefs that would make them make sense.

Zio Luca had an affair with Margherita Granchio while he was married. His marriage had been arranged, as well, and from what I'd heard, it was not a good match. Whether this had to do with Margherita Granchio or not was not clear.

My father said after *Zio* Luca met her, he was never the same. And for someone as powerful as his brother to lose the one thing he'd always lived for? Would die for?

Margherita Granchio had bewitched him.

This all happened before my time, but a lot of our family accused her of being a *strega* to capture *Zio* Luca's focus like she had.

The affair between them produced a son, Brando, and his wife was as peculiar as his mamma. Brando was a duplicate of *Zio* Luca, but he wasn't raised with us. Margherita had kept him in Louisiana while *Zio* Luca went to jail there. Brando did not carry our ways, but I could sense similarities about him even though he was not raised by our rules. He seemed to have an innate understanding about how our world worked. And he was as formidable as his father and our grandfather.

Naturally, my father felt threatened by him. Brando's brothers—Rocco, Dario, and Romeo—were all in line to inherit the throne, too, but my father felt they would have stepped back out of respect. But because he felt Brando's wife, Scarlett, was the same as Margherita, he felt dark magic was at work.

All because my father could not understand how a man who had the Fausti kingdom at his fingertips would not fight for it, choosing the love of a woman over our world.

Spells had to be cast for this to happen.

I'd met Margherita and Scarlett. Both were beautiful women who did have something special that made them

different. Perhaps it was their spirits. Or the light in their eyes when they talked about something they loved, or how they looked at their husbands. What I found most interesting about them, though, was their loyalty.

Especially Scarlett.

Brando would kill for her. She would kill for him.

There was nothing sneaky going on behind the scenes with them. What was going on for all to see, for those who cared enough to look, was the unbreakable bond between them. That was the sort of thing some men would go to war over.

Me included.

I'd always admired the relationship between Marzio and Grazia, my grandparents. They had a love worth living and worth dying for. My father reflected on them as his parents, but rarely did he speak about their love, and never how theirs had helped shape the love between him and my mamma. He never spoke of it because love hadn't. My parents were both driven and kept in line by the rules of the family. The rules shaped their relationship.

Love was fleeting. An afterthought.

"You think my belief in such a thing is foolish," my father said, breaking my attention.

I turned back to him out of respect.

"I am just an old man who believes in old superstitions. But like everything else, superstitions have a place in this modern world. We learn from our ancestors, not ignore them. Both of those women have powers that are not normal. When you look at me, you see my older brother as well. Can you see me falling to my knees, losing all that I inherited, because of a woman? My older brother does not have a weak bone in his body. But for her? He is weakened, as though she drains his blood.

"I am not weak.

"Am I afraid of those two women? I am wary, but not afraid. Because I am driven by something stronger than

whatever drives them. I am doing all of this for us. *My* family. The power will stay in my grandfather's line, my father's line, and it will be our line that will carry it on. Luca will fight me for it. I can feel it coming. The entire family feels it coming.

“Soon, we will be invited to Venice, the City of Masks, so Luca can reveal himself and attempt to claim the throne. He will not win this time. I am strengthening our ties and securing our lineage. This is the time we will learn who our friends are. Our foes, as well.”

We grew quiet as the car pulled up to my parents' gated estate in Rome. It had been built by Italian royalty—someone in my family—in 1640. It was used to impress aristocrats and similar guests who were en route to Rome. My family had invited Elettra Buratti and her family over for a private meeting before we went public with the marriage announcement.

The armored car took the long driveway and parked in front of the villa.

My father fixed my cap and straightened my collar. “Do not change. A woman loves a man in uniform. And if she does not, she will still love you—you are a Fausti. Our blood runs through your veins. You do not lose. Remember that, ah?”

The guard opened my father's door, and he fixed his suit as he stepped out. The second guard opened my door, but I took a second to sit and think.

I wondered if Elettra Buratti's family lived behind beautiful ornate gates like the ones that protected my family's villa. And I wondered if, behind those gates, her family was as vicious as mine.

FIVE

AVA

JOHN F. KENNEDY International airport must have been hopping. It seemed like I spotted airplanes every time I looked up at the sky. It was something I did sometimes. Watch as they cruised the air like a steel bird, trying to imagine how free the passengers felt having temporary wings. I wasn't sure how many people each plane could hold, but each one of those people were going somewhere or had been somewhere.

I cherished the idea of it.

Having the courage to fly thousands of feet above ground to get to where you wanted or needed to go.

Sometimes when a sense of melancholy refused to get out from under my skin, I'd go to the airport. I'd hang around, like I was one of the people heading toward another road in my journey. I'd pretend to be the woman who was leaving for a while, her purpose bringing her closer to what she'd always dreamed of.

Going to Italy to find the Faustis.

I'd had chances and the money to, but no time had felt like the right time. Maybe because I was still hung up on earning a reason to go, such as one of them agreeing to let me in. Entrance happened occasionally, like it did with Edna's dad, but a certain level of trust had to be earned.

If I just showed up and tried to knock on one their doors? It would seem like I was just a nosy reporter who had done nothing to earn her place.

I had, though.

I had worked hard to write pieces on them that were accurate. I was conscientious about only including facts and not opinions. They didn't want to always be shown in a charming light, but they also didn't want to be only shown for the darkness they cast either.

It was a fine line with them, and I felt like I was close to being able to walk it without my knees going wobbly. Once I was fully balanced, I'd be certain I'd earned my ticket to Italy and into the den of lions.

I'd tell Lilo these things, and he'd listen, then sometimes he'd tell me I was bullshitting. I was making excuses for why I'd never traveled to Italy to track them down. He said I talked a big game, but when it came to putting my money where my mouth was, truth was...I was scared.

Scared of meeting one of them and being let down. Then everything I based my life on, the thoughts, dreams, time, energy, breath I'd devoted to them, would feel like a waste.

Where would I go after that?

Where would I end up?

Purposeless and wandering?

Nothing or no one to call my own?

Lilo never pushed me to answer, because the truth was...I didn't want to consider those questions. I *was* too afraid to ask myself them.

I wasn't too concerned, though, about the Faustis not living up to the hype. Edna had been indifferent to them until she met Marzio Fausti. After that, she'd devoted her life to writing articles and books about them, even though she refused to publish the books. That was how charming *and* mysterious Marzio had been to her.

She'd told me that meeting Marzio Piero Fausti had changed her life—irrevocably.

How many people had those once in a lifetime experiences like Edna had? It didn't seem like many, judging by the rush I

was usually caught up in, people always desperate to find the one thing that would fulfill them.

Edna never had that urgency or misdirection about her. She'd found all her fulfillment in Marzio Fausti.

I was made up of the rush of the world mixed with Edna's solitary contentment.

There was a hunger inside of me to hunt down more information about them, and once I found it, it would sustain me for a while.

Just for a while, though.

The magnetism I felt toward them always drew me back for more.

A tugging on my hand made me turn my eyes from the sky to the ground. Hoffa. I'd bought her a cat harness and leash and decided to take it on a test run. She was low to the ground, stalking a bunch of pigeons that were waiting for day-old bread from Valentino's, Lilo's father's bakery.

I'd been drawn to it ever since my eyes opened that morning. I couldn't seem to shake the feeling that Tigran was still touching my skin, and I couldn't slip out of it.

I was never alone—this was New York—but I'd never not had my sister close. She'd always been there, even if we hadn't talked in a while. For the first time since I was a kid, I could feel an entirely new crack in my life, and it felt like it was bleeding—at the same rate Tigran had.

Fuck feelings.

I loathed them like Parker loathed me.

I was Hoffa.

Dispassionate.

Dismissive.

Deadly.

Repeat it like a mantra, Ava. Refuse to let weighty feelings get you down. Treat your life like you do an article. Find the

facts. Report on them. Leave emotion out of it.

“What the fuck you lookin’ at?” I asked when I realized a pair of eyes were on me. A guy stood next to Valentino’s, using it as a prop as he smoked his cigarette, staring hard at me and Hoffa.

He took a drag and blew it my way. “Your pussy.”

Asshole.

“Ever met a pussy with claws so sharp they could rip you in two?” I didn’t like the way he was looking at me. It was the same way Hoffa had been looking at the pigeons.

I wished Mooch, Lilo’s horse (*haha*) and pit bull mix, was on the other end of the leash instead of Hoffa. That jerk wouldn’t have looked at me twice. If the asshole tried something, Mooch would lunge, whereas Hoffa *might* only go for his jugular because she was in hunting mode.

Hoffa dug her claws in when I tugged on her leash, pissed that she was being interrupted. Finally, she went, but she was being a real bitch about it. I wanted to get to the store at the corner. I knew the man who owned it. He was connected to the Italian mafia. I could have gone inside of Valentino’s, but I didn’t want to give Michele, Lilo’s father, any trouble. He’d just lost his wife and, in a big way, his son and his family. My sister was pregnant, and before she left, she’d spent more time at Valentino’s than Lilo had.

Besides, Michele would help me, but I never liked to deal with the disappointment in his eyes when he looked at me. He hated all things criminal, and for a while, that included his son.

Mentally edited to add...*He didn’t hate Lilo; it seemed like he hated the things Lilo did. Seems like a fatherly thing to do. Worry and care about your kid.*

Not my dirty bath water, I reminded myself as I didn’t rush, but kept a steady pace. The asshole was following me. Stalking more like. I stopped abruptly when I got close to the entrance of the store. I turned to him, and he stopped.

I lifted a hand and ticked my fingers. “Italian, Irish, Russian, Armenian...I could go on, but you don’t seem bright

enough to remember.”

“What the fuck you talkin’ about? Food?”

“You wish, Chubs. I’m talking about mafias. Take your pick. Because if you touch me, I mean something to all of them.” *Bluff.* Some of them found me irritating. *I know, right? I can’t believe that shit either.* “You’re choosing to bring this to their tables, so...think twice before you take a step closer to me.”

He took another drag from his cigarette and considered me. He flung the butt on the ground and stomped it out. He took a step closer to me, and then another, and a bead of sweat ran down my back from the sheer will it took to keep myself planted where I was.

Maybe it was dumb, not taking off for the safety of the store, but I dealt with men who were connected daily.

Who was this asshole to run me off?

Right before his body touched mine, he stopped, and I felt someone at my back. A hand came to my shoulder. “What’s going on, Peps?”

I looked over my shoulder. Neil. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

We both turned in the asshole’s direction, and he took a step back. And another when the owner of the store came out holding a baseball bat. I finally took an easy breath when he disappeared down the street.

“You both okay?” Joe asked us.

Yeah, another Joe in my life. All men seemed to be *Joe* to me, except for a special few.

Neil looked at me and squeezed my shoulder.

“Okay,” I said.

Joe nodded and slunk back into his store.

“I see you made another fan,” Neil said, coming to stand on the other side of me. The one Hoffa wasn’t occupying.

“Don’t I always?”

He gave me a sweet grin and ran a hand through his hair. “Are you out reminiscing?”

“Something like that.” I felt eyes on me from the ground. Hoffa. She was looking up at me with dispassion, and I shot her the bird. I swear, if a cat could roll its eyes, she could. “What about you? The Armenians?”

He nodded, and without a word, we started walking in the opposite direction of the store and bakery.

Neil tucked his hands in his pockets. “The news broke about Tigran, though we both know the ‘family’ knew before anyone else. You talk to your sister?”

“Yeah. I called her last night. Lilo’s silence was louder than words.”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice husky. “He lost his mom not long ago.”

“Now his uncle.”

We walked in companionable silence until we reached an old apartment building that had been kept up. It looked storybook New York, flowers on the windowsills and all. An Italian flag hung from one of them.

“I was looking for Aren,” Neil said. “That’s one of the reasons why I made a trip here.”

Aren was Lilo’s uncle, his mom and Tigran’s brother. Lilo was all Aren had left.

We turned our faces and met each other’s eyes.

“You want me to ask him?” I asked.

He shrugged. “If you think he’d talk to me. I’d like to go at this from a more personal side. I meant it when I said Tigran was a good boss. He wasn’t some hot head off the street. For his position in that life, he was still a gentleman.”

“You fell under his spell too.”

He nodded and fixed his glasses.

I sighed. “I can ask Aren.”

He pulled me in close by the shoulder. “You’re fucking one of a kind, Peps.”

I’d met my quota for enough emotion for the day, thinking about my sister and missing her. I nodded toward the building. “What’s up with this place?”

“Andrea’s great-aunt has a rent-controlled unit here. We want you to take it.”

“What?”

“Yeah.” I could feel his eyes on my face. “She passed this morning. I know it’s soon to be thinking about such things after a loss, but again, *rent controlled*. We have a place we love. And we thought this one would be perfect for you.

“Most of the community knows you, and a couple of them even like you, and you’d have a place to call home with that she-bitch of a cat. She can even make frenemies with Sweets! Aunt Lucia left her behind. She’s the sweetest little poodle. She’s blind in one eye, has a few teeth missing, and needs her anal glands expressed regularly, but she’s such a cuddle monster, you can’t help but fall in love with her.”

“No fucking way,” I said. “You know how I feel about dogs.”

He sighed. “They get too attached. They require an emotional obligation.”

“Correct.”

“Take this place, Peps. And take Sweets too.”

“Why?” I finally turned to him.

It seemed like he was steeling against something, but his voice came out soft. “We all call Vice City our home, Peps. Even Andrea and I live there most of the time. But can you guess what’s the most important word in that sentence?”

“Peps?”

“Smartass.” He grinned. “*Most*. Not *all*. We leave on occasion. We go home, to the place we created together. It’s a haven. A respite. A fucking spa in the middle of a concrete

jungle. We're worried about you, Peps. Your sisters left. Your father is in the hospital fighting for his life. You're caught up in territorial wars all the time. You have a dangerous Russian stalker. Your passion is burning hotter than ever for the Faustis..." He took my shoulders and squeezed. "I'm worried..."

"Worried about me? Why? That all sounds like *the* life to me, except for the sisters-leaving part."

"Peps," he breathed. "I'm worried that you're in danger of becoming Edna."

"Edna?" I repeated, knowing I had to have heard him wrong. We both loved her. She was our mentor. Our journalistic guru.

"Edna," he confirmed. "Hold on. I love her as much as you do, but Peps... The job is her life, and so is her love for Marzio. She's never gotten over him. She lives for a ghost now. Doesn't that seem...sad to you?"

I wasn't sure why, but in that moment Joe the Detective's words hit me like a sledgehammer to the gut. "She pulls out the lonely in people," I breathed out.

"Yeah, it's hard to *not* feel it after you leave her, because it's consuming, and it lingers."

I took a step back and crossed my arms. I couldn't move any further because Hoffa was digging her claws in again, probably enjoying my suffering. When I went to pick her up, she hissed at me, and I seriously thought about letting her go for a second. But if I was going to suffer through this life with me, so was she.

"Do I pull out the lonely in people, Clarke?" I finally asked.

"You're starting to. Your life is starting to mirror hers."

We both grew quiet and faced the building, the awkwardness of the conversation turning us away from each other. A couple of minutes later, Andrea made his way outside. His eyes were bloodshot, and he looked tired.

Neil squeezed his hand and pulled him closer.

“Got Sweets all settled.” Andrea sighed. “For the time being. She’s going to miss Auntie Lucia.”

“Me too,” Neil said.

“Same,” Andrea admitted.

The silence between us grew thick. I didn’t want to deal with it. I was about to leave when a car came to a screeching halt behind us. The three of us turned to look.

Aren’s cab. He looked desperate and, not going to lie, a little dangerous.

“Get in, Ava.” He nodded to the back seat. “Your friends are welcome.”

I looked at them. Andrea made a motion with his head for Neil to go, and Neil made a pleading motion to me with his hands. This was what he wanted. A one on one with Tigran’s brother.

“Okay,” I breathed out, still stung but loving Neil enough to do this for him anyway.

The idea of me with an apartment and a dog, though?

No. Fucking. Way.

Aren drove like a New York cabbie, but he was driving like a New York cabbie who had just lost his sister and brother in the span of months. Like he had nothing to lose. He would have gone a hundred miles an hour if he could have, all the while swerving around traffic and being deathly quiet.

Neil elbowed me, and I turned toward him. He didn’t scare easily, and his hands were clenched, knuckles white. He nodded toward Aren but didn’t say anything.

“Where are we going, Aren?” I asked.

“To the hospital.”

“What for?”

“Your father isn’t doing well. Family first.”

I sighed, about to tell him to just drop me off at Vice City, but Neil made the pleading motion again and I kept my mouth shut. At least Lucila couldn’t say I didn’t do as she asked. Check on Sonny.

I scootched up a little closer to Aren’s seat. “I’m so sorry about Tigran,” I whispered. “He didn’t deserve that.”

Aren met my eyes through the mirror for a brief second and then nodded. A tear slipped down his cheek. Neil squeezed my hand and looked out the window.

We stopped at Vice City so I could drop Hoffa off, and then we went to the hospital. Neil stood in the waiting room with Aren, and even though he had a story to tell, I knew he wouldn’t step over any lines with Aren. He would be honest about his intentions and only ask respectful questions.

While they went to grab coffee, I went to Sonny’s room.

He looked small and fragile in the hospital bed.

There. Seen and checked.

I crossed my arms and went to walk back out when the nurse came in.

“His daughter, right?”

She didn’t give me a chance to respond. She moved around me to fiddle with his machines.

“He had a rough night.”

“Not too rough. He’s still going.”

She stopped what she was doing and glared at me. Then she smiled and I looked over my shoulder. A woman I didn’t recognize came in.

“Oh.” The woman stopped behind me. “I didn’t think anyone was coming, so...”

“Who are you?” I asked.

She introduced herself as Sonny's new neighbor and told me my sister had asked her to check on him.

Luci was right to do it, but it still pissed me off. Why did she even care? This man didn't deserve our time or energy.

Want to talk about emotionally dead? Sonny Girardi was the poster boy for the disease. His kind inspired songs like "Daughters" by John Mayer.

Sonny the slob never worked. He drank all the time. I was surprised I even recognized him from the front. Even when he was home, all we got from him was a view of the back of his head. He was a fucking recliner potato, his eyes glued to the ancient TV across from him.

He pushed our mom away. He pushed us away.

The only thing he ever did for us was provide a shitty place to live. And sometimes even that was in question when he'd gamble.

His absence, emotional or physical, turned me into a runaway and Luci into a domestic housewife from the 1950s because she had to take care of him *and* us. *Us* included the daughter, Minnie, he had with a hooker. Minnie saw Lucila as a mom instead of a big sister because both of her parents had bailed on her too.

Minnie's a good kid, but she isn't mine. I wasn't the one who paid for sex and then got another responsibility out of it. Luci saw me as being selfish, but I only had one life, and I wasn't going to spend it bailing Sonny out.

He was a poor excuse for a husband and a father—a man.

I called Luci on my way out and recited all the shit that had gone through my head while I was stuck in the same room with him. It turned into a shouting match, which hadn't happened since before our mom left. We were usually passive aggressive with each other, and we knew it.

Not this time.

"Why the fuck do you even care, Lucila? What makes him so special? What has he ever done for us? Nothing!"

“Are you going to let me get a word in? Because if not, I’m just going to hang up.”

“Oh, who’s the one running now?” I shouted, and because people were staring at me, I asked them what the fuck they were looking at.

Lucila the Perfect thought I was just like our mom, always running from responsibilities and commitments, but Luci had always gotten her shit twisted. She felt bad for Sonny and made excuses for him because he stuck around. Like her. But what good did his staying ever do for us? It was the equivalent of a pity fuck!

She sighed. “One day, you’re going to feel really bad about this conversation.”

“Why is that? And don’t you *dare* tell me it’s because something might happen to you in childbirth—”

“AVA! Why would I say that? That has nothing to do with any of this!”

“What does it have to do with then?”

“Sonny, *our dad*, and what the fuck you don’t know!”

“Enlighten me then.”

“No. I don’t think I will.”

“Because you know whatever excuse you’ve come up with to make him seem less like a loser won’t be good enough.”

“That’s not it at all. You’re not there yet. You still need to come to terms with the fact that the world doesn’t owe Ava Girardi *shit*. Was our childhood the best? Not by a long shot, but the truth is the truth. Until you stop playing the blame game, you’re not going to believe it. And even *if* you do, by some miracle, you’ll come up with something to twist it.”

“HA” was all I got out in response. She hung up on me.

“Fucking Sonny!” I went to slam my palms against the doors to open them, but they were automatic, and I ended up looking like I needed my mental status evaluated. I stopped outside of the hospital, fuming, torn between calling her back

and kicking something. I decided on neither. I was going back to Vice City to do...whatever.

The world outside of its doors had gone off the rails.

Neil trying to get me to commit to a rent-controlled apartment *and* a senior dog.

Aren bringing me to the hospital because... *family first*.

My sister going off on me.

Did these people even know me? Or was the moon in retrograde or something? I didn't even believe in that kind of stuff, but I was starting to wonder. The world hadn't felt straight since Tigran had been killed.

I sighed, closed my eyes, and touched my phone to my forehead.

At least at Vice City I had stability. Everyone had a job to do, but because of the nature of our business, it always felt new and fresh. And I could count on Edna being Edna. She never changed.

A sharp urgency to get back to my safe place forced my eyes open. I turned and looked at the hospital, but no fucking way was I going back in there to find Aren for a ride. He might start to lecture me on not knowing the value of a moment until it was gone or something. I felt for him, because I loved my siblings too, but Sonny was totally different. I didn't want to have that conversation with him, though.

Lucky for me, a cab was waiting in front of the hospital. When the driver noticed me waiting, he pulled up and I got in.

It only took a second, but I knew it was a big mistake.

A warning pulsated on the cellular level of my being. My gut was screaming at me to run.

I couldn't, though. He had his foot pressed to the gas and he was already dodging traffic.

My fingers wrapped around the door handle, my knuckles turning white, as our eyes met through the rearview mirror. Middle-aged, probably. Not that tall but built. His hair was

shaved in a buzzcut, and it was dyed a fake shade of blonde. The inside of his cab smelled like leather, old sweat, a sub sandwich, and a cologne that was pricey. Even though his clothes looked cheap, something about his demeanor told me he came from money or had it at one time.

He was a good-looking son of a bitch, despite being a walking contradiction.

“You have lost someone?” he asked. He had a thick French accent.

It took me a moment to answer him. I didn’t want him to hear weakness in my voice. My breaths were shallow in that panicked way. “No.” I looked away from him, down at my phone, getting to the call screen. I was about to dial Andrea, since Neil probably wouldn’t answer while he was talking to Aren, but the man hit the brakes in front of Vice City.

I took a deep breath and tried the door. It opened without issue, and the panic seizing my chest relented some.

The driver met my eyes through the mirror, and neither of us said anything for a second until I cleared my throat.

“How much do I owe you?”

He didn’t answer, and the awkwardness grew into something fucking creepy. I got out just before he sped away. A fat raindrop landed on my forehead and slid down my nose.

A chill shook me when I realized...he hadn’t asked me where to.

SIX

AVA

THE FAT DROPLETS started to multiply, and when they reached my clothes, I shook them off and hustled into the building. The smell of ink and urgency seemed even stronger when they were mixed with the scent of fresh rain and frigid air.

Something about the cold always pulled them out, like it did with the dust and mold on old papers, but when New York got wet, it seemed to make smells even more powerful.

A few coworkers glanced at me, but when they realized my sneakers were drenched in water and not blood, they went about their business. Blood meant scoop, and we all turned into sharks when it was in the air.

Hoffa seemed to narrow her eyes at me when I entered the office, but she went back to her nap when she realized it was just me. I flung my things on my desk and ignored the tremble in my hands. I went to the cabinet with my secret items and grabbed my caddy and some clean clothes. I took a hot, long shower, and then tried to figure out what I was going to do next.

All the boxes I'd packed up from Sonny's were still stacked in the corner. I rummaged through a few of them, cursing when I cut myself on an old piece of glass hidden at the bottom, before I got to one that was labeled *Fausti*. I went through the cards I'd made, mouthing to myself the names and stats of each member in Marzio's line. I'd memorized them.

I sighed when I got to the last one and flung it back in the box.

Rocco's card reminded me. I forgot to show Edna the picture of Rosaria Caffi that was where Tigran's heart should have been. She'd brought up the coronation, and it was all I could think about for a while. I grabbed the blood-soaked picture from the safe in my locker and headed toward her office.

Andrea was coming out of his office with a leash in his hand. A small poodle who looked like it belonged in Pet Cemetery was pulling against its harness. One of its eyes looked blue.

"Sweets?" I asked.

"She really is," he said with a grin. "Sweet. Even if she has seen better days." He bent down and scooped her up, and she seemed to relax. "Neil still out in the field?"

"Yeah, he's talking to Aren, Tigran's brother."

"He'll do right by him."

"I wouldn't trust anyone else with Aren right now." I patted Sweet's head. "What's going on with her?"

"I couldn't stand to see her go to the pound. No one else in my family wanted her. She's mean to almost everyone but Neil, me, and the neighbor across the hall. I'm not sure how long she's going to last without Aunt Lucia, but we'll try our best to give her a good ending. Edna told me it was okay that I bring her to work."

"Ed's getting cozy with the pets in this place."

"Not really. Edna's not huge on change, but she let me because she let you." He adjusted Sweets. "I better take this old girl out before it really starts coming down. She's a grass snob."

We parted ways, and I stopped outside of Edna's office. I was going to knock, but the scene stopped me from intruding. Two crystal glasses sat on her desk, a bottle of whiskey next to them. It seemed like she'd just filled the glasses. The scent of

alcohol still burned through the air. Glenn Miller's voice spun out of the record player.

Edna gazed up at the poster of Marzio Fausti, a faraway look in her eyes, while her assistant sat in a chair across from her desk. He was waiting for her to say something or to give him an order, maybe.

He wasn't going to last much longer. If she started to go quiet with them, another one usually replaced the current one a week or two later. None of them could ever live up to her expectations. None of them were ever going to be Marzio Fausti.

One tear slipped down her cheek as she reached for the glass. As soon as it was in her hand, she wiped the tear away, probably thinking no one would ever see it.

I did.

For the first time, I truly understood what Joe had meant. What Neil had brought to my attention.

How it was possible for someone to pull the lonely out of someone else.

Edna's lonely seemed to reach out to mine and pull it from a deep, dark place and dance cheek to cheek with it. It whispered to me all the things I'd never have—a home, a family, true love.

For a split second, it made me want to run away and find all those things and hide behind them. But when I snapped back to myself, all I could think about was running back to my office, even if the loneliness crept behind me like a shadow when I did.

I wasn't much of a pacing kind of person, but it seemed like I was going to run the floor thin with my tracks. I had to focus. Forget about the scene in Edna's office. Delete the conversation with Neil. Erase the phone call with my sister. Backspace Aren's words about family coming first.

Call Kirill, a voice in my brain suggested.

Kirill Balabanov was a Russian gangster who was obsessed with me, and though he was freaky in the bedroom, he was also a cuddler. I honestly didn't have it in me to sidestep a lot of his sweeter gestures. And Kirill Balabanov could get possessive. I might find myself locked on a plane with him with no way out. Especially if they deported him again. Lilo was the one I usually called when I had issues with Kirill, but since Lilo wouldn't be around for a while, I had to be fifteen steps ahead instead of ten.

I plopped down on my sofa/pull-out situation and blew out a heavy breath. The rain was coming down harder, hitting the office window with constant taps, just like Hoffa was doing to the top of my head from above me. My hair got caught in her claws, and she started popping me even harder to get free.

Maybe she'd knock some sense into me. Make this entire week make sense.

I closed my eyes, my brain in overdrive, but after a while, I must have fallen asleep. I woke up because I felt like someone was watching me. In my line of work, it becomes second nature to be more sensitive to it.

My office was dark, and the rain was still at it. I sat up some, blinking at a pool of blackness that couldn't be penetrated with eyesight alone. It didn't seem like anyone, but if someone was dressed in all black, it could have been.

My breath caught and I sat back on the sofa when someone did appear out of it a second later. He or she was dressed in a black robe that covered not only the body but the head. The mask was elongated into a frozen scream.

I leaned forward a little and narrowed my eyes. It was one of those kiddie costumes made for Halloween. The mask was from the movie *Scream*.

"Make a noise and you will die." The voice was distorted, and I couldn't tell if it was a man or woman. It was the same voice who had called me and gave me the information on the Faustis.

“I don’t plan to.” *Good.* My voice sounded normal. Still sleepy. No matter how many times I found myself in these sorts of situations, I never knew how my voice would react. I was proud to report that most of the time, it came out just right. “You never called me back. I’ve been waiting.”

That made him or her pause. “You will still get the information, but I need more from you now. You will go to Italy, and come November, you will infiltrate the Fausti family. As I said, I need more information on them.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You *will* lose someone.”

The threat brought back a memory from earlier. *You have lost someone?* The taxi cab driver.

“I might lose a lot more if I go against the Fausti family. I don’t even know you.”

In a few strides he made it to me and held a knife to my throat. The metal pressed against my skin, and as he started to cut, it felt like a cold flame was burning my flesh while hot blood tried to put it out, even after the knife stopped.

“I do not mind killing women. And I have one in mind—a pregnant one.”

My sister.

“Yeah, all right. I’ll go.”

In a swish of fabric, he moved toward the door, and only the white of the mask was visible through the pool of darkness. I sat up even further, my hand clawing the end of the sofa to keep me steady.

“How did you get inside this building?” I didn’t expect him to answer, but it suddenly occurred to me that the only people who had access to the inside were the people on the inside.

Danger had finally made it beyond the security doors of my fortress. I wasn’t sure if anywhere would be safe for me ever again. Edna had made this place close to impenetrable.

“I will be in touch soon,” the strange voice echoed as the figure disappeared through the doorway.

SEVEN

AVA

EDNA HAD GIVEN me permission to start a Fausti Family column at the newspaper a while back. She was mostly indulging me, because our main audience was of the criminal variety, and if it didn't pertain to what was going on in that second, they really didn't care about facts and history, or how romantic a crime family could be.

What I found, though, was that my Fausti column brought in more female readership. They would reply and ask for more, especially when we ran features on each man and included a picture.

The column lasted longer than it would have because of the women who were subscribing just for that reason.

When I wrote the column, I wrote to those women like we were friends. Like we were all in an exclusive club and all honored to be there.

So...I've decided to go about describing what happened after the creep with the Scream mask left the office in a different way for this chapter of the story.

I'm going to talk to YOU. The reader. Just like I did the readers of my column. Because we're in this together, right? I'm going to assume you're here for the Fausti family just like I am. That you love them as much as I do. (And let's digress for a second. I'm doing this for you, subjecting myself to torture such as...being close to men who are almost too gorgeous to be true. Italian vampires, really. *Okay. Okay.* We

all know that part is a joke. We'd offer up our necks to any of those men.)

The truth...The Creep pushed me out of my safe place after he'd left Vice City, even though I was trapped behind its walls. I became highly aware of everyone and kept mostly to myself, claiming I had a lot of work to do. It was the most intense time of my life, not knowing who had allowed him in and knowing we were sharing what was supposed to be a safe space for all of us. I even distanced myself from Neil and Andrea. I doubted it was them, but it was my neck on the line.

October came and I got a call from the Creep—who instructed me to call him ON—with more instructions.

Paris would be my first stop, and he gave me the name of a hotel.

If you're thinking I'd be dumb enough to use the plane ticket he bought and stay at the hotel he instructed me to... you're wrong, my friend. I cleaned out my savings account (because if I'm going to die, I'm going to enjoy every penny I saved for this once-in-a-lifetime trip) and used the money to buy my first-class plane ticket and new clothes, and to secure rooms in Paris, Rome, and Venice.

ON (how ridiculous, right?) hadn't mentioned any place other than Paris, but I'd always wanted to visit Rome, and my gut told me Venice was a no-brainer, especially since that's where the coronation traditionally takes place.

Also, if things got dicey in Paris, I could try to escape to Italy.

I didn't tell anyone I was leaving. I left Edna copies of the plane tickets she'd bought for me and scribbled one word across them—*arrivederci*. I left Neil and Andrea a note, too, but just said that I was going to find my future. Neil called me at least twice a day since I left, but again, I wasn't sure who to trust. If he was my friend, he would be there for me when I get back. He'd understand the predicament I'd been in.

Luci was in Italy, and I was going to track her down once I got there. The only warm spot in my life was knowing I had

her, even though we were at odds. Minnie and Lilo were bright spots too.

If you're worried about Hoffa...seriously, don't. That bitch could survive total world destruction. But she's mine, and I didn't want to see her have to scrounge for her food. I dropped her off with Molly, the woman who lived next door to Sonny before he moved. She was always like a grandmother or great aunt to us.

Let's fast forward to Paris now.

It's a beautiful place, my friends, but I could feel my steps leading me closer and closer to the lion's den. It wasn't just a feeling. I had intel to back it up.

ON put me in touch with an artist by the name of Rainer Winter. This Winter has a picture of Scarlett Fausti he took years ago, when she was a ballerina in Paris. His sister either was or is a ballerina, and that's how he met Scarlett.

Dude was totally obsessed with her, which would not go over well with her husband. Rainer rambled on to me about the picture, how artistic it was, and how she was his sad little muse. He told me that Scarlett and Brando were not together in Paris, and that without Brando, Scarlett's heart had turned dark and was broken. *He was* in jeopardy of losing a heart, like Tigran, but I said nothing because he was my ticket into the coronation, although it was being advertised as a charity ball.

It was Marzio Fausti's moment to shine all over again, except this time it would be his son, Luca, who wore the crown.

I had no clue how Rainer knew ON, but from what I could gather, ON's family was a patron of the arts and somehow put it into Rainer's head that he should go to Venice and take care of whatever lingering business he had with Scarlett Fausti.

Which led me to that moment.

It was November, and I was there.

In Venice for the switching of power.

And it felt like I was getting close to the precipice of my life's...everything. I was almost to the highest point, knowing where I must go next but hesitating for a second.

My makeup was done. My hair was done in big curls. My dress fit like a glove. I smelled like a million bucks thanks to the perfume I splurged on.

At that moment, I was a breath away from entering the Fausti's world.

I was every one of you who have read about this family. Dreamed of them. Fell in love with them.

I picked up my mask and secured it to my face.

I was finally there.

EIGHT

AVA

BOTH OF MY feet off the gondola, I stood rooted to the spot. My heart was suddenly inflicted with a bad case of nerves, and I was finding it hard to catch my breath.

I'd never let anxiety stop me before, though, even when it felt like a steel wall between my dreams and me.

I climbed the motherfucker. Even when I slid and fell a thousand times. Even when I knew I might crash on the other side.

I stuck my chin up and squared my shoulders, took Rainer's outstretched arm, and got in line. This was a massive event, and there was no shortage of people dressed in the ritziest clothes money could buy. I wondered if the some of the dresses and suites cost as much as a fancy car.

When I'd chosen my dress, I'd kept that in mind. Some of these people were gazillionaires, and I had used my entire life's saving on this trip, clothes included. So, I picked a dress that *I* made, instead of the *dress* making me, so I'd stand a chance of blending in with this crowd.

I'd always been partial to white, because it pulled out the blue in my eyes and just flattered me in general. It was covered in crystals and would sparkle when candlelight caressed it.

Besides, if what Edna had suspected was going to happen—Lothario refusing to give up the throne to Luca—I could have a magical dress, and no one would even notice. The switching of power was a huge deal for this family, and the

sword was probably hanging in silent balance, ready to fall on the loser's head.

I wasn't going to play the fate game, where I ran through all the possibilities the night could hold ahead of time. I was on the verge of entering my dreams, but awake inside of them, alongside a cult following of readers who were with me.

I was going to be present in every second if fate allowed it.

Rainer held on to me tighter. He was almost rattling with tension, anxious for a second of time with Brando Fausti's wife.

Even though he was nice enough, after he told me about the picture he'd taken of Scarlett Fausti without her knowing it, I thought he was a bit...odd. And not in a fun and quirky way. Because of it, I was going to warn him to tuck his heart in deeper—being odd didn't make a person worthy of a death sentence—and then ditch him.

ON gave me instructions to get Scarlett Fausti alone in a room. I had no idea if Rainer was in on it or not, but I wanted to be on my own. I had no intentions of getting her in a room alone because I knew ON had nefarious intentions.

He'd threatened my sister, but I knew Lilo would take care of her, and I was going to warn the Faustis about ON and then ask for protection. Whoever this ON was, he had connections, but I had no doubt the Faustis could squash him.

The masked man at the door allowed us entry after Rainer's invite was scanned. They also wrapped two fancy bands around our wrists and scanned those too.

We checked in Rainer's designer coat and my cloak before we entered the main area of the luxurious palazzo. I asked for a separate ticket. I didn't plan on leaving with Rainer, and I wanted my cloak. I'd never had one before, and I really loved it. It was fancy in an old-timey way, and it had cost almost as much as the dress because I'd found a seamstress in Paris to make it. She'd copied the theme of my dress and decorated it with crystals that shimmered underneath all the Venetian candelabras lit up by burning candlelight.

Oh my...

Oh my...

Oh my...

My thoughts were tripping over themselves. I couldn't form a full one.

The entire palazzo.

Who it was filled with.

Reality hit me like gale-force winds.

I stopped walking, and Rainer tugged on my arm.

"We should go find Scarlett," he said.

"You go ahead," I barely got out. I needed a moment to take this in. I needed to separate from him.

He looked unsure, but I knew nothing was going to stop him from going after Scarlett Fausti. He just needed a tiny push.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," I said in an exaggerated way. "I'm not going far. And once you talk to her, you can introduce us. It'll be easier to get her to the room from there, I think."

It was clear to see he was mulling this over. I half expected a bead of sweat to pop out of his head. "What do you think Oli—ON wants with her?"

I shrugged. "He didn't tell me. Do you suspect something?" I asked in a conspiratorial tone.

He looked between me and the crowd, and I had the urge to push him toward it, but I didn't want him to feel how impatient I was. Then he'd suspect something and take me with him.

"Seriously," I urged in an even voice. "I'll be around. You should really go look for her before you lose your chance. She's a part of this family, and I'm sure she'll be busy with everything going on. Better catch her while you can."

He stood taller, trying to look over heads to see the crowd better. He was a raisin amongst grapes that were grown to make a fine wine. “I do see—”

This time I nudged him. “Better go!”

Whoever he saw, he went straight for them while I went in another direction. I found myself a spot in a darkened corner and just...forced myself to breathe.

My dress felt too tight suddenly, and I had to slow my intake of breath so I wouldn't pass out.

I'd once watched a man on the streets of New York hit the concrete from a heat stroke. He wavered before he went down, and his head cracked against the pavement. It was a sound I'd never forget because I heard it over the roar of New York.

Blood had pooled underneath his head.

I imagined the same thing happening to me in that moment, except it was the blood from my throat when ON had cut me.

I closed my eyes and refocused my attention.

Start with how everything looks, Ava.

Okay.

Breathe.

I opened my eyes and looked around.

Ritzy, in a warm Italian way. Age-old frescoes were painted on the ceilings, and marble floors still bore the scuff prints of long ago. But the elements around me were more modern—the entertainers. A blossom of fire blew out of a costumed man's mouth as he sent it rushing toward the crowd.

It was exactly how I pictured this event, but infinite times better.

Setting taken in, I concentrated on what I'd waited my entire life for.

Being in the same room with what might be the entire Fausti family.

The BDE (Big Dick Energy) was strong in here. So strong, I could feel the undercurrent of it charging the air. It was like having a bunch of alpha lions circling the same area, any one of them prepared to take on another male in the arena if it encroached on his territory.

Even with masks on, their builds were unmistakable. Maybe a few men were the odd ones out and didn't fit the bill, but I automatically knew the ones that did.

Tall, broad shoulders, thin waists—basically, perfect builds. Underneath it existed feral wildness that was kept in a cage until it was unleashed. That undeniable swagger set the BDE on the map and claimed it as Fausti territory.

And the masculine scents overpowering all other scents?

It smelled like fine men in tuxes, smoke from lingering cigars, and the roughness of whiskey in the air.

Shit.

This was...almost unbelievable.

I couldn't allow myself to get caught up in all the masculine essences wrapping their arms around me, though. I'd made a promise to myself to stay centered, in the moment—but I also needed to keep my head above it all, in the literal and figurative sense.

ON was going to be trouble for me.

The Fausti men revered women, but they also wouldn't hesitate to take one out that threatened their pride. Edna once told me that back in the day, a woman tried to kill one of their wives, and that woman was found slumped over her dinner plate. She'd been poisoned.

It was rumored that the Fausti husband had lifted the dead woman by the hair, admiring her face, which was going as cold as the soup. "Such a waste," he'd said in Italian, and then let her hair go carelessly, reinforcing his words.

I watched as a server walked by with drinks and decided to pass for a bit. I hoped they were not going to accuse of me of

being *that* woman. A waste if they even thought I was out to touch Brando Fausti's wife.

What a fucking pickle I was in. But I'd been in them before. Maybe not to this level, but somehow, I felt all those times were preparing me for this one.

My confidence spiked with the thought, and the warmth of the room flowed over me as I took a step forward, deciding to make my way deeper into the party.

Bad timing.

My first step coincided with a body making its way through the same space.

We collided, and I almost went down.

A hand, a very large hand, grabbed me by the arm before I bit it. Our eyes connected, and it seemed like the world slowed around me, melting like slow-dripping wax, the colors of the night creating the oozing candle.

The man nodded at me, as if to say, *you're good*, let me go, fixed his suit and continued forward with a coolness that made me shiver. He stopped for a second, his wife took his arm, and then they made their way deeper into the crowd together.

I couldn't move.

His warmth had melted me, and his coolness had frozen me to the spot where I stood.

Lothario Fausti had just saved me from going down.

Lothario.

Fucking.

Fausti.

Son of *Marzio*.

Brother of *Luca*.

The man's picture with his stats was laminated and saved in my drawer back in New York.

And he'd just touched me.

Burned me, more like.

His hands were hot, and the perfect balance between soft and rough, like he took care of them, but he wasn't afraid to get them dirty.

I had to stop the excited scream from erupting from my throat. I felt like one of those young girls at a concert, acting a fool after their dreamboat touched them, swearing to never wash their skin in that spot ever again.

Lothario's small touch set me ablaze, and the blood rushed through my veins. I looked around with what I knew was a fucking giddy look on my face. All the doubt faded, and I claimed the moment for mine.

I claimed the entire night.

This was the highest point of the mountain I'd been climbing, and even though I had some issues to deal with, I was where I'd always dreamed to be. I stood taller, straightened my back, and lifted my chin. I surged forward with the crowd, grabbing a glass of champagne from a passing server.

The first half of this charity event/secret coronation was probably going to be aimed at giving the crowd a chance to take in the *wow* factor of the event.

Like I would be observing for the column, I took everything in, too, from general mood to the music.

I listened to the chatter. A lot of it was foreign, but from what I could tell, my first instinct was right. They were still taking in the magnificence of the night. There was a sense of magic in the air, especially with the full moon shimmering over the city like melted silver. And that wasn't factoring in the historic significance. The last time the Fausti family switched power was when Marzio had been crowned.

I wasn't much for taking pictures in my personal life, but I wished Milo Furaha, a photojournalist at Vice City, was with me. We covered a lot of ground in New York together, and his photos won awards in the city and beyond.

Milo had gotten married recently and was probably on the last leg of his honeymoon in Kenya, where his family was from. Milo didn't have an "undercover" name since he wasn't writing the articles, only taking photos.

The thought of his wedding made me pause. Everyone I knew was suddenly coupling up and committing to forever. It brought what Neil had suggested to the forefront of my memories. Even though it was a good offer, a rent-controlled apartment, a geriatric little dog and a real bitch of a cat, it all screamed...caged.

I needed to be able to stretch my wings and know I was free to fly whenever I wanted to. The thought of being shackled to a person, place, or thing made me feel... claustrophobic.

Maybe that was why I was afraid to take the step and meet the Fausti family before. I wasn't sure in which direction I was going to go after. The family had always given me a purpose, the air to fly through.

I sighed, then thought of Edna. Her father had witnessed Marzio's rise to power. He had a photojournalist of the time with him to capture it. The article had been featured on the front page of the newspaper with an unforgettable black and white picture of Marzio looking as regal as a king, his beautiful Italian actress of a wife on his arm as his queen.

If Edna hadn't been invited to witness Luca's historic rise, I was going to search out the designated area of press and see if any of the photographers were interested in a freelance job. There was no way in hell Vice City Press should miss this. My column might not have lasted, but we still had a huge audience who craved Fausti news.

This event was *big*.

It was going to be plastered across all news outlets, hailed as the charity event of the century, but in an outlet such as mine, the face behind the mask would give more of the truth.

The area designated for invited press was off to the side. They were offered an open bar, but guards were watching

them. My eyes scanned the crowd, hoping to find someone I recognized or who would at least listen to my offer.

“Peps?”

My eyes stilled on a masked man with a camera around his neck and a glass of water in his hand.

“Milo!” I crossed the line between guest and press and hauled myself into his arms.

Milo had won awards for his work, in and outside of New York. It made total sense that Edna would send him. He was familiar with taking shots of lions out in the wild. I hadn’t seen him since before his wedding, though. He probably separated from Rashida, his wife, on their way back from their honeymoon in Kenya to get to the event.

“Whoa.” He hugged me with one arm and then stepped back to look at me. “What are you doing on the guest side? Wait. Don’t even tell me. I don’t want to know.”

I grinned. “You really don’t.”

“New York not dangerous enough for you anymore, Peps?”

“You know me. It was only a matter of time before I needed more space to spread my wings.”

“And to fly out of the pot and into the fire.” Milo’s parents left Kenya before he was born. He was first generation with a hint of a New York accent, but his time in Kenya had touched him. I could hear the slight Swahili accent coming through.

I smiled at him. “Marriage looks good on you.”

His smile came slow, and he shook his head. “Always so eager to change the subject.”

“I prefer to call it deflecting.” I looked around. “Who did Ed send with you to report?”

Milo turned, and a man with combed-over black hair and jet blue eyes gave me a chilly look.

“Neil,” I breathed.

His jaw tightened, and he took me by the shoulders a second later, wanting to shake me but stopping himself. I could feel the restraint in his muscles.

“Peps,” he said, his voice ice cold, “you’re one of my best friends, and I’ve always loved you, but right now, I want to strangle you.”

“Join the club,” I whispered, overcome by emotion at seeing him. I *hated* it. Feelings were not my friends.

“Why the fuck haven’t you been answering my calls?”

I flexed my hands. They felt tight suddenly, or maybe shaky. “Just what I said. You’re in a club now.”

“No offense, Peps, but that club started about the time you hit the streets for Vice. If you set everyone who wanted to harm you in a line outside of the building, it would wrap around it!”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “But the line never made its way into the building.”

“What’s going on, Peps? No bullshit.”

“Someone came into my office at Vice. Threatened me.”

Neil and Milo became very still. They knew for a stranger to get inside, besides a kid like I’d been, the stranger had to have an in.

“You think I’m a threat?” Neil whispered.

“Right now, the entire world feels like a threat to me.”

“Even Ed?” Neil asked.

I hesitated but was truthful. “Even Ed.”

The three of us stood in tense silence until Neil breathed out a sigh. “You were right to cut me off.”

Milo agreed. “Shows our Peps has some sense of self preservation.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Milo. She’s here and didn’t even tell anyone.”

The only person I trusted to tell was Molly, but I didn't want to bog her down with details. I'd just told her I was off to Italy to find Lucila and Lilo. If I got lost along the way? Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe I'd get found in the end.

Hopefully not under a bunch of dirt, but still.

"How do you know I didn't tell anyone?" I asked.

"You have a fear of failure, Peps. If this didn't work out —" he gestured to where we were, meaning the Fausti family "—you would have skulked off to some cave to die in the darkness alone. But that's beside the point right now. How much trouble are we looking at?"

"It made it inside of Vice." I shrugged. "So, I'm estimating more than I've ever been in before."

The two men before me became quiet. Neil opened his mouth, probably to tell me I could trust him, but he knew it would do no good. I had trust issues to begin with. And he would have taken the same route as me to keep the people he loved safe too.

"Fuck," he snapped. Not at me, but at the situation in general. He reached out and took my hand, squeezing.

I squeezed back and took a deep breath.

The volume of the place had lowered, like when someone is listening out for something or someone. A second later, a whispered buzz went through the crowd, and I turned to face them. The press was edging closer to the line separating them from the event, preparing for what we all felt.

The grand entrance of the guest of honor: Luca Leone Fausti.

Brando Fausti and his wife, Scarlett, made it through the crowd first. It reminded me of guests at a wedding, waiting with bated breath while the bride made her way up the aisle. Their entrance had that kind of effect.

Brando was one of the finest gentlemen I'd ever seen, keeping his wife close as her arm was tucked around his

protectively. He was smooth, but it was easy to tell he'd rather be anywhere else.

Scarlett, on the other hand, was a world-famous ballerina whose parents were well known before she was. She held her chin up high, but she was warm and cordial to anyone she made eye contact with.

She was so confident in her steps, in her position next to her husband, that it was inspiring.

Together, Brando and Scarlett Fausti made a gorgeous couple. It was hard to look away from them.

As the couple passed our area, Brando kept his face forward, but Scarlett turned and met my eyes.

Whoa. Her eyes. They were pure green, like gems, and they sparkled in reflection to all the candlelight. And those knowing eyes...they made me feel exposed...like my skin was thin and she could see straight through me.

Neil squeezed my shoulder and whispered in my ear, "Breathe, Peps."

Had I forgotten to? I was still standing, so I didn't think I had.

Rocco and his wife, the infamous Rosaria, were not far behind Brando and Scarlett. Rocco was just as gorgeous and just as much of a gentleman as his older brother. But where Brando was all mysterious darkness, Rocco's sea-green eyes made me think of the water in Sicily, and the beautiful monster waiting underneath to drag me under if I waded in.

Rosaria...she was beautiful, no doubt, but Tigran's blood seemed to smear my opinion of her. I wasn't sure what they had going, whether the love he died for was reciprocated, but I couldn't seem to see where it belonged to her. She looked so...entitled to this moment, with her nose turned up, that it made it hard to believe she cared about anything but status.

Rocco looked our way, acknowledged us, but Rosaria gave her profile only.

Since Luca's sons and their wives seemed to be entering by birth, which made total sense for this family, Dario and his wife, Carmen, arrived next, followed by Romeo and Juliette. Romeo stopped in front of us, bowed, then winked and laughed as he kept Juliette close. She was smiling, shaking her head at him as the press ate it up.

"How human," Neil whispered, enchanted.

Neil's words seemed to come at me from a faraway place and hit me with a sense of the truth. He was right. Up until Romeo made his entrance, it was like observing history, but Romeo gave us a sense of the...present. A reminder that this was happening in real time.

"If his sons made this much of an entrance," Milo whispered. "I'm eager to see what the head lion is going to do."

The head lion, Luca Fausti, didn't arrive until later, but like all meteorites, he came in with a crash that imprinted his profile on coins.

"Showtime," Neil breathed.

I couldn't find my breath to answer him. But totally—yes.

It was showtime.

The king lion had arrived, and there was no doubt that the night smelled of blood, and he was on the hunt.

NINE

AVA

THE MOOD of the entire event changed as soon as Luca made his entrance. Next to him was the woman who was being reported as his wife. It was the woman from Louisiana, Margherita Granchio, who was also the mother of his oldest son, Brando.

“Interesting,” Neil murmured from behind me. “That’s not the wife we’ve seen before.”

“No,” I whispered. “I bet he dissolved that marriage.”

“Dissolved?” Milo was being as quiet as we were, but I could hear the laughter in his voice.

“Margherita Granchio was the mistress,” I said, even though they probably both knew this. “It’s been too long to have the first one annulled, so it seems more like a dissolve issue. An *I have made this issue go away* situation.”

“I guess he wifed Ms. Granchio up,” Neil said. “She’s beautiful, the forever-young type, and she has that special something that comes naturally—aura-wise. You can’t buy that in a bottle and slather it on. The other wife seemed to be all about the bottle.”

“I can’t say for certain, but I don’t think Marzio would have approved of this.” I watched as the couple made their way closer, like royalty greeting commoners at some regal function. “Marzio was the one who had arranged Luca’s first marriage. Things are definitely changing in this family.”

“Not all that much,” Milo said. “Lions will always be lions. They’ll always *roar*.”

I was clueless as to why—maybe it was the proximity between me and Luca with Milo’s faint roar—but goosebumps puckered my arms when I thought of Luca making the same noise. The man had the spirit of a lion and the body to back it up.

Yeah, maybe his hair had gone mostly all silver, and the lines around his eyes gave him wisdom stripes, but mercy to the world, he was as handsome, maybe even physically stronger, than any of his sons.

I was certain that was why the entire mood of the event had changed as soon as he walked in. No one, outside of his family, had seen him out in the wild since he’d been charged with murder and sentenced to however many years in prison in Louisiana. Then he makes an epic comeback, looking as fine and as fierce as ever, ready to fucking rule.

This man was a dangerous legend.

One who was currently singing an opera classic as he made his way deeper inside, hitting notes high enough to echo in the spacious palazzo, putting a spell on anyone who was susceptible to it.

The three of us included.

I wondered if Neil was still breathing. He was never really interested in the family, but I could tell they had charmed him with both the romantic and ruthless energies they gave off.

“Incoming,” Milo whispered.

Neil held on to me tighter. For his benefit or mine, not sure.

Luca was so close, his spicy cologne reached out and touched me. Damn. He smelled good. I wanted to sniff the air around him.

Okay.

My heart was palpitating.

Maybe I was having a heart attack.

Or a panic attack.

Some kind of fucking attack because I couldn't breathe when he stopped in front of me.

"Hello," he said in a deep, accented voice, taking my hand and setting his free one over mine, enclosing it in warmth.

I curtseyed, and when I stood, I gave a little roar.

I fucking roared! Like a cub, but still.

His face went blank and then he exploded with laughter. His teeth were perfect and white, the last thing prey would see before he went in for the kill. "Ah," he sighed, pressing a kiss to my hand. "How delightful. What is your name?"

I couldn't answer.

"Pepper." Milo had pity on me and answered.

"Pepper," Luca repeated, but I could sense it. Either he didn't believe Milo, or he didn't think the name suited me. "Have a wonderful time tonight." He roared at his wife as he continued down the line, laughing. His wife threw me a smile and a wink over her shoulder.

"You curtseyed," Neil said in astonishment. "You fucking roared!"

The three of us turned to each other and laughed. It was an odd sound, though, like we were trying to relieve some of the tension. But Luca Fausti was a force-field, and I'd been sucked into his orb, no amount of laughing going to send me back to my own planet.

Seemed like Neil, Milo, and the entire line of press he'd passed felt the same way. Everyone was staring after him.

A guard cleared his throat to get our attention after Luca and Margherita disappeared. He announced in an accented, and no-bullshit, voice that the press was free to join the main event and to mingle. We were not allowed to roam the property, though. I included *me* in *we* because my background check must have come back listing me as a journalist, including credentials, even if Rainer had "invited" me as his date.

The three of us started for the main area of the event when Rainer took my arm and stopped me. Neil and Milo stopped too.

“Where did you go?” he hissed at me.

“Problem here?” Neil asked, nodding toward where Rainer had a hand on my arm.

Rainer didn’t even care—he was so obsessed with the thought of finding Scarlett Fausti, it seemed like he just wanted me to answer and be done with it. His eyes kept flicking to me and then to the crowd. On one glance, he was about to look back at me when he stopped and stared.

My eyes followed the line of his and stilled on Scarlett Fausti.

Rainer had spotted her, too, if the thirsty look on his face was any indication. But he was going to have to wait to get close to her.

With the grand entrances over, the main event of the night was about to begin. The music stopped and one of Marzio’s younger brothers took the stage, probably about to give a speech.

Edna had once told me studying the Fausti family was like studying a pride of lions from afar. Every day, little by little, like wildlife biologists or zoologists, we learned their ways. It was how we knew the family was steeped in the symbolic.

The city was no mistake.

Venice is known as The City of Masks, and this coronation wore two faces.

To the rest of the world, it was simply a charity ball, a way for the family to give back to their roots—*we are Italy*, they were known to say—while the other side of it was more personal and had to do with the kingdom’s politics.

Behind the mask, Luca would have taken his trusted *consigliere* and gone to church where the priest would bless him, and his man would pledge fealty. Then the event would be where he pledged his everlasting love and undying loyalty

to the family, to their country, to their private world, but in a way that would also wear a mask.

It was always important to listen beyond the words with them—it was always two stories. The surface one and the deeper one.

Marzio's brother handing over the microphone to his nephew was emblematic. He was an older member, had a direct connection to Marzio, and was giving his blessing.

My eyes scanned the crowd for Lothario, who was standing with his own faction, watching with eyes that didn't seem like they would miss a fly in the air.

Lothario stood tall, his shoulders back, chin up, but I wondered if his heart was thundering as loud as mine.

If he denied Luca this, blood would be spilled.

I didn't think anyone would be watching me, since all attention seemed to be on the stage, but I felt it. When I turned my eyes from Lothario, they landed on a man standing close to him.

Our eyes met for a second before I turned forward.

Maybe that guy's heart was thundering too. Whoever he was, he was with Lothario's faction, and whatever was going to happen, he had to be feeling it on a deep level.

The old man's speech was to the point, and when he introduced Luca and handed him the microphone, Luca set it back on the stand. The two men embraced, a hug and a kiss on each cheek.

The exchange seemed meaningful, and the old man left the stage, looking moved.

I felt eyes on me again. I turned in the direction Lothario was in and met the same stare from before. It was...hard, intense even. I couldn't hold it, even though I gave him a small smile before breaking the connection, not even sure why.

I turned back just as Luca stepped up to the mic.

He made a joke about forgetting his notes, patting his suit like he was worried he wouldn't remember his speech without it. The crowd ate it up, me included. He was more than charming. He was charismatic. I could feel myself being pulled closer and closer into his circle.

“Ah, well, notes are too formal for this occasion. I find that the truth is spoken from the heart, not the mind, where it has to be rehearsed.” He went on to thank everyone for attending, for all the generous contributions to all the charities, and he hoped the night's festivities lived up to expectations. “This night would not have been possible without the help of my daughters. Scarlett Rose Fausti.”

Brando helped Scarlett up the steps to the stage, then Rosaria, Carmen, and Juliette followed with the help of their husbands. Luca had called them up in the order of his son's births. They surrounded him in support.

“A round of applause for these women who not only shine on the outside, but on the inside as well. These are the daughters of my heart.” He applauded each one with the crowd, then called them forward separately to introduce the charity of their choice. Each woman gave a short speech on why they were championing for that particular charity.

Romeo's wife went last, and she finished her speech with, “Later on in the night, there will be auctions to raise even more funds, for those who are willing to dig a little deeper. Not only in your pockets, but in your hearts.”

There was another round of applause, Luca still giving them praise as his “daughters” were helped down from the stage, taking spots next to their proud husbands. Once the noise settled down some, he went on to say how important family was, and then dived deep into who the Faustis were.

His speech dug into the history of the family, and he told the crowd how they had lived and loved in Italy for generations, and how their hearts and blood were tangled in the soil, rooted like an ever-expanding tree.

“I would do anything for my family, for my country. I would even die to see my father's wishes come true. This

night is one for wishes to come true,” he finished with.

He gave the crowd a little time to absorb his powerful speech. Most of them were still under his spell, but I was looking around, trying to see past masks and into the truth, especially from Lothario’s faction.

I would even die to see my father’s wishes come true.

Did that mean it was going to be war if Lothario didn’t concede the throne?

Yes, I fucking thought it would be. Someone was going to shed blood—either Luca or Lothario—in this power struggle.

My breath got stuck in my throat when Luca called his brothers and his sons to stand around him. One man was apparently missing from the circle—Lothario.

In no uncertain terms, I was sure Lothario was sending Luca a big fuck you. He wasn’t giving up the throne, not without a fight.

Luca gave a subtle nod, but I really thought it was a war cry.

A roar of “*Saluti!*” came from the crowd, and the music started to play again.

Neil touched my arm. “What’s happening, Peps?”

I’d forgotten he and Milo were still standing around me. Rainer too.

“Lothario didn’t concede control,” I whispered. “He refused Luca by not shaking his hand. What happens from there...” I knew it wasn’t going to be good.

“This entire family is out of bounds,” Neil said.

“But I see the draw,” Milo said. “It’s like the royal family married into the Medici family, and their kid married into the mafia. This current family is a product of all those ties.”

Neil and Milo started discussing the family while I watched the main players in tonight’s event. Most of the family started dancing after Luca’s speech, but Brando moved

away from the floor and went to talk to Lothario, who was standing at the bar.

“My chance,” Rainer said, taking me by the arm and pulling me toward the dance floor, where Scarlett was dancing with an unknown man.

I mouthed to Neil and Milo, *I'll catch up with you two later!*

Neil and Milo followed behind us, and when Rainer left to go talk to Scarlett, I told them it was okay. They should go mingle. Edna was going to want a detailed article along with some fantastic shots.

“I’m worried about you, Peps,” Neil said.

I looked him in the eyes and said, “I’ve got this.”

He hesitated for a second, then kissed my cheek and set a press pass in my hand. I looked at it as he walked away. It had the hotel they were staying at scribbled on the back. The dress had pockets, and I tucked it into one.

Rainer had finally summoned the courage to approach Scarlett while her husband was occupied with his uncle. I was torn between watching him interact with her, or watching the exchange between Brando and Lothario, but I didn’t have to debate for long. Brando’s eyes were constantly on his wife, and when he noticed Rainer, he left the conversation with his uncle and headed toward Scarlett.

Judging by the dangerous glint in Brando’s eyes, if this place would have been made of glass, he would have shattered it to pieces to get to his wife, using the sharp pieces to his advantage.

I breathed out a sigh.

How fucking romantic and ruthless.

Oh yeah, Brando Fausti had both in spades.

He swaggered up to his wife and Rainer like he ran the entire world, setting his hand on the small of her back. One subtle move, and the entire room knew she was his.

Scarlett seemed uncomfortable. She was rambling, introducing her husband to Rainer, while the guy she'd been dancing with slapped Brando on the shoulder, a smirk on his face as he left them. The conversation was somewhat awkward for Scarlett, and I thought it was because she was on edge about what her husband might do to Rainer. Brando was calm and cool on the outside, but underneath the surface, there was something deadly about him.

A server passed and lowered a tray of bubbling champagne in front of me. I took one, then a small sip, keeping my eyes on the three and trying to stretch my ears to hear the conversation.

A man came to stand next to me.

Tall, broad shouldered, dark eyes, perfect lips, smelled like a million bucks...

Fausti.

He greeted me in Italian, and when I shook my head and lifted my hands, he spoke to me in English.

"I have been admiring you all night, angel." His voice was deep and smooth and perfectly accented. "One dance on earth, then you will either allow me to escort you back to heaven or be thankful for the fall from grace."

Back in New York, I would have laughed and, depending on who it was, either called him a clown in my head or out loud, telling him to go back to whatever circus he had escaped from. Whoever this guy was, he was as smooth as they came, and I bought what would have ordinarily been a cheesy line.

I downed the champagne, set it on a passing server's tray, and shook my head. "Sorry, I don't dance."

"No." The word was elongated and spoke in such a deep tone that it made it seem like my answer was a serious insult to dance floors everywhere.

"Yes," I said.

"How can this be?"

“Simple, really. You know how some people refuse to kiss on the lips because it’s too personal? I refuse to dance because it’s too personal. Sing out loud too.”

“For the right man, you would do this, yes?”

“I don’t even know your name.”

He waved a hand. “Names do not matter when it comes to fate, but since they seem important to you, my name is Renato Fausti, and I am taking your rejection as a challenge.”

It didn’t ring any bells, but he claimed the Fausti name, and I could tell he belonged somewhere.

“I’m Pepper Nash.” I looked up into his dark eyes.

“Pepper from America.” He grinned, then looked away from me and back to where I’d been standing. “Is he your man?”

“Rainer? No. I only accompanied him tonight as...an acquaintance.”

His eyes narrowed some. “You do not seem to like this acquaintance.”

“What would give you that impression?”

“I am a Fausti.” He blinded me with his smile. “I can tell these things. But if you really must know.” He touched the tip of my nose. “You made a face with this.”

Oh, he meant I’d scrunched up my nose.

I turned my eyes from his for a second, the intensity hard to hold. I went straight from the pan into the fire because the other eyes I met were the same ones that had been staring at me throughout the night.

“Who is that?” I asked, breathless.

The mystery man was standing close to the bar, a glass of whiskey in his hand, staring at me like he was starved, and I was the next course.

I wasn’t looking at Renato, but I could tell he looked in the same direction when he answered. “Nazzareno.”

My brain went into filing mode and started searching through all the notes I'd taken over the years. Nazzareno Fausti was Lothario and Belaflore's first-born son. The rest of the details were a bit sketchy, because the last time I'd updated his cards was when I'd first started.

"Is there a reason why he's looking at me like he wants to have me for dinner?"

Renato turned his head up and laughed. It was gritty and deep. "A Fausti knows an angel when he sees one. My *cugino* is probably growling at himself for not seizing the moment before me."

I didn't know how to respond to that, and if I did, I couldn't have. Nazzareno continued to watch us, or me, and I felt breathless. He was unnerving me. Every instinct was screaming at me to FLY AWAY!

Forcing myself out of Nazzareno's hungry force field, I looked back to Renato. He was looking over the crowd, but when he felt my attention turn back to him, he concentrated on me.

"Listen...do you think I could talk to Luca? It's about my...acquaintance. I think the man who sent us has ill intentions toward someone in your family."

It was like someone had teleported the charming Renato out of his body and replaced him with an entirely new version. Renato's eyes turned hard, and he became almost stiff.

"What is his name?" he demanded.

"ON. That's all I know—" I couldn't even finish my sentence.

The crowd seemed to shift around men hustling through it. There was an urgency in the air that wasn't there before. I wasn't sure why, but my eyes went back to where Nazzareno was, but he was gone, like my breath when he'd stolen it.

I'd never felt breathless in that way before. Like my body would remember it when his starved eyes came to mind, and I'd always have to catch my breath when I thought of how they made me feel.

Renato cursed in Italian. Then he looked at me, like he was remembering I was there and had to decide about it.

After a second, he grabbed my hand and started hauling me in the direction of the *no go* area of the palazzo.

I was powerless to stop it.

Not only because my nature always followed danger, but because suddenly, it didn't feel like I had control over my limbs anymore.

TEN

AVA

THE MOMENTS between when I was chatting with the man, whose name I couldn't recall, and when he dragged me toward the restricted area of the palazzo were all a blur.

I think the man I was talking to had instructed a second man to see me back to the party, where he was to wait with me until the ordering man came back for me.

It was hard to tell, though.

With the brain fog I couldn't find my way out of, and knowing the bare minimum of Italian, I was so fucking lost.

And alone.

The guard, or whoever he was, pointed in the opposite direction, talking to me in Italian, and then ditched me.

I thought about all the times I'd wished for a scenario just like this one—when I'd had to either schmooze my way in somewhere or slip in like a snake undetected—and it would have to come true when I was drugged!

I knew I was. I'd been before.

That waiter. The second one. Had he done it? Maybe it was the fucker who'd sent me here!

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and hoped this was the worst it was going to get. I needed to down a lot of water. Get the shit out of my system. I forced my brain to fight through the fog.

Think, Ava!

A glimmer of truth seemed to shine in the darkness. What happened before I talked with the man who called me an angel...the issue between Luca and Lothario.

Denial.

The rush of men heading in the direction of where I stood.

Something big is going on back here.

I just had to fight a little harder to get out of the muck.

Why the hell was I drugged?

“Argh!” I made a frustrated noise and hit the wall with my fist.

The pain of it was a distant throb, lost somewhere in the darkness with me. Because the entire palazzo was cloaked, utilizing candlelight to give it a midnight-magic feel.

The cusp of time, when a new day is about to dawn and snuff the flames out—but the night is going to change everything.

The transfer of power.

I opened my eyes to pitch darkness and felt along the wall until I came to a hallway with burning sconces. It was a maze, a labyrinth of a palazzo floating over water. I didn't know which way to go, and I had no one to turn to for direction. Mine was the only shadow, and it crept along the wall, wavering with the hot flames.

Maybe I'm burning inside of them.

My skin felt weird, like it didn't belong to me, much too tight.

Maybe I'm shriveling up.

A sense of urgency wafted over me as hot as the heat. Somewhere deep inside of me, panic was leaking out at an alarming rate, and if I didn't move, find my way, I would combust.

I rushed down the hall, not paying attention to which direction I went in.

Voices! Or I hoped that was what I heard up ahead. If I was starting to hear things, I needed serious fucking help. Or ghost busters. This place was old, I could smell the history in the walls, and there was no telling who was lurking.

Get it together, Ava! You don't believe in ghosts. You stopped giving them power when you were a kid and afraid of the dark. Afraid your mom was one and was going to haunt you when she didn't come back home.

I just wanted the voices in my head to quit. It was like whatever *Whoever* gave me was playing on all my deepest, darkest fears. Fears I hadn't faced since I was a kid.

The voices sounded like they were coming from another corner. I turned it, not even bothering to put the brakes on, and collided with something hard. Hard enough that I felt myself bounce back, except I didn't hit the ground.

Two strong hands caught me.

Neither of us said anything.

I had no clue why he wasn't, but I knew why I wasn't.

I'd died the moment we collided.

Because he'd killed me.

With his hands.

Or his body.

Or whatever.

Because he'd fucking shocked me. Shocked me like I was made of water, and he had an electrical current running through his veins.

It might have been the drugs making me feel the collision like it was one of epic proportions, but I could still feel the shock he'd left behind. I was dizzy, almost unstable on my feet, and I was sure my hair was standing on end like I'd just taken a bunch of clothes out of the dryer.

After what felt like both a mini second and a century had passed between us, he cleared his throat. Our eyes searched for a second, and I remembered him.

Remembered his intensity.

Remembered his name.

Nazzareno Fausti.

He was with his mom. He gave me the subtlest of nods, I thought, and left with her. Then I came face to face with Scarlett Fausti. She must have been there the entire time. Even though she was tiny, she had a fierce look on her face, like she wasn't fucking around.

Whatever was going on back here, people were rushing toward it.

I wasn't going to give her a reason to send me in the opposite direction. I was going to play it cool and just act like I was looking for a bathroom and had gotten lost.

Or...there was something I needed to say to her, but I couldn't remember what it was.

The lie was so much easier to come up with than the truth.

I went to walk past her, but she stopped me. "What is your business back here?"

"The bathroom."

"There are plenty of bathrooms near the main event room."

"You must be Scarlett Fausti." I offered her my hand and she took it. "I'm a—"

"Journalist. Yes. I gathered that."

I had no idea what my face was doing, because it had become as gooey as my limbs, but I hoped it didn't seem hostile. She wasn't being rude, but she was terse, like she needed to fly to wherever she was so anxious to be.

"This area of the palazzo is off limits to guests," she said. "You need to—"

"I tried." I sighed. "I'm lost."

It seemed like she was trying to decide what to do with me when her eyes focused on something behind me. She signaled

and a man walked over. It was the same man who Renato—his name, finally!—had left me with.

“Can you escort this woman back to the main event?” Scarlett asked, but there was no mistaking it was a polite order.

The guard gave me a mean look, taking my arm. I tried to shove him off, but his grip tightened. She looked between the two of us then told him something in Italian. He seemed to take whatever she said seriously and turned me in the opposite direction.

I wanted to fight him, but I couldn't. I felt so drained. But the thought of what had happened between my body and Nazzareno's, and the idea that something any journalist would have killed to capture in real time was happening somewhere in this place, was keeping me on my feet.

My escort seemed to be taking me to wherever Renato had instructed him to, and I was about to try to wiggle free from him by using the oldest excuse in the book—I had to use the restroom—but another man came up to us. They were exchanging Italian in a rush but in a hushed tone.

The man holding me closed his eyes for a second and breathed out. Then he looked at me. He snapped something at me, and I held my hands up, like I understood, but I honestly had no clue what he'd said. I had a feeling he was ordering me to stay put, though.

A second later, my escort and the one who'd caught up with us rushed down the hallway, going in the opposite direction.

I kicked my heels off and rushed behind them, swaying as I did.

My head...I just knew I was going to have a fucking killer headache after this.

Not watching where I was going, I kicked something, and it rolled like a ball.

Why would they have a ball back here?

I narrowed my eyes at the rolling thing and...I took back what I'd thought about a killer headache.

The man who'd lost his head, which I'd just kicked, had the definition of a killer headache.

There was a head on the floor.

A fucking HEAD!

Which not long ago was attached to a body, judging by how warm the blood was, and the fresh smell...it made my heart race and my palms feel slick, like a memory was creeping in close, but I couldn't recall it to dismiss it.

I was caught in a nightmare of my own making from the drugs. Maybe the head was a figment of my imagination...

This was *the* worse. I couldn't tell what was real or not anymore, and it was truly fucking with my emotions. I kept feeling the *thunk* of when I'd kicked it, like hitting an animal with a car—the sick feeling in the gut it causes that never really leaves. I'd been in a cab once when a pigeon flying too low hit the windshield.

I forced myself to move, to not look over my shoulder at the grotesque face, or those wide eyes, which I felt haunting my back.

I came to a stop right outside of a crowd that had formed around a room. Whatever was going on felt urgent. People were moving around like they had one sole purpose in life and had to fulfill it. A scream pierced the air, there was fighting...

My body tilted into the wall because my life felt upside down.

I closed my eyes tight, and when I opened them, it seemed like mostly everyone had cleared out.

I walked in a daze to the room everyone had been rushing out of.

Blood. Gallons of it flooding the floor.

It almost seemed like the water underneath us had made its way inside and was turning the marble black.

I made the mistake of looking down my dress.

My feet were covered, and the hem of my white gown was absorbing the color of it, as deep and dark as stormy waters.

Somewhere in the distance, a lion roared in triumph.

ELEVEN

NAZZARENO

THE *MOTOSCAFO* (*WATER taxi*) wavered underneath me with a fast turn.

In my eyes, the entire world had turned into Venice. No matter where I'd go, the ground beneath my feet would be no steadier than trembling water.

I ran a hand through my hair and leaned over my legs, staring at my blood-stained hands. It had dried in the lines of my palms and turned rust colored.

My father's blood.

Droplets of rain splashed against my skin, loosening my father's life from its grip and dripping to the floor.

I could not look away from it. It was an emblematic representation of the night before.

My father had made it clear that he was not going to forfeit his position in the family and concede power to *Zio* Luca.

In our family this meant war.

My father had been planning for it for some time, knowing one day *Zio* Luca would be set free from prison, and they would go toe to toe for the position.

Comparing it to American politics, to some degree, my father had gone to different factions of the family to gain support. Especially to those who had not wanted *Zio* Luca to lead from the beginning.

Even though I had never outwardly shown favor for my uncle or explicitly told my father that he should back down, my father knew my feelings. I had never stoked the fire like Leandro or mamma. I sat quietly while he gave his gallant speeches and swung his sword in practice.

Guns are for quick work, he'd always said, and not the weapon of choice for gentleman in a war for honor.

He knew his brother was skilled at it and, like in everything else, wanted to defeat him.

When the time came that he was summoned to the private area of the palazzo, he called on Leandro to go with him, along with his men and some family who had sided with him.

I looked after my mamma, who got a bad feeling about the situation after my father and his men had left.

The anguished roar from my father at the same moment his brother cut his legs off met us outside of the doors of the meeting, and so did a blood trail.

It was symbolic.

Legs were important to rule. To stand against other men and to lead his own. To represent the family as a man of worth.

My father would never stand again, not on his own two feet. Not without help. Not without the reminder that his brother had bested him.

If he lived.

He was fighting for his life, my mamma next to him, still in the dress she'd worn the night before. It was black, and she swore if my father died, she'd wear it in mourning.

I forced my eyes from the droplets of blood hitting the ground and to my own state.

My tux was disheveled and bloody, even if only some of it could be seen. The hidden stains held the scent of wet copper. The muggy air made it even stronger.

Against it was the scent of smoke.

Vincenzo sat across from me, his eyes on my face, sucking on a cigarette. Vincenzo was my cousin—didn't matter what number—and had made an oath of fealty to *Zio* Luca's faction of the family.

We all had it in us to kill, provoked or not, but some of us more than others. Vincenzo fell in with some of us more than others. He had made a career out of it with the family.

He came to collect me when *Zio* Luca summoned me to his palazzo. Vincenzo said he wanted to speak with me.

Vincenzo met my eyes, and after a second or two gave me a subtle nod. It was his way of acknowledging what had happened the night before. Perhaps he would have done the same thing to his brother—laws are laws and winners are winners—but the nod came out of respect for me.

The *motoscafo* pulled up to a palatial palazzo, and Vincenzo escorted me inside. Rocco, Dario, and Romeo each shook my hand and pulled me in. Again, it was not because of my father, but out of respect for me. I had nothing but love for my cousins and them for me. If the situations had been reversed, I would have made it a point to seek them out and do the same.

Rocco escorted me to *Zio's* office instead of Vincenzo. Rocco and I shared similar eye color. His were a mossy green in the dimness of the halls, the color of the sea when in the bright sun. Mine were the color of green olives in the sun and somewhat darker in the halls. Both of our eyes were thoughtful as we walked.

Brando met us at the door.

His eyes were stone brown and hard, though they showed the same amount of respect when he looked at me for a brief second. He turned his attention to Rocco and inquired in Italian about the situation.

I looked between the brothers, and Rocco sighed.

“A woman and man were found on the premises. The man is a German photographer. The woman is a journalist from America. She works for Vice City Press. She writes under the

name Pepper Nash.” Rocco’s eyes turned to mine. “She asked if you were here. Do you know her, *cugino*?”

“No,” I said. “I did not even speak to the press last night.”

Brando grunted at this. An agreeable noise.

“She also mentioned Renato,” Rocco continued. “She was with him before the meeting in the restricted part of the palazzo, or so she says.”

My memories went in reverse and snagged on a fallen angel in a white dress. She had caught my attention, and I’d been drawn to her for some reason. Renato had made a move on her, and she had talked to him. The urge to break his hands when he had put them on her was strong, but my mamma had changed his fate when she demanded I escort her to the reserved area of the palazzo.

Then...

I took a breath, remembering how she had stolen mine.

We had run into each other, and she almost knocked me to my knees.

It was such a powerful exchange that, forevermore, if I was in a crowded room full of women, I’d search out her scent to find my way to her.

Did I know her?

I’d never met her and exchanged words, but my soul had introduced itself to hers, and hers had answered back in a language I couldn’t understand but felt.

My great-grandmother had told me that happened between her and my great-grandfather, and if it ever happened to me, it would make a permanent mark.

Brando and Rocco were staring at me when I blinked back to reality. I would have to explain this in the simplest way. “I did not meet her knowing she was with the press. I did not even get her name, or her business at the event, but I noticed her talking with Renato before the meeting. After, we ran into each other in the halls.”

Brando's eyes narrowed on me, like he held an inside secret, but it would take a master thief to step inside his mind and steal his thoughts.

Rocco nodded. "There is more to this. A few months back, a man contacted her at the newspaper. She claims he used a voice-distorting device to hide his true voice. At the time, she did not know if it was a man or woman. This person had claimed he or she had access to all our properties."

Brando stood taller, and my entire body went rigid.

"He came to her after, dressed in a disguise, and threatened her family, who are in Italy. Her sister is married to Brio Valentino."

"Valentino," Brando repeated. "His family owns the bakery with the same name in New York?"

"Sì," Rocco said. "Brio was sent away from New York for a time because of family business."

By "family business," I knew Rocco did not mean actual family business. Brio was connected in New York, but I did not have much to do with all of that.

"Tell me, brother, why did this man threaten her family," Brando said in Italian. His demeanor took on a harder edge. His suspicious nature was starting to speak to him.

"He used it as leverage to force her to attend the ball in Venice with Rainer Winters. He wanted to speak to Scarlett, and his sister was able to obtain a pass. This *man* seems to have connections to the Paris dance scene."

The air grew still, and the two brothers stared at each other, communicating with their eyes.

A few seconds later, Rocco nodded. "He told Ava to call him ON."

If murder had a scent, Brando was reeking of it.

Rocco looked at me. "ON stands for Olivier Nemours. He is the man who has been terrorizing my brother's wife for too long."

“I have heard things,” I said. “Who is Ava?”

“Pepper Nash’s true name. Ava Girardi.”

Ava. The angel in the white dress. The name suited her.

Rocco stood taller. “Nemours threatened Ava’s family because he wants her to get in with us and spy. She could be telling us this because she’s a journalist and she knows we will not trust her, but it could also be a ploy to get us to trust her. She has a curious nature and is good with it.”

“Sounds familiar,” Brando muttered, and his eyes had this faraway look in them.

“Ava claims she was drugged last night as well. She believes Nemours did it. She thinks he was there dressed as one of the wait staff as a disguise. He gave her a glass of champagne that was tampered with.”

“We will kill him,” I said.

“If men could be killed more than once, I’d tell you to get in line,” Brando said. “But seeing as it can only happen once, I’ll be the man killing him in my wife’s honor.” He looked at Rocco. “Scarlett doesn’t hear of this. Not now.”

Rocco only nodded.

“Rainer Winters,” Brando said, changing the course of the conversation.

“With Ava in father’s office,” Rocco replied in Italian.

The three of us stood taller, our postures going rigid, when *Zio Luca*’s voice met us in the hallway. He was singing. Dressed casually. I’d never seen him so relaxed before.

Perhaps there was something to what my father had said about his wife being a *strega*. He seemed almost bewitched. A spell even stronger than the blood he shed the night before, or even taking control of the family.

When he was close enough, he looked us over, then motioned for us to follow him into the office. The look alone dispelled any signs of bewitching. It was back to business as usual.

Perhaps his wife was just able to give him balance—a true act of balance between the romantic and ruthless he could play out.

As the three of us entered behind *Zio* Luca, Rainer Winters set whatever he was looking at back on the shelf, and Ava sat up straighter in her chair. She watched as *Zio* Luca entered, followed by Brando, Rocco, and then me.

Her heartbreaking face, which was already pale, made even more ghostly by the black smears of makeup underneath her eyes, drained fully of color when our eyes met.

She fainted in my arms a second later.

I had caught an angel, but I had no idea what to do with her.

Ava's eyes fluttered open a second later, and she tried to wave off the need for help, claiming it was the lingering drugs in her system, but *Zio* Luca insisted on a doctor after I'd said it.

My great aunt's husband came in to see Ava not long after. He was a doctor and, at one time, my grandfather's trusted advisor. Out of all the doctors in the world, I trusted him the most. Brando directed Winter to a different room to give Ava and *Zio* Tito some privacy, and Rocco brought me to another as well.

This was a complication I did not need.

A woman who looked like an angel, even in the bleakness of the day, to fall into my arms and for me to want to keep her there.

It was hard for me to leave her, even though she was in the best hands.

The room was dim, and I went to the window. Venice was experiencing an *acqua alta*, the water overflowing into the streets, and the day resembled evening. My mind seemed to wander off on its own, but my body was in search of its own

direction. The urge to move was strong, the aftereffects of last night colliding with this morning, but I tamed it.

I refused to give the head lion another droplet of blood.

He would sense my moments of weakness if I paced, knowing I was unnerved by this woman and what he probably had in store for me. I love my uncle and respect him, but the laws of my family and how to manipulate them, when possible, are ingrained in me. It's a tight line we walk between respect and disrespect. Knowing how to keep balanced is key to survival.

When we are wounded, sometimes we are saved by the pack. Sometimes we are killed by it.

My uncle's booming voice seemed to echo down the hallway. He was singing again. He entered the room, and I turned to face him.

We embraced. I kissed both of his cheeks, and he shook my hand, keeping it while he placed one hand on my shoulder and squeezed. Our entire conversation took place in Italian.

"It is good to see you, Nazzareno," he said, and his eyes were unguarded, somewhat softer around the edges.

He spoke the truth.

In our family, it was vital that we did, or we would owe blood for it.

La mia parola e buona come il mio sangue.

My word is as good as my blood.

Those words helped create the foundation of who we are. It is our family motto. Our thing. We become men of honor by those words.

"It is good to see you, uncle." I squeezed his hand.

"Let me see it."

We let go, and I turned and raised my shirt up. He examined the tattoo that took up most of my back. It was of a lion with a sacred heart tucked into its mane, a rosary draped

around his neck. I'd added two wings to each side to symbolize who I am—a pilot.

Getting the symbol of our family inked into our skin was a rite of passage. It stood for accepting who we are, our position in the family, and letting the world know it.

“Ah.” He slapped my back. “This makes me proud. It reminds me of the *Lion of Venice*. Now sit. Tell me how life has treated you.”

He took a seat on an armchair. I took the seat across from him after I'd made myself more presentable. A blazing fire burned behind him, and even though most people would accuse him of being created by those flames, I always thought he resembled what his middle name implied, a lion. At least in spirit.

“I would have come to see you sooner,” I said. “I did not know how or where to find you.”

He grinned at this. “I made an entrance.”

I returned the grin. “A spectacular one.”

He waved a hand, dismissing my praise, though I could tell he ate it up. “Tell me all I have missed. You are a pilot now.”

Not a question, but a segue into catching up on my life. He'd been in prison for years, and the last time he looked at my face in person, I had looked a lot younger. Only select men were allowed to see him in prison in Louisiana. I was not one of them.

I caught him up to speed on my life, and he seemed pleased by all I'd done and accomplished. Then he brought up the reason for my visit.

The angel and that she had asked for me.

I did not give him a lame excuse, claiming to not know why she had. Even though we had never met, formally and with words, our meeting last night drew her back to me. Perhaps surrounded by a new society she did not know the rules to, she felt she could trust me.

There was not a reason I was certain of, just that our meeting seemed to explain everything to the heart beating inside my chest. It accepted it as truth, sense or not.

Zio Luca sighed at my silence, then continued. He went on about how Ava could not return to New York until we knew the truth behind her visit. Olivier Nemours was a bigger threat than I'd known, and I could tell my uncle was somewhat taken back I did not know the depth of it.

"I do not concern myself with much going on below," I said. "I keep to the skies."

"Like a lion with wings."

"Yes, uncle," I said.

He gazed at me for a few seconds. Sweat dripped down my face, even though the weather was not hot. *Zio* Luca was digging for the truth, then forming a picture from it.

Even though I was my father's son, my father did not bring me into his circle and trust me with all his secrets. He considered me different from him, even though we shared the same blood. I was sure *Zio* Luca was considering this.

"Your father tried to have my son and his wife killed, though not by bloodying his own hands." He lifted his. "I kill. It stains my palms and I let the world know. I do not hide behind any man."

He was basically saying what my father had done—tried to have his son and his daughter-in-law killed by someone else, and then denying it—was cowardice. I had heard rumors...but I had left them on the ground.

My uncle was not expecting an apology from me. I had not done it, or I'd be dead, or without my legs. But he wanted me to be aware, and in his own way, he was putting a certain amount of trust in me.

That made me suspicious.

Trust was not easily earned, and if he was investing in me...

"This woman. Ava Girardi. She needs to be watched."

My face did not outwardly deceive me, but my entire body flinched. Here was the fucking complication. I was drawn to this woman, and I did not need to be moving closer to her, fate attempting to shove us together.

By fate, I meant my uncle.

I looked toward the window for a second, and when he said the next words—*Renato will take responsibility for her*—my eyes snapped to his.

Snapped right into a fucking trap.

My uncle sat back, satisfied with himself. He had tested me, and I had failed. I'd given him a reaction, which labeled me as human and able to bleed, and that spoke volumes in our language.

I did not want fucking Renato around her.

He would be good to her, but not good enough.

However, I could not do this, be close to Ava Girardi any longer than I had been.

Even though my father and I had our differences, I belonged to him, I had respect for him, and he had arranged my marriage.

I had given my word.

Elettra Buratti, pasta heiress, would be my wife.

I could see it in my uncle's eyes, though, that he was in a romantic mood. The singing from earlier should have served as a warning to me.

“You will take care of her.” His tone was final. “Renato has other reasons for wanting her. I cannot be sure he will have clear eyes to see.”

I leaned forward some, just a pleading breath. “I respect your decision and I am honored that you trust me, uncle, but I will be honest. I do not want her for other reasons.”

He thought about this for a second, then nodded. “This is why it will work with you and not Renato. He wants her because she is a challenge to be conquered. Given the

circumstances, your engagement, you will be glad to be rid of her—you will see everything clearly, and the time it will take to find the truth will pass quickly.”

He stood, and I had no choice but to stand as well. He walked over to me and set a hand on my shoulder, leading me to the door.

“I believe in fate, my nephew.” He squeezed. “It is always at work. Perhaps the reasons you do not want her are the reasons for her to stay.” He paused and so did our steps. He snapped his fingers, as if a thought had just struck him like a thunderbolt. “The name Ava in Latin means bird; birdlike. You will understand her, since you are a pilot, ah?”

Outside of the room, he pointed me in the direction of the room Ava was being held in. He went in the opposite direction, laughing and singing again.

I was fucking wrong.

He might have been in a romantic mood for someone else, but for me, it was nothing but ruthless.

TWELVE

AVA

IF I WOULD HAVE BEEN A MUCH BETTER swimmer...I would have dived over the side of the water taxi and swam to freedom.

Even for me, the events of the last twenty-four hours were a bit much. I needed time to myself to take it all in and make sense of it. But it didn't seem like that was going to happen. No one said it, but I was pretty sure I'd earned myself a chaperone for the near future.

I'd tried to get away the night before, after I'd left bloodied footprints on my way out of the palazzo, but Rainer had caught me. He only demanded to know what had happened the night before after he got a phone call. I had a feeling it was ON, that piece of trash, and Rainer was following his orders to get what he wanted.

Whatever it was from Scarlett Fausti.

I was the one who'd suggested snooping around wherever Luca Fausti was staying. I knew that his security—or soldiers, as they were probably called behind the gilded gates—were going to pick us up. I wanted them too. I wanted the chance to speak my truth, letting them know about ON and what he was up to, in a general way, because my mind still wasn't working like it should. I was lagging. I felt weak. And the only name I could come up with when we were picked up was Nazzareno.

I was worried that no one was going to believe me about ON. They were going to think I was just snooping around for the sake of writing an incredibly detailed article about them.

But *one*, I would never poke around and do that. Because *two*, they would probably poison me for it. Or find a way to get me fired from Vice City. They (whoever, because it was never confirmed, only rumored) did that to an author who wrote a book about them once. They got her ostracized, and no publisher would touch her work after that.

When I mentioned the drugs, though, that got their attention. They didn't confirm with words, but the mood in the room had changed, and something passed between them, something like...*the fucker strikes again*.

Yeah, he did. And if I ever found out who he was, and could get my hands on him, he'd have a crazed woman to deal with. I'd go madder than the hatter on that asshole. I wasn't sure what the motherfucker gave me, but it was still causing me to go in and out, and I kept having horrifically real nightmares. Even when I'd wake up, I'd question my surroundings. I'd expect the ghost of my mom, who might not be a ghost at all, to pop out at me from nowhere.

The kind doctor, who had instructed me to call him Uncle Tito, said the drug was just going to take time to run its course. I was ready for it to be over. Not much scared me, but just the thought of those visions assaulting me again made my heart race and sweat coat my body, even with the cool weather.

The water taxi had three bench style seats below. Two were across from one another and the third was by itself, facing the two. Nazzareno sat by himself, but when our eyes met, he came to sit beside me, sighing as he did.

I hadn't felt how cold I was until he sat next to me. He was warm, and I almost wanted to scoot closer and put my hands against him.

Even though he felt like what I needed, I scooted away from him some. In all the time I'd been alive, I never needed to get close to someone to drive my demons away. I did it myself. But...it almost felt like he was responding instinctually to me.

Those dreams were freaking me the fuck out, and so was this.

Whatever *this* was between us. I could feel it pulling us closer to together. Like sexual attraction but on steroids.

That was another reason I'd needed to get to Luca's palazzo. My curious nature was dying to get close to Nazzareno again. My memories from the night before were somewhat distorted, except for a few things that stood out vividly.

The swaying candlelight.

The shadows crawling up walls and twisting into mysterious shapes.

The gallons of blood covering my bare feet, seeping into my white gown, and turning it black.

That moment in the hall that shocked the shit out of me when I'd collided with Nazzareno.

We weren't touching on the bench seat, but it was almost like my hand ached to reach out to his. To feel his body pressed up against mine, his arms around me, his scent as strong as his embrace.

There was something so warm about him, besides his appearance.

He turned some and met my stare.

He was so fucking good looking. Like...the Fausti family was a beautiful bunch. Italian vampires, remember? And no one knew as well as I did just how gorgeous they were, especially after last night. But Nazzareno...no other man could compare.

He stood out in a crowd of the most gorgeous men in, maybe, the world to me.

His hair was jet black, worn in a military-style cut. His skin was smooth and a tad bit darker than tan. He had that Mediterranean glow about him, like he was made by the olive tree, and its drupes had reached his eyes. In this dimness, they were a darker green, but in the sun's bright light, they were going to be the color of green olives.

He had that Fausti look about him—strong, prominent bone structure, sharp features, and lips that looked like they could kiss for days.

Sitting next to him, his body made mine feel feminine... like I became hyperaware of myself. I was a woman made up of atoms sitting next to a man with the strongest magnetic field.

Not even when I had my cards and was going through stats did I concentrate on only him. In person, though...I had no clue how he stood out among his family to me, but he did. And it might not make any sense, why then and not before, but I was never one to focus on everything making sense.

The only thing I couldn't figure out was what was causing the pull.

Was it just physical?

If so, I'd never been drawn to a man so strongly, except for in my fantasies.

Or was it something deeper?

And in that case...I'd never had that either.

Again, like the nightmares, it freaked me the fuck out.

My sister was the one to believe in souls meeting and responding to each other—soul mates, I guess—and she was never afraid of commitment, or as I liked to call it, being cuffed to another person forever.

Just thinking about it would send a shiver over me, and I'd break out in cold sweats. Being tied down was a fear of mine. A terrible, terrible, fear, and there was no true basis for it, except I just didn't like the idea of feeling trapped.

My sister once told me that maybe it wasn't fear of commitment at all, but I was just claustrophobic and confusing the two.

A small grin came to my face at the thought, and Nazzareno's eyes went straight to my lips before they did a slow rise back to my eyes.

My heart started to beat faster, and I had to steady my breaths.

It felt like a moment adrenaline junkies live for.

Skydiving.

Mountain climbing.

Jumping into shark-infested waters.

Kissing a Fausti.

His cellphone went off, and we both turned in opposite directions. He answered it by greeting whoever was on the other end of the line with his name. “Nazza-reno.”

Send help, if his looks and body didn’t kill me, that voice would. It was deep, gritty, and the most sensual thing I’d ever heard, especially with his accent. I had to stop myself from thinking about what his tongue did to the letters *R* and *L* or *I* might form a puddle beneath me.

I could hear a muffled male voice coming from the speaker and glanced over my shoulder at his profile. Nazzareno glanced at me at the same time, and instead of holding my eyes, he stood and looked out of the taxi, giving me his back.

It was like the world came into focus in that second and I realized how unkempt he looked, how tired, and how stained the white parts of his tux was.

His father was...I didn’t know if he was alive or not, but the amount of blood...the state of his health couldn’t be good. And Luca...he was so cordial, as charming as the night before.

The man could sing too!

Luca didn’t seem like he had any regrets from the night before, and even though Nazzareno had showed up at the palazzo, probably because someone had called him after I’d asked for him, he had to be conflicted. His uncle had either killed his father or severely damaged him. I was no expert, but the amount of blood had to be caused by a serious weapon.

Knowing how romantic they could be, probably a sword.

From the outside looking in, this was exactly the break I'd always wanted. Something so ruthless, but at the same time romantic, to share with the world. The headline wasn't solid, because I had no idea what had been done, but it would have been eye catching.

Gazing at Nazzareno's back, though, I thought he seemed so human, even if otherworldly gorgeous.

His father might be dead by his uncle's hands.

The entire time he'd been quiet, listening, and then a second passed before he hung up. He held the phone in his hand, watching as a watery world passed us by. A few seconds later, he turned and took a seat across from me.

I took a deep breath and gathered the courage to say something. "I'm sorry about your dad," I whispered. And I realized...it was the first time I'd ever spoken to him. Had reached out and broke the filled silence with empty noise. My apology was sincere, but whatever was going on between us felt...loud, but only between the two of us.

He took a knee in front of me, and because I was not expecting him to grab my leg, I was too late to pull back. He removed one of the boots I'd haphazardly slipped on without socks. I hadn't even had the time or energy to scrub all the blood clean. I barely had time to change out of the dress and into a sweater and jeans.

He examined my foot, turning it from left to right, gazing at the blood stains in the creases of my skin. My nails were painted black, and it looked like dirt had gotten underneath my nails. But we both knew it was more dried blood.

I tried to pull back, but his grip was tight, and I could feel the tremble in his hand, even though it wasn't shaking. After a tense second, he looked up into my eyes. And in that moment, I remembered something Edna and I had discussed about Rocco Fausti.

His eyes were light, like Nazzareno's, and just as beguiling. Which made them just as dangerous as dark eyes,

like Brando Fausti's, because both colors hid the monsters lurking beneath the surface.

Nazzareno had his own monster.

I went to scoot back some but didn't want to make it obvious. There was nowhere to run to anyway. My heart started to beat overtime, my palms slick, but from something different this time.

I wasn't afraid he would try to keep me. I was afraid he'd try to send me away.

No. No. No.

Fucking NO!

That was even more terrifying than being kept.

Being caught!

He took a shuddering breath, the warmth of it touching my foot when he released it. He said something in Italian and studied my face carefully when I tried to understand it. A few breaths later, he cleared his throat.

“Are you sorry about my father, wild birdie? Or are you sorry that you did not get to see him bleed out in real time when his brother cut his legs off?”

The breath I was about to take got stuck in my throat, but I held the urge to explosively cough down. He wasn't finished.

“Are you sorry you missed his roar of pain? Or did you catch that part? Tell me, *uccellino selvatico*, what will the headline read when you write this article? ‘My dangerous obsession has led me...’”

Right to you, the most dangerous Fausti of all to the health of my heart, I wanted to say, but I kept my mouth shut.

My chest felt tight. My throat burned.

I couldn't answer.

What was the point? It was my word against years of my actions.

Whoever had called must have told him all about me and not to trust me.

Fucking A.

He shouldn't.

Just like it was for the best if I didn't trust him either.

I was a wild bird who needed my wings, and most importantly, my heart.

I refused to let him steal it.

But it didn't matter anyway.

I could sense he had locked me out.

THIRTEEN

NAZZARENO

HER FIERCE BLUE EYES, which empyrean skies could not even compete with, locked with mine. Her chin raised a subtle bit. Her arms crossed.

Whatever I felt from her, apart from physical attraction, had been locked inside a covered cage.

Either her truth or her lies.

At the palazzo, when Rocco had told me she was part of the press, I had assumed she was like the rest—there for a story to report on and then move on from. But my *cugino* had called to inform me of how deep her obsession with my family went.

Years and years back, and to a degree that was compulsive.

Her presence in the restricted area of the palazzo during the meeting between my father and uncle went with her character.

She had been there for the blood. It still stained her feet as it had stained my hands. But while she collected it to share with the world, I had tried to stop the hemorrhaging.

Her history and obsession steeled my resolve when it came to whatever existed between us. She was a complication.

If any feelings truly existed between us.

She was only obsessed with all things Fausti.

She even worked for a woman who had been infatuated with my grandfather to an unhealthy degree.

Ava looked away from me as I slipped her boot back on. Her eyes gazed out at the passing scenery as the water taxi grew closer to Marco Polo airport. Her blond hair tumbled down her shoulders in chaotic waves. An edge of one of the strands was still stained with blood. But the way the dreary light haloed her...it made my chest ache in a way it never had.

My eyes consumed her beauty, as if they had been starved of anything with substance.

In a rush, she exhaled and popped up like her seat had gotten hot. A loud *whack!* echoed from her head hitting the roof.

I could not stop it in time.

“Shit!” Her hands flew to her head.

I steadied her as she held her hands on her head as she sat down.

“Forgot that was there,” she breathed out. “But!” She pointed outside. We were just passing the place she’d been staying. “My things! I can’t leave my things. I don’t have the money to replace them. It’s bad enough that I lost my cloak last night. I checked it in at the event, but Rainer rushed me out and I didn’t have a chance to grab it. I *really* love that cloak. It’s one of the most expensive things I own. *Damn.*” Her voice and eyes took on a sadness I felt in my chest.

An instinct I had never felt before rushed into my chest, and I felt the urge to find the root of her sadness and kill it. My hands ached to fix whatever troubled her. Even if it meant reaching deep into her heart and tearing out the darkness causing her to feel weak, scared, depressed, hurt.

The only thing I allowed myself to grapple with was the instinct.

I had to harden my chest to stop it from taking her in. I could not allow her to go any deeper than she had. I did not know if her intentions were pure, or how far she would go to get close to me, only to find my heart sacrificed to her pen later on.

However, her comfort level with me had changed. Before she was being quiet, demure, like she had been overwhelmed by the connection between us. But after I'd taken her boot off and we both seemed to harden toward each other, her words rushed out, and I could feel her energy soar.

This was either who she was, and the other version was a lie, or vice versa. Or perhaps the quieter version was a glimpse of who she would be with me. At peace with the silence, because we shared it.

She pressed against her head with both hands. "*Ow.*" She closed her eyes, locking me out of heaven, and took a deep breath.

Each of her features were soft and feminine. So was her body. I watched her, studying, memorizing, until she opened her eyes. "Your things have already been collected from the hotel." I cursed the sound of my voice because it came out somewhat strangled, raspy, and too fucking vulnerable.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. I turned and faced the front of the taxi until it sailed into a spot at Marco Polo Airport. I helped Ava out and we walked together until we met Beni. He was dressed in his co-pilot uniform.

His eyes were on mine, and he squeezed my shoulder. I nodded, acknowledging what the gesture meant. He was sorry to hear about what had happened to my father. Then I took the spinner suitcase he'd brought for me.

I told him her name and ordered him in Italian to watch her. "Do not let her out of your sight." I glanced at her, and her face was pinched, trying to understand our words. I went on to say that I would explain after we took off what her business was. I also added that Luca Fausti had ordered it.

Beni stood taller, taking the order more seriously. He did not want his head to be severed from his body and put on a platter to be served at his family's place for dinner.

I did not want to acknowledge that my movements were rushed as I washed off quickly and changed into my uniform.

But they were. Even though I trusted Beni, Ava Girardi was going to be as hard to keep locked away as a wild bird.

My feet stopped in the middle of the crowded airport before I made it back to Beni and Ava. She stood with her back turned to me, gazing out the window as planes landed and took off. Beni was staring at the profile of her face.

She was fucking exquisite when the light hit her, and she was caught up in the glow—like she'd flown out of the clouds after a cleansing rain.

A second later, she turned, and our eyes met from across the airport. She took me in from head to toe, and her mouth fell open.

I would have paid millions to find out what she was thinking in that moment.

Beni said something to her, and she snapped her lips shut, blinking as she turned to him. He gestured toward me, and she nodded. She was taking her time, like she was in no rush to meet me, but her steps almost seemed exaggerated. She was forcing her pace.

Like an obstacle course fate had set down at my feet unexpectedly, this woman was going to be the greatest challenge of my life.

“Are we ready, cousin?” Beni asked in Italian.

“Where are we going?” Ava whispered.

“To Rome,” I said.

The Eternal City, she mouthed, and the three of us started to move through airport traffic. Her eyes kept flickering to me and then to the crowd.

“Is there a problem, *Signorina* Girardi?” I asked her.

She grinned and shook her head. “You stop traffic in that uniform, *Captain*.” She looked at Beni. “How do you say Captain in Italian? *Capitano*?”

“*Sì*.” Beni gave me a cheeky fucking grin though he had answered her.

“Let me rephrase then,” she said. “You stop traffic in that uniform, *Capitano*.”

Her voice was breathy when she called me *Capitano*, and she had a mischievous glint in her shimmering blues. She was being flirty, but all it did was poke at my self-restraint. My body was drawn to hers, like blood is drawn to a heart, and if I lost the battle to stay away from her, I was going to ruin her for anyone else.

I was going to steal her heart and charm it into beating for only me.

There was a desire inside of me burning like a flame to extinguish any other man’s touch on her skin. I would fucking run them out of her memory, and the only name she would ever remember was mine.

“You like to be called *Captain*, don’t you?” Her body was in the airport, but her voice was in the bedroom—with me.

I nodded ahead and put my hand on her lower back. “Keep walking.”

She saluted me. “*Sì, Capitano!*”

Beni snorted and I narrowed my eyes at him.

He saluted me and said, “*Sì, Capitano!*”

I would need the strength of an army to get through this.

A stewardess waited on the steps of the plane as we boarded. She was in the traditional uniform of my company, sky-blue blazer with the profile of gold lions on the shoulders, white silk dress shirt underneath, tucked into a blue pencil skirt. She wore heels and a matching cap. The jewelry on her wrists, gold and diamond bracelets with lion pendants, matched the ones in her ears, except those incorporated the colors of the Italian flag.

The idea was to take flying back to what it used to be.

An event.

She welcomed us in Italian, and her eyes lingered on me in a soft way. A way I knew meant she wanted me to take her to

the bedroom of the plane and add mile-high points to her club membership.

I did not touch crew members. Everyone knew this, but it never stopped the looks from female workers.

Ava looked between us and ticked her mouth. “Don’t you know you should never give a woman jewelry unless you’re claiming her? Molly told me that. I think her generation had a better grasp on that than we do, but...it sends the wrong message if you’re not fully in it.”

“It is not for them to keep,” I said. “The jewelry is part of the uniform.”

“Did you tell her that? She must have been sick the day the company memo went out. Because she has ‘*he’s mine*’ written all over her face.”

Before we came to the crux of the attraction between us, we had both been quiet. If she was the same as me, we were both trying to understand it, figure out a way to get closer to it, but we both seemed to decide on that boat. It would go no further than the attraction we could not control. It was going to turn us into ashes before this was over. And it seemed like her filter was the first to be consumed.

She had none.

I led Ava to her seat, and she made an exaggerated noise when she took it. But I could tell she was impressed by the plane.

“My clothes?” she asked. “Are they coming soon? I feel so underdressed for this fancy ride.”

“They have been delivered already and loaded onto the plane. You are welcome to the bedroom and bathroom after we are in the air.” I leaned down and set my hands on either side of her, on the seat rests. “Are you afraid to fly, *Signorina Girardi*?”

“Not at all. I am, however, afraid to crash.”

“Welcome aboard then, *Signorina*.” My grin came slow. “You are in capable hands.”

“We’ll see *how* capable.”

If I was going to spend time with her, I had to feed the attraction between us some, or I would break completely. My eyes lowered to her lips. My tongue darted out, just the tip, then my eyes moved slowly back up to hers. They had softened, but she crossed her arms, almost fidgeting in her seat.

“Be sure to include the details of my plane in your article.” I winked at her as I stood, about to leave her to her own devices as I claimed the captain’s seat in the cockpit.

“Be sure to roll out the red carpet for me then! Primo snacks and drinks!” She spoke to my back. “If not—the article will reflect how hangry I was. Not sure if hangry is a thing in Italy, but it’s not a good one in America. Just warning you ahead of time, *Capitano*.”

I grinned, even though she could not see me. I stopped and gave the stewardesses a collective order: whatever *Signorina* Girardi wanted or needed, it was hers.

Beni was warming up the 737 as I stashed my suitcase and took my seat. My phone pinged, and Beni looked at me with raised eyebrows. I never left my device on during takeoff or landing. Most of the time not at all.

“The cogs in your mind are working slower today, cousin,” he said in Italian, wiggling his eyebrows at me. “I wonder why?”

It was my brother, Aristide, and my heart stopped beating.

“Brother,” he greeted in Italian after I picked up. “Where are you?”

“Leaving Venice,” I answered in the same language. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong with father. He is still stable. There are other things going on. More war.”

“More war,” I repeated.

“Leandro knows more than me, but the Ponte dei Pugni, it is being attacked as we speak. *Zio* Luca and his family are

fighting for their lives.”

The Ponte dei Pugni. The “bridge of fists.” Without Aristide having to give more details, I knew the bad blood from the night before had run over into daylight. The bridge, and its history, spoke volumes—it was chosen by members of the Fausti *famiglia* for its symbolism.

“I am coming for you.”

“No, we are safe here.” Aristide sighed and lowered his voice. “I do not know if father and Leandro had a hand in this. It might be a bomb, so to speak, that was prepared to go off if he lost to *Zio Luca*.”

“Where is Leandro?”

“You do not even want to know, brother.”

“Tell me.”

“Malum. He left only a short while ago.”

Malum was a maximum-security prison built by the Fausti *famiglia* to keep in their own that had broken our laws and could not be held in any other way. It was located on a private island out in the Atlantic, surrounded by almost nothing but water. An airstrip had been built on a separate island, and it was the only way in or out, unless by a water vehicle. Food for the guards and inmates had to be flown in and then delivered by boat.

The Fausti *famiglia* had chosen it for two reasons. Like the Bridge of Sighs in Venice, it was torturous to the inmates to gaze upon God’s finest painting—the water and nature that surrounded it—but never be free to enjoy it. Comparable to Alcatraz, those same waters that surrounded it were as damning as shackles. The location was off the grid, where nature was still wild and untamed enough to not be listed on any maps. The water was testier than not, and sharks were abundant, always looking for a next meal.

My father had complained about *Zio Luca* not being sent there. He grumbled about his brother being on vacation in Louisiana for his crimes. But my grandfather had done it for a

reason, allowed him to be sentenced by a court other than his, and I thought I had figured out why.

He was close to the woman he had sacrificed it all for but could not reach out and touch her.

Not even Malum could compare to that.

This news was not welcome, though, and it would set my wings in a different direction. If Leandro had gone to Malum, he was going to seek someone out. The only men he would find there were traitors to our family.

Traitors who would welcome death instead of being locked up, surrounded by wild beauty.

These were men who would not hesitate to take the life of an appointed king and cause anarchy among all the factions, making our stable feet wobbly and twisting our insides from within.

Leandro was going to find someone agreeable to end *Zio Luca's* life, if the battle at the bridge was unsuccessful.

“He is going to cause an entire family war, Nazzareno,” Aristide whispered, “if he is successful.”

I hung up, knowing I had only a little time to get there. I could not make a detour and leave my wild bird in a cage in Rome to be safe.

She would have to fly into rough winds with me.

After the 737 was safely in the air, gliding at my touch and basically flying herself, I gave Beni orders to get in touch with Malum and tell them to expect our arrival. If not, they might shoot us down.

“Malum,” Beni repeated.

“Malum,” I confirmed.

He did as he was ordered to, and after we got approval, he turned toward me.

“I rarely question orders, *cugino*, but why are we taking women with us to such a place? My *culo* does not even feel safe!”

I believed everyone needed a Beniamino in their lives. He never meant to be, but even when the world seemed the darkest, he was the comedic relief to ease the tension. He had an expressive face, more expressive than most, and he could make his eyes bug out, purposely or not.

I squeezed his shoulder. “I will take care of Ava.”

“The stewardesses?”

“Will stay on the plane with you.”

I hadn’t decided whether to take Ava or not. Keeping her on the plane or taking her with me—both scenarios made me uneasy for different reasons. I could not keep an eye on her if she was left behind, but bringing her inside might get us both killed.

Beni closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why is she—Ava—here?”

I was going to need his help, and I decided to trust him with the truth. We were cousins, but in all the years we had become friends, he had earned his place in my life. We served in the military together, and he was my co-pilot on all flights after. We had been through it all.

He sat quietly as I explained everything that had happened. I left my attraction to her out on purpose. I fed it some, but I refused to give it substantial credit, and speaking it out loud might give it credence.

“If you do not reach Leandro in time, it might not only be his life on the line.”

We let that statement hang in the air between us. Beni was right. If *Zio* Luca connected the attack on the bridge to our faction, then Leandro hired someone from Malum to try to assassinate him, he might destroy all of us. Malum had a detailed list of all visitors, including only approved flights in and out. The Boeing 737 would even be swept when we

arrived to make sure all passengers we claimed were on the flight, and we were not attempting to smuggle extra bodies in.

If Leandro had a man on the inside—he had no doubt either earned himself a spot in the prison or a grave. No one ever had a man on the inside. It was always a trap.

“I have to stop him before he does irreversible damage,” I said.

Beni understood how dangerous the situation was and nodded. “What if Luca requests fealty from you?”

That was something to fucking consider. The only men who gave fealty were the king’s consigliere, or men who were from a different faction of the family who decided to serve underneath a different one. Vincenzo and his brother, Guido, for instance. Their father was proud to have them serve such a powerful faction.

For the sons of a son of Marzio, though, it was never expected of us to pledge an oath to anyone other than our fathers. Unless there was anarchy and our faction’s loyalty was questioned.

A coup, such as the one on the bridge, and this subterfuge by my brother...I would have to make the decision to pledge fealty to my uncle and break free from my family’s faction, or I’d be held accountable for my faction’s actions.

“Fuck me,” I snapped.

I’d never seen eye to eye with Leandro, and this was only going to put more space between us. We might end up in a battle like our father and *Zio* Luca. Leandro was the perfect child of my mother and father—he allowed his thirst for blood to rule him. Mine lurked below the surface, but I would not hesitate to do what was necessary if he challenged me.

A scent drifted past my nose, and my nostrils flared. I looked over my shoulder to find Ava standing on the precipice of stepping into my “office.”

Her eyes were lit up by all the lights, and I could not tell if it was her curiosity burning that deep or if it was only on the surface.

I forced my face to stay blank. She had taken a shower, her hair straight down her shoulders and her face fresh, and she was dressed in a cream off-the-shoulder top with a pair of matching flowing pants, and her scent...I was nothing but a wild animal scenting the air for a true mate.

My natural instincts woke from a long, dark slumber, and they were going to send me in whichever direction she went—feral with want and need.

“Hello, *Capitano*,” she said, grinning. “I see you’re hard at work making the friendly skies...*friendlier*.”

The teasing tone to her voice—it sent the guard around my heart up while lowering the one around my body. My cock was in control of that one.

“Who allowed you back here?” Beni scrunched up his face at her.

Her grin turned into a smile at the serious look on his face, which made it hard to take him seriously.

She pointed behind her. “One of the ladies on the plane. She told me *Capitano* Fausti said to give me everything I want or need. I wanted to come back here and check things out. I’ve never seen this part of a plane before. Does this airline offer pins?”

“Pins?” Beni made a confused face.

Ava’s lips tightened into a thin line, and she was struggling not to laugh at him. At least her filter worked somewhat. Beni was mostly genial, but he knew the situation we were up against, and I could tell he saw Ava as a complication for me. And if she laughed at him, without him truly knowing her, he would feel disrespected.

“Yeah, a pin. The ones that attach to your shirt with a needle? Some airlines give them as souvenirs. A gift to mark the memory.” Her face was totally serious.

Beni matched it. “We do not give those.”

“Shame. This is a memorable plane and flight.” She looked at me.

Our eyes held, and I could not control the impulse to stay locked in with her, but I forced my mouth to work.

“What do you need, *Signorina* Girardi?”

“That’s a loaded question, *Capitano* Fausti. I doubt you’re ready for it.”

“The simple version of the question then.”

“The polite version then. Simple answer. I don’t need anything. I just wanted to thank you for getting my clothes and things, and I’m...curious...about what goes on in here.”

I cursed under my breath. Curiosity could be a beautiful thing. It had the power to fire us up, keep us living and learning, but it could also have a dangerous edge when not controlled, when fear was lacking from its nature.

This woman’s curiosity was missing fear and control, just like she was missing a filter.

It made the decision to leave her with Beni or take her with me even harder. I could not trust her with the specifics of Malum, and I could not trust her not to report on the inside of it. Even if I had the time to land and leave her with someone else, the prospect seemed risky. She seemed skilled in escapes.

“If nothing is needed...” Beni broke our connection and stood. “We will be experiencing some turbulent weather in a few minutes. It will be safer for you to return to your seat.”

That was the truth. Even in the best of weather conditions, taking off and landing at Malum was for highly skilled pilots. Storm season was still upon us, and we were about to experience some forceful weather. But I had successfully landed aircraft in many of the most dangerous airports in the world—Lukla Airport and Paro Airport included. I was the ninth pilot allowed to land there.

Beni escorted her out, then came back a minute later, claiming his side. I could feel his eyes on my face, and I turned to meet them.

“You did not mention the electrical force between the two of you, *cugino*.”

“Electrical force,” I repeated.

“The one strong enough to shock this plane and send it crashing into the jaws of the ocean.”

“You are being dramatic, Beniamino.”

“Am I?” His voice went up an octave before it smoothed out. “Not mentioning the attraction is telling, *cugino*. You are attempting to cloak it, which tells me you do not want it, but cannot control it.” He squeezed my shoulder, his eyes serious on mine. He spoke in Italian. “You have never allowed anything to have control over you before. I can sense it. You are deep in trouble. You would take the fall for her. And where we are right now with the family...”

I turned my attention back to the controls just as the plane started to tremble from the strong breaths of the sky and the violent swirls of dark water beneath us.

FOURTEEN

AVA

THE ONLY REASON I wasn't crapping myself in this beautiful iron bird: I didn't want to show weakness in front of the bitches who worked the back of the plane. The three of them, perfect molds for plastic dolls, sat in their seats, hands in their laps, grinning at me.

They had sensed it. Or maybe they had smelled it.

My fear.

I'd probably made the expensive plane reek of it.

I grinned back at them, even though my hands strangled the armrests.

On the inside, they were probably gloating about my fear after the snide comment I made about one of them not getting the memo about the jewelry they wore not being a claim.

I mean, I'd gloat too, but this seemed excessive, since their lives were on the line as well as mine.

Naz's copilot was not shitting me when he said we were in for some turbulence. The entire plane seemed to tremble with it, and my body kept being jolted from one side to another. Even the lights flickered some. I was waiting for oxygen masks to drop at any second.

Was this fucking normal?

I refused to ask any of the molds.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, then turned my face and looked out the window.

Bad idea.

No.

The worst idea.

I didn't see any patchwork patterns connecting the layout of the land. No lights running through sound surfaces like sparkling veins. All I thought I saw was a very pissed-off sea.

Is that water? If it is, why are we flying over so much of it?

I went to grab for my phone and remembered I didn't have one. Security at the Fausti Palazzo in Venice had confiscated it from me. I couldn't even—*fuckadee fuck, fuck, fuck!* The plane bounced and rocked me from side to side, and the lights flickered again. I imagined the swirling wind trying to catch us up in its tornado.

If something happened, I couldn't even call my sister and make things right with her. She would allow guilt to eat her up. That was the kind of person my sister was. She looked more like Sonny's side whereas I looked more like our mom. On the inside, though, I thought it was reversed. She took after my mom, and I took after Sonny—emotionally dead at times unless something dangerous sparked me to come to life.

The issues I had with Sonny, though, felt like the driving force behind...my steps in this life. I didn't want a heart because of him and all the things he'd done and *not* done.

Okay. I wasn't getting in deep with that. Sonny was *not* going to be the last person I thought of before we crashed. He didn't deserve it, even if it was negative.

The only other person who came to mind as "safe" was flying this steel bird.

Why he even came to mind, I had no clue, but he did.

This was so unlike me to attach to someone else like this—like a clingy octopus—and I'd only just met him.

Yeah, he ticked off so many boxes, but before him...I'd never even had fucking boxes.

I had people who entered my life in the usual way— chance meetings. Few stayed. Joe the Detective was one of them. Most left. *C'est la vie*. Easy come, easy go. There were so many other *thems* out there to meet and lose.

This was why Molly had once told me it was okay to pray for people to come into your life, but it was also wise to pray for people and things *not meant to be* to be removed.

Back to the point...I felt like I had to mentally shackle my feet to the floor to keep from running to him.

He felt...safe.

Safe.

When nothing in life was safe. That was something I'd always believed in.

Shit. I was fucking losing it.

Bye bye, birdie, you're gone.

It had to be the overwhelming developments as of late making me feel this way. I was lost in a world that had its own set of rules, and I was clinging to the first warm body who had showed some interest in me.

Yeah.

That had to be it.

Yeah, it has nothing to do with the spark between you two, my mind said sarcastically and rolled its eyes. Or its amygdala, because a straight shot of fear seemed to turn in my stomach like bad food.

I took a deep breath, settling it in place. *It's only attraction, you sarcastic bitch, I thought back. One night, or day, with him in the sack...I'd wash that man right out of my hair.*

My heart stopped like hands had a chokehold on it.

Was this what my sister had been talking about when she said I'd regret what I'd said? Did she have a feeling this was going to happen? I was going to crash?

No...she would have warned me.

Damn! This was why no one should ever say shit like that! The word *regret* should be erased out of the dictionary and cleansed out of people's memories. No other word had the power to haunt like that one, besides maybe *goodbye*, or *hello*, depending on who that person became to you.

After a few more minutes of this line of panicked internal dialogue, I started to breathe better, my grip on the seat releasing the claws some, when the plane felt like it was in smooth motion again. The three molds were unbuckling and getting back to business.

One of them informed me that we would be landing a few minutes after that.

"Is this Rome?" I asked her. I'd expected more lights and less water.

"No," she said.

My eyes opened wide, and I waited a beat before I asked, "Where then?"

"Please buckle in," she said in a polite voice. It was accented but I couldn't exactly place it. Swiss, maybe? "We are about to land."

She took her seat and buckled in, and I did the same, since it was my ass on the line. My stomach dipped at the first drop in pressure, and after a little time, we were hitting the runway and then coming to a complete stop.

Two men came running toward us with flashlights. They looked like guards with the same lion insignias on their uniforms as the crew of this plane. But their uniforms looked more like fatigues, and they wore matching hats which covered most of their eyes. Rain drops slid off the brims and soaked them.

The flight attendants unbuckled, and I did the same. A minute or two later, Naz exited the cockpit, and I took my seat again.

Right.

The man was breathtaking in that uniform, and he had the power to knock me on my ass.

No, backspace that and replace it with a word that meant more than breathtaking.

Maybe it took two: soul stealing.

My eyes devoured him like he was water after a long trek in the desert and had saved my life by just existing.

He stopped when he came to my seat and took a knee, getting really close to my face. His masculine scent washed over me, and I wanted to bathe in it.

I caught Beni's back as he left the plane to talk to the two men. I wasn't even that curious about where he was going or why he was showing them some kind of badge. Or what they were saying in a language I should have learned years ago in preparation for these moments.

Not with the man in front of me.

"I have business to take care of," Naz said. "You will stay on the plane with Beniamino while I am gone."

It was clear to see the internal war going on inside of his head about that. He didn't want to leave me. Probably because he couldn't trust me, and he sensed how much of a wriggler I was. I'd gotten myself out of many sticky situations with the ability.

"I'll stay put."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You say this, but you make it sound like there is a but."

"There's always a but," I said. "What if someone charges the plane? Or I have to pee? Or... anything happens that makes me move. I can't stay put in those situations."

His hand gripped my arm, hard enough to make me take notice. His skin was hot, burning through the fabric. "This is no joke," he said seriously. "This is not New York. This is an actual jungle compared, with actual animals that are starving and will eat you. Even if they are not starving when you meet them, they will still kill you and save you for later."

A million sarcastic comebacks were fighting to be set free, but I held them down. He was being serious. I just had a morbid sense of humor and a streak of insanity.

His eyes seemed to study mine. “You are truly not afraid of anything.”

“Not true,” I breathed, because for a second, his searching gaze had found mine. “I was scared a few minutes ago.”

“Why?” he whispered. His breath smelled so good. Like mint.

“I thought we were going to crash.”

“I cannot vow to stop death, but I will protect you at all costs. I will keep you flying if it is in my power to do so. You can trust me, *uccellino selvatico*.”

I breathed out. “But you can’t trust me, right?”

“Can I?”

The moment froze between us until Beni called his name, and he left me to meet him outside the plane.

Could he trust me?

That was a loaded question.

I automatically thought *No, no one should trust me. I’m too flaky and too independent, and I’m claustrophobic when it comes to the thought of commitment, of having my wings clipped.* I could sense Naz felt it, especially after he probably got deep intel on me.

But...

Another voice whispered in the background...*he’s different.*

How did that change things? I had no clue in that moment. It would take time to understand all of this.

I turned my attention back to Naz and Beni, who were listening as one of the guards—he was dressed like one—spoke to them. The other guard kept darting glances my way.

Naz and the guard leading the conversation got into a heated discussion in Italian after the guard said something Naz didn't seem to like or agree with. The guard kept shaking his head, and he gestured to me, then shrugged.

A minute or two later, the plane seemed like it was being stormed by more guards and sniffer dogs. They seemed to be sweeping the plane. The three stewardesses stayed seated and kept their eyes averted.

Where the fuck were we? I could hear the wind howling outside, and the rain was coming down hard enough to dent the metal, it seemed. When Naz had said we were in a real jungle, I took it metaphorically, because of who his family was.

He was being for real. We truly might be in the middle of a jungle, or someplace equally wild.

The Fausti family had so many secrets they guarded fiercely, and I was sure this was one of them. Wherever we were, it seemed to be off the grid.

Naz's back was rigid as the guard climbed the steps to the plane and joined the search. He turned a second later and our eyes met. I wasn't sure what was going on, but his eyes had turned as stormy as the night.

A guard came to stand in front of me. He pointed to the door with his gun. It was slung over his shoulder. "You will come with us, *Signorina* Girardi."

My eyes moved back to Naz's. He nodded slowly, like he hated to do it, and I stood, straightening my clothes, walking ahead of the guard. After I was on the ground with Naz and Beni, the doors to the plane closed, and it felt like we were locked out of one reality, about to enter another.

FIFTEEN

AVA

NAZ'S GRIP on my hip was like the chokehold I'd felt around my heart when I thought my sister had predicted my downfall. His temperature ran so hot, he was burning me through the thin silk. And as we walked toward a building that looked like it was made of stone, we had to find a stride where our hips didn't constantly hit because he kept me so close to his side.

It didn't take us long to find a rhythm, and we walked as one instead of two.

It felt like the most natural thing in the world to be connected to him this way. I couldn't deny that his protectiveness and warmth made me feel safe in a way I'd never felt before.

I'd felt safe with Lilo over the years, but in a brotherly way. There was nothing sibling-like in the way Naz held me.

His touch felt like it belonged to me. It belonged *on* me. At all times.

"All is good with you?" His eyes caught mine for a brief second before he turned them forward.

"Yeah," I breathed out. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You are leaning into me more. Your steps are not as steady."

"Just unsure..."

"I will take care of you."

I only nodded, because my swaying steps had nothing to do with where we were, but my overactive heart.

Concentrate on where we're going instead.

The airstrip was narrow and surrounded by what looked like a jungle on both sides. The vegetation was thick and rustling with the strong wind. It blew my hair into my face, plastering it there with rain. I kept having to move it to the side to see. My clothes were stuck to me, too, and I was glad I hadn't decided on white again, or these men were going to get a show from my nipples.

I glanced at Naz. He didn't seem like the kind of man who would appreciate that, even though there seemed to be nothing there for him but attraction. Still. I'd done enough research to know how far these men would go for honor. And if I was under his protection, or watch...this situation might get ugly.

After the airstrip, we walked along a crude road, still surrounded by flora, until it opened up, and the stone building I'd thought I'd seen came into view. On the left of it, a metal fence that had to be over twenty feet tall seemed to stretch beyond what my eye could see. I hadn't noticed it before, so maybe it had been tucked further into the brush, or it blended better when it wasn't so close.

A part of it opened, and a man stepped out. He was holding the leash of another sniffer dog. A Belgian Malinois that kept looking to him every few seconds for guidance. The men on the plane had the same breed of dog, but also German Shepherds.

Was this a military compound of some sort? The guards all wore similar uniforms, had working dogs that were known to be in the military, and...from what I could see when the fence slid up and allowed the guard out, there was another building in the background.

"Where do the dogs live?" I asked.

Naz's grip on me tightened, and I had to stave off the impulse to step out of it.

The guard who seemed to be in charge blinked at me. From the time we'd started the walk, it had been quiet, only the sound of the wind, pelting rain, and a large body of water boiling around us filling the silence.

“*Ah*. With the men.” He swiped a hand down his face and sent water running down his slick skin.

There was a compound back there. Maybe barracks? The dogs and men lived together, which told me they saw them as soldiers or...guards, too.

Naz gave me a look. It seemed impressed, but it was hard to tell. Of course, I wasn't going to just outright ask the guard of the layout of the land. What did Naz think? I wasn't skilled at what I did?

Even though I'd gotten caught up a few times, I mostly had a clean and impressive record for out-maneuvering the most cunning and avoiding the law. This wasn't my first time on the field. I'd asked the guard something that wouldn't raise his hackles and gleaned the rest of the information from there.

This was a fucking development.

If the Fausti family had their own military...

A chill went through me at the news.

Naz noticed. He'd given me his jacket when I'd first stepped off the plane and he stopped to secure it.

If he only knew...he wouldn't have that look in his eyes, like he was trying to protect me. He would know, instead, that I was frigging excited to be the first journalist to ever uncover this!

The Fausti family probably had their own army.

Shit. This was so huge!

“Slow your thoughts down, meddlesome little birdie.” He tightened the jacket around me and pulled me closer. He leaned down close to my ear and breathed, “This is probably not what you're thinking it is.”

“How do you know I was thinking anything?” I whispered back.

“Your heart is about to beat out of your chest. You need to be careful of that. Tuck it deep inside. These men are skilled at stealing them.”

You are, too, I was about to say, but I couldn’t find the words. How did he know my heart was beating so fast? Could he hear it? Maybe he noticed a tick in my neck?

It started to beat even faster as we approached the main building. Maybe it was made of stone, but I had a feeling it was storm proof.

Over the entrance door, in big black letters with a solitary light over it, read: *Malum*. The door looked like the fence—metal—but it swung open instead of rising. It closed behind us with a thud as the lead guard walked with purpose to offices located in the back.

Men were doing odd jobs, and the scent of coffee percolated in the air. In this new world I’d been dropped in, it was a familiar smell, comforting. I also noticed that this place wasn’t as high-tech as I originally thought it would be. Some desks had old typewriters on them, and the men working behind them had ink stains on their hands.

One of the guards typing at a desk, a pencil behind his ear, looked up at us as we passed. He wore standard-issue black eyeglasses and the same uniform as the rest. He grinned at me, and it was so disarming, I grinned back.

Naz put more pressure on my back to keep walking. We were led to a room where we were legitimately frisked, like we were about to visit inmates. I used the term “legitimately” because after we first arrived, we were just patted down. I thought it was because we were entering a high-security military base of some kind.

In that moment, I wasn’t so sure.

The frisk ended when Naz growled at the guard when his hands lingered too long on my body. I didn’t see a woman

guard. This place, wherever we were, hadn't arrived at that point yet.

Body search done, the lead guard had us wait outside the door of what looked like a man of importance's office. It was closed, unlike all the other offices, and the guard knocked. It was a secret one. He did it in a pattern. The man behind the door spoke in Italian, and the guard disappeared behind it.

We waited in silence, just the pecking of typewriter keys and the storm outside breaking it some. It had to be less than a minute before the lead guard opened the door and motioned us inside.

A man in a more decorated uniform stood, waiting for us. He greeted Naz and Beni in Italian and only nodded at me.

A sick feeling rolled through my stomach as I stared at him. He was the spitting image of Omero Capanna. My mom had been a bit obsessed with him. She would watch *The Jewel of the Nile* nonstop for a while. And she never fantasized about Michael Douglas, the hero, but the villain Omero played.

She'd say to us, "That's one fine-looking man."

And there was Lucila with her questions. "What about Daddy? Is he one fine-looking man, too? Is that why you fell in love?"

"Sonny is...okay," she'd finally say.

Naz applied more pressure on my back, and when I blinked, I realized the man was holding out his hand to me. He gave me a high-ranking position before his name.

"Omero."

He didn't give a last name, or maybe that was a last name, but when I held out my hand, I said, "Your mom was a *Jewel of the Nile* fan too?"

He dropped my hand and looked at Naz. Naz shrugged, and then we were all told to sit. Naz pulled out my chair, setting me between him and Beni. We were offered coffee, and all of us took it.

The conversation took place in Italian, so I was fucking lost. I sighed and looked toward the window in the office. It was to the right some of Omero, where if he swiveled his chair some, he could see the expanse of water surrounding him.

A light, reminiscent of one from a lighthouse, seemed to appear out of nowhere for a second before it faded into the night.

Hmm... it happened again. There and then gone.

It gave me barely a glimpse of the dark, stormy water, but confirmed there was a lot of it.

The Atlantic, probably.

We were on an island.

The conversation between Naz and Omero heated some, then a guard came in with a tray of coffee, followed by another guard with a long notebook. Omero took the elongated pad from the guard, set his specs on his nose, and looked over the paper. His eyes stopped scanning, and he turned it toward Naz, tapping at a signature.

Leandro Piero Fausti was signed in a flourish that was easy to read.

Naz's eyes hardened on the signature before he looked up and started arguing again. I took my cup of coffee and wandered over to the window. The conversation stopped for a second, and I could feel Omero's eyes on my back, like he didn't like me looking around. He was waiting for me to turn to him so he could order me to take my seat without having to get up.

He probably knew who I was, but that begged the question:

Why did they want me off that plane then?

If this place was so top secret, why bring me directly into it?

Naz said something heated again, and the conversation seemed to pick up where it had left off.

My eyes were trained across the great expanse of nothing and that area where the light had flickered before being swallowed by darkness again.

Something was out there.

Something dangerous enough to keep from this island, an island so far away from civilization that it took a plane or boat to get to it.

The light did its thing again, and I realized...it was turning around something. A building, maybe? A yard with a fence? It seemed so far away, so maybe that was why it was so faint, but it was definitely out there.

I was half listening to the conversation while I sipped my coffee, but when Omero said a name, Naz went completely silent.

Luca Fausti.

Whatever he was fighting for or against, he must have discovered in that moment that Luca had ordered it. I turned and Naz was staring at me, but I wasn't sure if he was seeing me.

“What?” I asked.

It took him a moment to answer, and his green eyes were heavy. “Remember how I told you to tuck your heart in deep, *uccellino selvatico?*”

He waited until I nodded to continue.

“Now, you should forget you were born with one.”

SIXTEEN

AVA

OMINOUS..THAT was the only way to describe the feeling coming from Naz. I should have taken the feeling and made something of it—fear, like on that plane when I thought our wings were going to be clipped—but I had been *me* for so long, all I could summon up was curiosity.

This was what I did. What I lived for.

And Naz wanted me to forget I had a heart to do whatever I was going to have to do?

Done.

A heart was a literal thing to me. The vital organ all mammals have to pump blood.

But it still caused a fuck-ton of problems for everyone when it came to storing feelings.

If I could have survived without it, I would have given mine up a *looong* time ago.

Naz called me a bird, but I preferred to think of myself as a jellyfish, or a starfish, or even a sea anemone. I'd looked it up. None of those had hearts, and they were still doing all right for themselves.

“Uccellino selvatico.”

My attention automatically focused on Naz when he called me that. I'd been so caught up in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed the movement around me. Omero was standing at the door waiting, and men were moving behind him. Preparing for something no doubt.

I ditched my cup in the trash and went to stand next to Naz. He grabbed my hand and held it in a vise grip. We followed behind Omero and a few of his men. The other men walked behind us.

We were led to another room with uniforms hanging up on a long wooden pegs, closet style. Polished boots were lined up on the floor, probably in a variety of sizes. One of the guards grabbed two, handing them to Naz and Beni. He looked me over, then searched through them. After he found what he was looking for, he handed me the uniform.

“A hat,” Naz said in a tone that could have frozen over all the water and created another Antarctica.

The guard searched the top shelf and handed him one. He nodded outside of the room and said something in Italian. Beni said something to Naz after the guard left, and then he left, leaving Naz and me alone.

“I know I’m not supposed to snoop,” I said as he started to undress. “But...can you at least give me a clue as to what the fuck is going on here?”

He sighed and set his Captain’s white shirt on the plain wooden shelf. “This place is top secret, but since my uncle decided to give you clearance and order you to stay with me, you will be with me for this trip.”

“Your uncle.” I kicked off my heels, then removed the jacket he’d wrapped me in and set it next to his shirt. “Luca Fausti. I do need to change, right?” I asked when I noticed the look on his face.

He nodded, and I assumed he was answering my first question about Luca being the uncle who gave me clearance. “I can change first and then leave so you can. I do not want to leave you alone with the men—even outside of this room.”

“No worries. I don’t mind changing at the same time so we can stick together.” I lifted my shirt and set it next to our growing pile. He hesitated for a second before he started to undo his pants. “Let me try to straighten this out. This place—

Malum—is a...well, at first, I thought it was a military base, but now I get the feeling it's a maximum-security prison?"

"*Si*, for members of my family who have broken our laws."

"So, basically, men who have gone rabid and can't be controlled?"

"*Si*."

"So...death is too good for them then? They're here to suffer."

"You know more than you should about us, Ava Girardi."

"Maybe, but I've always had an...intuition about your family. I've studied them so much, even took a class about them when they offered it at the university in New York, and Edna has taught me so much, not to mention all the criminal families I've dealt with at home, which...some of them base their families off yours... I can piece together what isn't said. Maybe you can just call me fluent in Fausti symbolism."

He looked at me like I had truly lost my fucking mind. I ignored it.

"Back to Luca. He gave me clearance and gave you an order to take me with you. That means...he either has something against me or you, and he stuck you with me and is not letting me off the hook here. I could have waited with the molds on the plane. Because I'm assuming this place isn't 'fit' for women?"

He set his hands on his hips, his nostrils flaring.

That was when I noticed.

He was in nothing but a T-shirt and boxers. His dick bobbed behind the curtain.

Maybe that was when he noticed me too.

I was only in my bra and underwear, and water streamed down my body from the walk. My hair was almost dried but sticking to my shoulders.

His dick was not hiding anymore.

The monster was about to tear free from the fabric and come after me.

I wasn't running.

He was so fucking gorgeous. And again, *gorgeous* wasn't a strong enough adjective for him.

He didn't rush to grab for the pants that were given, but he slid them on nonetheless, which prompted me to start moving too.

"Assuming all I said was correct," I continued, "why are we here in the first place? Why even give Luca a chance to do this?"

His sigh was heavier this time, but more resigned. "My father challenged him. Lost his legs. *Zio* Luca rules the family now. The Ponte dei Pugni was attacked as we were leaving Venice—perhaps more of the family who are against *Zio* Luca ruling were in on the coup. I received a call from my middle brother on the way that my younger brother is here—possibly searching for a man who is brave enough to try to escape and destroy Luca Fausti.

"After the man here kills *Zio* Luca, my brother will show him favor. My brother has been told by my father that he has it in him to rule. Add that to *Zio* Luca telling me in Venice that my father tried to have Luca's son and daughter-in-law killed while he was in prison. Now, from all of that, tell me why we are both going into this prison."

He was challenging me, wanting to see if I could come up with the reasons why Luca would do this after Naz had given me the facts.

I lifted my pointer finger. "Let's start with me. He's doing this because he wants to teach me a lesson. He thinks giving me clearance and bringing me where no woman has gone before is going to scare the journalist out of me. He thinks I know too much already, but he's not going to poison me, *yet*, because I somewhat intrigue him."

I slipped the plain white T-shirt over my arms while I waited for him to give me confirmation or denial. The shirt

was ten times too big, landing below my knees, but I didn't complain. It was probably for the best if I resembled a guy, which was why they gave me the clothes in the first place—and why Naz had wanted the hat. I had a feeling it was for me to tuck my hair into.

“*Continua*,” he nodded, slipping a shirt over his head.

I lifted two fingers, then started to slip the pants on. “As far as what this means for you...it's a little more complicated. The bad blood between Luca and your father has been brewing since Lothario was born. It just came to a head at the event in Venice. Your father refused to hand over power, and Luca had no choice but to rise to the challenge. Which he did.

“Leandro is pissed, because maybe your father was going to look over you and have him head the family if something ever happened to Lothario.” The pants were much too big, too, but the shirt being tucked in helped keep them up.

Naz handed me the hat and I looked around. A mirror above a plain basin with a faucet was on the other side of the room. I stood in front of it, and Naz stood behind me, arms crossed.

I was just glad I hadn't put on any makeup on the plane. I lifted my hair and started to tuck it into the hat. “You're here to stop your brother from contacting whoever he's thinking of in here. Are you too late?”

He shook his head. “He's waiting at the prison.”

“That's good. At least.”

“You do not know my brother.” He squinted at me. “Or do you?”

“No, just a few things about him. Same as you.” I sighed, trying to fit more of my hair underneath the hat. “Jumping to another reason. Lothario tried to have Brando and Scarlett Fausti killed?”

He nodded, and I noticed the veins in his arms swelling. That heart wasn't doing him any favors either.

“Okay, I’m thinking Lothario does this because Brando is welcomed into the family out of basically...nowhere. He’s the oldest of Luca’s sons. He might challenge Lothario for the position since Luca is in jail. *Wait!* Was Rocco in on this with your father? He would have good reason to do it, too, since he was in line to rule and Brando could nudge him out.”

“Stay on the same road. Rocco would not do this.”

“Just going over all possibilities. So...Brando and Scarlett are still here to tell the tale, which means...your father failed, but Luca knows what he’s done. He might have put the both of us in this situation because it might be as dangerous as the one Brando and Scarlett had to face. But...” I made a growling noise when I couldn’t get the stupid hat to sit right. I had too much hair, or I just wasn’t fixing it right.

Naz came to stand behind me, and his scent and body heat...it took me on a ride in the clouds, just as he took me for a ride in his plane. He set the hat on the counter and started to slick my hair back.

“But what doesn’t make sense is for him to stick me with you, especially for this. He could have found someone you cared about, like Brando loves Scarlett, to make this hell for you—for both of us.”

Naz was concentrating on what he was doing to my hair, his eyes hard, until he stuck the hat back on my head. I was more dude-ish once he was finished, and I was thankful for it.

He looked to the left, before he met my eyes straight on. “There is one more reason *Zio* Luca did this.”

A weighty pause.

I lifted my eyebrows. “Care to share?”

“If I do.” He grinned. “I will have to kill you.”

I laughed, a breathy sound in the otherwise empty room. “There must be an easier way. Death might be easy, but it lasts forever.”

“There is another way. I keep you...*per sempre*.” The grin had faded from his face, and I couldn’t tell if he was joking or

not.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The loud raps on the door made me flinch. Naz didn't move, but he turned his face toward the door and said something in Italian.

"Those knocks are for us," I said, and my voice came out neutral, but on the inside, I was melting from his words, the thickness of them. I went to move, but Naz's grip on my arm stopped me.

"You do not seem like the type of woman to just listen when told to do something."

I didn't realize it at first, but I was shaking my head, agreeing. I wasn't. I wouldn't bite my nose off to spite my face, but I always did what I wanted to do.

"However, in my world, I need you to just fucking listen, or you might get me killed without a good reason for it, ah?"

Yeah, I could understand that.

"Okay," I agreed.

"Tell me you trust me, Ava."

"I do."

He studied my face, as if he could tell whether I was lying. He gave a subtle nod and then went for two pairs of boots underneath the uniforms. The smallest pair was still huge on me, and I knew I would have to find a rhythm or I would look like a clown.

He helped me into mine, lacing them up before he did the same to his. He took my hand and led us out of the room. Beni and some guards were waiting outside.

Beni looked me over. "She does not look like one of us," he said. And by "one of us," I was sure he meant a man. He sniffed the air. "She smells too good. This is not going to be good, *cugino*. They are going to scent her from across the water, and one look at that soft face..."

He didn't finish his thought. He didn't have to.

Naz's shoulders stiffened, and he held my hand tighter.

The guards led us out.

The rain seemed to be coming down harder, the wind stronger, and when I was helped into the boat, I whimpered and hoped no one had heard. The water was rocking like an out of control being, and I didn't even want to think about how many sharks were probably around.

If this boat went over, we were done.

I'd always wanted to be a jellyfish. Maybe I had manifested myself into shark bait.

Naz and Beni wedged me between them as the boat rode the waves. The captain kept his eyes forward as he navigated them. The light I'd seen from Omero's office grew brighter the closer we got to the actual prison. It seemed to circle the otherwise pitch-black island compound, highlighting different areas of the property. When it would shimmer over the water, it would give life to the frothing ocean.

The captain said something into his radio on the dash, and a minute or two later, a stream of men came out to meet us.

"Do they live here?" I whispered to Naz.

"They rotate and work in shifts. On the main island, the guards sleep and eat and train. While at the prison, no guard closes his eyes while he is there. This is why they take shifts."

"Do they ever leave?"

"*Si*. They work for two weeks and then return home for two weeks."

Beni easily got off the boat, and Naz looked between me and the land. He looked conflicted.

"What?" I asked.

"I want to carry you off the boat but do not think it is a good idea."

I hid my grin. “Because I’ll look like a damsel?” I copied Beni’s moves and helped myself out of the boat.

Naz was a breath behind, and after the three of us were on land, a guard stepped up and shook our hands. He spoke in Italian, and I pretended to listen with rapt attention, even though I had no fucking clue what he was saying. Another guard scanned us with a metal detecting device, and after we were cleared, we were led into the prison, which had a series of doors.

I almost felt like Sally Atwater in *Up Close and Personal*. I refused to see Naz as my Warren Justice, though. Not with that tearjerker ending.

For a prison, it wasn’t all that big, but it felt almost... empty, and it was extremely cold. Like someone had turned the AC to freezing and forgot to turn it off. The air felt soggy, holding the drafts, and my clothes were wet.

I appreciated that Naz had decided to give me an extra layer before we left. He’d run back and grabbed me a jacket. It helped disguise my shape even further, and it was helping to keep me warm.

None of the men’s teeth were chattering, but mine were starting to.

We passed a bunch of empty rooms, which looked like they were designed for visitors, but I didn’t see any cells. They must have been behind the walls.

The guards stopped, and we moved between them. One of them gestured to a brightly lit room. I held in my gasp and moved closer to Naz without making it obvious. A man who looked a lot like him was just taking his seat, and the man across from him...his hands and feet were shackled, and he was wearing a mask that looked like it was made for Hannibal Lecter.

“What the...” I breathed, and Naz’s eyes snapped to mine.

I shrugged because it was a...shock. All I could see were his stone brown eyes. And if I ever wondered what it would

look like to come face to face with a shark, I knew. His eyes were dead, but I knew he was driven by blood.

He'd eat me in a heartbeat and not in the amorous way.

Neither Naz or Beni were reacting to it, though, and I copied their body language. I stood taller, squared my shoulders, and hoped my face looked as blank as theirs.

“Alvaro,” Beni whispered to Naz.

Naz only nodded.

I guessed Alvaro was the prisoner's name.

Naz entered the room first, and Beni gave me a light push to the back to go ahead of him. They were sandwiching me in again.

As soon as we entered, Leandro got to his feet. He raised a hand at Naz and started shouting. Naz raised a hand to him, and they started shouting at each other. The entire time, the man at the table, Alvaro, stared at me.

So. Fucking. Awkward.

Heat crept from my feet and went straight to my cheeks. Not because he was giving me warm feelings, but because my body seemed to be trying to run off the chill he was sending down my spine.

As a woman, I'd been in many situations where my gut told me something wasn't right. Someone had meant me harm, mostly men, because the people I mostly dealt with were men.

I'd never felt anything like this before.

On a cellular level—every warning bell inside of me was going off at once.

My heart reacted, and so did my sweat glands.

It wasn't something I could control.

And he refused to stop staring at me.

I moved closer to Beni and Alvaro's eyes moved with me, like a predator who had spotted prey. It was like he could sense my heart racing, my blood pumping, and he was

salivating for a warm, fresh meal, though he was expressionless.

This desire came from some depraved place deep within.

Then my mind parted from the fear and started coming up with questions.

What the hell did he do? Why did he do it?

The line of questioning was derailed when the entire place went quiet. The rain outside had been an afterthought after we were showed inside, but I could've sworn the raging sound of it was echoing inside of the cell.

Naz locked eyes with his brother, then said something in Italian. His voice was low and menacing, and he couldn't have been more like a lion if he wore one's skin.

My eyes pinged to Leandro, who was giving him the same look, but a sly smile came to his face. He said something, and I got the feeling he had repeated what he said before. His hand gestured toward me.

In the next breath, Naz charged him, and they seemed to collide at the same time.

Beni was watching with narrowed eyes. Alvaro was still watching me. And the guards were watching from outside of the room.

The fight between brothers felt like it lasted centuries, but only minutes had passed. Naz had his brother pressed to the wall, a hand to his throat. Whatever he said to him, he said in a sharp, whispered tone.

Naz's eyes seemed...possessed.

The monster had shattered the surface and was on land.

After Naz finished what he was saying, a moment passed between them, and his brother lifted his hands. Though there was still something about Leandro's face that was fucking sly, like he had a secret Naz would never know about.

Naz released him, and Leandro fixed his clothes, heading for the door. He had to pass me on the way out, and our eyes

held.

One minute I was standing, and the next, gravity was pulling me in the opposite direction. Leandro acted like he'd just ran into me, but I knew a shove from a knock. The boots were much too big, and I wasn't expecting it. When my back hit the table, I went over on it.

Before I could even take a breath and try to right myself, Alvaro made an inhuman noise, and his dead eyes were staring into mine before his mouth went for my throat.

SEVENTEEN

NAZZARENO

I SET our bags down and then took off my aviator glasses, placing them on the table.

We—I was home.

My mind kept giving Ava claim where it shouldn't. This wasn't her home. Her home was in New York. This was my home. In Rome. But when the thoughts came, the ones that included her in my life like she had a place there, it felt so fucking right.

I did not know if I could ever fly again and not feel the distance from the plane to the ground—if she was standing on it. That was how in tune with her body mine was becoming.

She glanced at me and then turned her attention to my penthouse. It was located in Centro Storico, along the River Tiber. The area was full of Roman history; the Pantheon, Colosseum, and Trevi Fountain added to the old story. I thought Ava might enjoy all the boutiques, sidewalk trattorias and bars. The markets were busy, and the squares seemed to have pulses of their own, including Piazza di Spagna, where the Spanish Steps were located.

My grandfather, Marzio, had left me a much larger place, filled with family history, but I preferred to be here. I could lock myself away from the world, but a world long-gone was only a step away.

Marzio used to say this area spoke to the romantic in me. He would even squeeze my shoulder and tell me, “Nazzareno, imagine it. Two gladiators armed and ready to fight to the

death. Now let us add a woman between them. *Ah!* Now that is what I would call an honorable show! This is why I teach you all to use swords, *nipote*. I teach you as it was taught to *me*.”

A grin slipped across my lips at the memory. I would find my sword and practice, imagining the day I would fight for my woman, and not only defend her honor, but win her love for eternity! This was the Eternal City, after all. Rome would go on forever, no matter how many empires rose and fell, no matter how many cities and rulers were buried underneath the rubble, and if our love burned here—it would burn for eternity.

Ava met my eyes, and my grin turned into something else. Something that pinched my lips and made me feel her tension like it was my own. After what had happened at Malum, she had been different. The wind had been knocked out of her, but she hadn't caught her breath.

My uncle knew what he was doing when he sent her with me. She would be the first woman to ever cross the threshold of a place only men had inhabited over the years, but even men found themselves there in nightmares. It was one of those cursed places that served as a threat to those who rarely felt threatened.

“This is what happens when death is not good enough for you,” the men in my family would say. “You get sent to *Malum*.” The word was whispered, like it was forbidden to shout, because it might come to eat you alive in your sleep.

Ava was right about my uncle's reasons for sending us in together—and this was one of them. We were locked in a room with one of the most dangerous men on earth. Alvaro Fausti. The reasonings for him being locked inside were confidential, but it was rumored that he'd slept with a woman and told her some of the family's secrets in confidence. Later, she had turned on him and wrote a book. The book was pulled, and she could no longer be found, but the damage was done.

He was a killer that couldn't be contained. He'd rip throats out with his teeth.

He had an identical twin brother, Desiderio, but they became estranged after Alvaro was locked in Malum. From

what I'd been told, they looked the same, but were total opposites. Like one city with two faces—the good side and the bad.

Ava had experienced the bad side. She still hadn't recovered.

I did not think it was only the violence that had knocked the wind from her lungs, but his eyes.

They were completely dead.

My brother was close to it.

Leandro had gone by the time we were able to leave the room. He had flown back to Venice and told Mamma about Ava. She had called me on the ride to Rome, called my uncle a dead man and Ava a *strega* called forth by the other witches, and then hung up on me.

I was precariously close to a war with my own brother.

A sigh escaped my lips when her eyes roamed around, curious about my place, but she did not move. I did not think her curiosity was gone for good, but Luca Fausti had tamped it down a bit. She was acclimating to this new world she had entered.

She might have gone on a few crash courses in New York, but nothing could have truly prepared her for my family.

She was a chirpy bird amongst salivating lions.

Ava being chatty was another reason—the reason we hadn't discussed—that my uncle gave the order for her to accompany me.

My uncle wanted to test her, to see how trustworthy she would be for me. Just like my grandfather, my uncle had romantic notions, and I knew he was trying to push us together because he felt fate was at work. When Ava said that he was putting us in the same situation as Brando and his wife, Scarlett, she was right. Because my uncle was not only seeking his revenge for what had been done to them. My uncle knew I had feelings for her.

He was probably also relishing the fact that my marriage had been arranged by my father, and it was to a prominent family in Italy. *Si*, our marriage was to one another, but it was truly between two powerful families eager to come together.

Ava moved from foot to foot, and I set my hand on her back.

She flinched.

“We are no longer there,” I whispered. “My home is safe.”

“I know,” she whispered/snapped.

This woman hated to be vulnerable, and I wondered what had happened in her life to make her that way. Rocco had sent over everything he had found on her, but I wondered if she would tell me on her own. She did not owe me anything, and this could not go far between us, but I wanted to know everything about her, down to the deepest noises she made while in the throes of passion.

Like those old fantasies I had of swinging my sword and defending my woman’s honor, I imagined her legs wrapped around me and my cock driving into her deep.

Those noises she would make would be mine.

“A tour,” I said, making sure I warned her before I applied more pressure to her back.

She narrowed her eyes at me but didn’t ask why my voice sounded so rough.

She was quiet as I introduced her to my place. Her hand lingered on the spiral iron staircase that brought us to the second floor. She seemed to brighten in the small library, where the sun flowed like white honey through the gauze curtains.

“Beni lives here too?” she asked.

“*Si*. A few years ago, I decided to separate the two sides. Dario Fausti is an architect, and he drew up the plan for me. Beni lives on the other side.”

I set her bags down in her room. She hovered by the door. “You two seem very close.”

“We are. We served in the military together.”

“He seems worried about you. Why?”

“What happened in Venice.” *The two of us meeting, and what road it might lead me down.* I had never attacked one of my brothers the way I did Leandro. Because he had called her a conniving witch. I would have killed him, but if I had, I would have been sentenced to time in Malum.

No blood shall be spilled on the soil from an outsider, or the outsider is sentenced to time.

Who would look after this wild bird if I was locked up? She would be left to the hands of my family.

“Yeah,” she breathed out. Then she looked at the bed. “I’m so tired. I’m going to take a bath and get some sleep.”

“You only have ten minutes of water time,” I said, about to crack a smile, but I was stopped by the rush of her next words.

“I’ll be out in five! At home, with Sonny, I mean, we didn’t get a lot of hot water because the house is so old. And Lucila would stress about using too much water, ’cause she thought we wouldn’t be able to afford the bill, then we’d get disconnected and not be able to get it turned back on. So I won’t use much, I swear.”

A beat passed between us, and she breathed out.

“Judging by the blank look on your face, you probably meant the hot water runs out fast because this place seems old too. I don’t think money is a problem for you...” She shook her head. “Not sure why I just had word vomit, but...here we are.”

“It was a joke, about the water. Take as long as you need.” I went to leave, but she stopped me.

“Are you leaving?”

I felt her unease, like she did not want to be alone. She was hiding it behind her armor.

“No,” I whispered. “I will be here.”

She waited until I was out of sight to close her door. I stopped in front of my room, where I’d left my bag, and stared at my door. I ran a hand over my head and looked toward her room. There was nothing I could do to fucking lock *her* out.

I wanted her in my bed, writhing beneath me, her eyes locked on mine. I wanted to fuck the unease out of her and replace it with my courage. Let her feel how safe she was in my arms, in my bed, in my life.

Every woman should have that.

A man who would protect his woman at all costs. Who would pick up a sword and be prepared to use it in her honor. To bleed for her. To die for her.

I sighed, knowing how complicated going to her would make things. And she had not invited me in.

Not able to sleep, I went to the gym Beni and I shared in the building. He met me there, and we were quiet as we burned off the night. It was lunch by the time I showered and made it into bed. I did not need much sleep, and I usually waited until night to fall, especially given the places I flew to. It was easier to adjust to the time differences if I waited out the day.

Ava.

She was forbidden fruit I was trapped inside with, and I was famished.

I could smell her body wash from the down hall. It lingered.

My mouth watered.

The thought of her made my cock stiff. I was so hard it was fucking painful. I ran my hand down my length and squeezed the tip on the way up. My muscles tightened at how good it felt.

Not fucking good enough.

Only a woman would do.

Wet. Warm. Willing.

A knock came at the door, and I sat up some just as it was opening.

“I can’t sleep,” she whispered. “Maybe we could go for a ___”

“Come,” I said in Italian, then I repeated it in English when she gave me a blank look. I held the covers back for her.

“You’re inviting me to sleep in your bed?”

“It should be the other way around, but yes.”

“Um...I didn’t understand anything but *yes* in that sentence.”

“Get in the bed, Ava.”

“That—” she moved toward me “—I understand.”

She slipped in on the other side and I slipped out. My bare *culo* was in front of her as I moved to the bathroom. I never slept in clothes, but I found a pair of pajama bottoms and dressed in them before I stepped out.

She was sitting up, staring at her nails, and her eyes flew to mine. “You don’t have to leave your bed or your room. I can ___”

She stopped talking when I slipped in next to her, and she gasped when I pulled her body next mine, keeping her as close as skin. I kissed her all over her face, telling her to go to sleep in Italian.

“You’re so warm,” she muttered, “and this place is so cold...” She drifted off a second later.

I was wide awake, her closeness making my heart tremble. I did not know what it was about her that drew me to her so strongly, but it was the greatest ache I had ever felt, and my greatest peace all in the same breath.

La pazzia. I touched my temple. *Madness.*

Her breaths were even as they flowed across my chest, and her heat beat against my side in the same rhythm. She talked in

her sleep—nonsensical things that perhaps made sense in the worlds she was in. But then one word came across in a language I could understand.

It was a name.

Tigran.

She was crying for him.

She was always going to cry for him.

Because I was going to kill him.

EIGHTEEN

AVA

I'D SLEPT for almost twelve hours, and if Naz's chest wouldn't have been pressed against my cheek, I could have probably slept for twelve more.

There wasn't anything wrong with his chest.

On the contrary.

Everything was right with it.

I'd slept like the dead, but even my ghost was attracted to him. I kept getting whiffs of his cologne, or natural body scent, and it made me stir.

It also made me want to kiss his neck, taste his skin, and stick my hand under the covers, past his pajama bottoms, and run my hand along his massive erection.

He was not only long, but thick.

Our lips would touch and...

I sat up, needing air and space.

He grabbed me by the back of my thin camisole right before my feet touched the wooden floor. He said something in gruff Italian. I had no clue what, but I took a guess.

"I'm going to the bathroom." My voice was as rough as his. "Then I need to eat. I was serious about the hangry thing. I need to feed me, or the world will not be a happy place."

He gave me a sleepy smile and the world stop turning for a second.

How the hell was he so gorgeous? It didn't seem fair. Nature needed charges pressed against her for allowing such a thing. He was a heartbreaker—or heart stealer—on legs.

“*I need to feed you, uccellino selvatico.* What do you like to eat, ah? Fruits and nuts? Seeds? Taralli?”

“None of the above. Well, maybe fruits and nuts, but I need more substantial goods too. A bagel and coffee sound perfect.”

His eyes fully opened, and the soft Roman light poured over him like honey. His eyes went from a dark olive green to an exotic moss. He blinked at me, then ran a hand over his hair and down his face.

He sat up and looked away from me. “Breakfast should be here already. I have someone who takes care of the place while we're away. When we're home, she delivers food. Help yourself.” He stood and stretched, the massive lion on his back rippling with his muscles.

Even his back was gorgeous, along with the tattoo he had for the Fausti family—a lion with a rosary around his neck and a sacred heart in his mane. His was a bit different from the ones I usually saw, though. Naz's lion had angel wings on each side, representing who he was.

He shut the door to the bathroom, and I blinked, like he had shut it in my face.

What the...? His mood had gone from playful to...dark. I noticed that about him. He could be mercurial. I wondered if it was a Faust thing. These were men who were used to getting what they wanted. And when they didn't...*ROAR!*

The question was, though...what had Naz wanted that he hadn't gotten? It was like he was still half-asleep when he'd grabbed me by the shirt, and after his mind caught up to his body, he remembered he had something to be pissed about.

I stared at the closed door for a second before I went back to the room he'd assigned me. It was quintessentially Roman, from the fresco ceilings to the wooden floor. It was so tastefully decorated, too, with golds and creams throughout.

Even though it was rich, it didn't make me feel like I wanted to tuck my hands in so I wouldn't accidentally break something irreplicable.

The smell of coffee wafted in the air, and I hurried to do my business, wash up, and change into a soft, mauve colored lounge set. I found the kitchen by following the delicious aromas. Beni was taking his saucer with a small cup of cappuccino to the table. He had a croissant in his other hand.

He stopped in his tracks, the slosh of the cappuccino and the set of his face the only proof I'd scared him.

"Sorry," I said. "I should have made more noise."

"Sneaky," he said, giving me a narrow eye.

I had to really control myself around him. He made faces that were...funny, especially when he was trying to be serious. I didn't know him all that well, though, and I could tell he didn't trust me. I didn't want to insult him by laughing at him when he wasn't trying to be funny.

I pointed to the tray of baked goods. "Mind if I have a croissant?"

"It is a *cornetto*." He took a sip of his cappuccino and it left foam on his upper lip. "Half are filled with hazelnut spread and the other half are filled with marmalade."

"*Grazie*," I said, and he winced at the way I'd said it. I had a heavy New York accent, and maybe that made a difference, maybe not, but I always botched foreign pronunciations. I wasn't all that great with rolling the letters I was supposed to. When I tried, it didn't sound natural. It sounded like I was trying too hard.

I grabbed a plate off the counter and took two *cornetti*—in my head I sounded more like Beni—and then made myself a cappuccino. I took a seat across from him and we stared at each other as we ate.

"Tentaculum," he said.

"What's...tentaculum?"

“The ancient Romans used to eat three meals a day. The first was called ientaculum. Breakfast.”

“Interesting.”

“Interesting enough to make it into one of your articles?”

A beat passed between us.

“What did I ever do to you?” I asked as I licked the hazelnut spread off my fingers. I didn’t have a problem clearing the air. Most people thought I was too forward, or didn’t have a filter, but it was so much easier to just knock whatever out the way and get on with it—depending on the person. Edna had taught me to always read my audience before speaking to them.

He sighed and set his *cornetto* down. “You are sneaky.”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “I have to be. Some people refuse to tell me things.”

“How about...” He tapped his chin. “It is because those things you are fishing for are private.”

“True. It’s not always a pretty job.”

“Why do it?”

“Do you ever kill birds with that plane of yours? Or do you ever think about the pollution you’re putting out when you’re flying those rich people around in your fancy planes?”

“I concede your point about the birds. Cannot be helped.”

I nodded to him. “Thank you.”

We ate in silence for another minute or two.

He cleared his throat. “It is not that I do not like you. I do not trust you yet.”

“Fair enough.”

Our eyes met from across the table when Naz came in, then we looked down at our food. He’d changed into a plain white T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. What he hadn’t lost, though, was the dark mood.

He made himself a cup of cappuccino and stood with his back pressed against the counter.

“Do not watch me while I eat, *cugino*,” Beni said. “You know how it makes me feel. I am not a grazer animal in a pasture being stalked by a preachy predator. If you want to eat—*mangiare*.”

“I am not watching you,” Naz said, and it was the first time I’d ever heard him get testy with his cousin.

Beni turned some and squinted at him. Then he looked at me. I looked at Naz.

He was watching me.

I didn’t care if he wanted to watch me eat. We all had kinks. I even licked my fingers to make it worth his while. After I’d finished eating, though, and he hadn’t looked away, I wasn’t sure what the staring was all about. But it was intense, like he had something caught in the wheels of his mind and couldn’t dislodge it.

“Would it be possible to tour Rome today?” I asked. “I’ve always wanted to go. And you know that old saying? While in Rome...” I stood and went to take my plate to the counter.

Naz met me before I could get there and grabbed my wrists. All three pieces of porcelain fell to the floor and shattered into a million pieces. He backed me up against the counter and stared into my eyes. I breathed out, and his nostrils flared at the scent of my breath—orange marmalade. It was still sticky on my lips.

“Tell me, *uccellino selvatico*, who is the man in New York you leave behind.”

There were quite a few, but I wasn’t comfortable saying that. He’d never looked at me that way before, like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to strangle me or fuck me.

“I honestly have no clue who you’re talking about,” I breathed out.

He nostrils flared again, and he pushed himself closer to me. I could feel his erection jabbing me in the stomach, and I

closed my eyes for a second, taking another deep breath.

“Tigran.”

My eyes flew open at the name. “Tigran,” I repeated.

“Tell me who is Tigran to you.”

His tone made me rush to answer, but I wasn’t sure why. I’d never caved to anyone who demanded anything of me before. But his intensity was making my heart race and do naughty things to my lady bits. “He was my uncle by marriage. My sister, Lucila, is married to his nephew, my brother-in-law, Brio. Most people in New York know him as Lilo. Last name Valentino. Why? What does Tigran have to do with anything?”

He searched my eyes, like he was digging for a lost secret, and once found, had to decide if it was fake or not. I tried to be as earnest as possible because I was telling the truth.

“He was your uncle by marriage.” He put emphasis on the word *was*.

“He...um...he was killed. By...well, I think your family, for sleeping with Rosaria Caffi.”

“What makes you think it was my family?”

“I was with him before he was murdered. I forgot my phone at his place, and when I went back to get it, I found him on the bathroom floor. His heart had been stolen and a picture of Rosaria had been left in its place. It’s tucked away in one of my blazers if you need to see proof. It’s hardened and stained with his blood, but you can still tell it’s her. It was a private picture he took.”

“You dream of him.” His words were hard, possessive... jealous even?

I looked away from him and my eyes burned with unshed tears. “No,” I whispered. “I mean, I do, but they’re nightmares. Especially after the drugs...the ones I was given the night of the event. I’ve never had anything like it before, the way it pulls me inside things I want to run from. Finding Tigran on the floor, someone I knew and respected...the

blood. I wade through it sometimes, like it's a sea, and then I'm drowning. *Ung—*"

Naz pulled me so hard to his chest that I lost my breath. He kissed me all over the face, like he'd done the night before, and then held me out some.

"Get dressed." His eyes gazed into mine. "I will take you wherever you want to go, *uccellino selvatico*."

He left me in the kitchen, a roar echoing from down the hallway from his throat. He was going for his bedroom, I thought. I stood there, staring after him, dazed and confused.

"What the fuck just happened?" I whispered.

"I know what just happened."

I jumped at the voice. I'd totally forgotten Beni was in the kitchen with us.

"Fill me in," I barely got out, looking at him.

He scrunched up his nose like he'd smelled something bad and threw his napkin on the table in a dramatic way. "You have awoken the slumbering lion inside of him. The sleepy beast."

"I...*did what* now?"

"Just as I said. You know all about my family, *supposedly*, but have you not heard of this?"

"Awaking the slumbering lion?"

"*Sì*," he said impatiently. "You have awoken the dormant lion inside of Nazzareno. We all have them inside of us, but it takes the right match to wake them up. This is when we truly learn what it is to balance two sides of who we are—the romantic and the ruthless. Our family is known to revere women, creatures much smaller than us, and when our mighty spirits and knees fall at their feet...it brings out our protective natures."

"Hence..."

"Awaking the lion within."

It was not absurd at all, especially since I could sense how serious this was, but I had to keep the laughter in my chest from bubbling up and exploding out my mouth. It was pure nerves and an overwhelming sense of...warmth and freezing cold. It had the same effect as blood that was too hot rushing underneath skin that was too cold.

I wasn't sure what to do with this...news, and I shivered from the war raging within.

"I have seen Nazzareno with many women, and he would not see any of them hurt or disrespected, but none of them had the power to wake the sleeping beast and make him *roar*." He made the noise, even if quietly. He curled his fingers into claws and acted like he was slashing through something at the same time.

"His protective nature will shield your more...tender one. Not that woman are powerless creatures. The opposite. They are stronger than us—their will and their hearts. But physically, we will challenge any male sniffing around who we consider ours. The woman a man claims as *his*. The woman created to be his equal. His partner. His flesh, blood, and bone. *She* who not only holds *his* heart in her hands, but *his* soul." He set a hand over his heart, the look in his eyes dreamy suddenly.

"Tigran," I whispered.

"Nazzareno must have assumed he was your man in New York."

We both turned toward where Naz had gone. His presence seemed to linger, like it was waiting for me to follow, just to see me safe.

"And if he was?" I held my breath, even though I knew the answer.

"If a man could die twice...his family would have to say goodbye to him again." He looked at me. "A piece of advice." He didn't wait for me to answer. "Do not run. If the lion is awake, so are his instincts. He was born to find his mate."

Another howl came from somewhere deep inside the house.

NINETEEN

AVA

AUTUMN IN ROME was even more spectacular than New York in fall. I never thought another place could compare. I was wrong. The fall colors were just as spectacular, and the weather was near perfect. Warm during the day, and it seemed like it might get cooler in the evening.

Typical fall weather, except nothing seemed typical here.

The light seemed softer...like an internal fire had been stoked and the haze of it flowed, especially against all the other colored buildings. More like history.

The Pantheon. The Colosseum. The Trevi Fountain. The River Tiber. *Piazza di Spagna*. The Spanish Steps.

I'd decided earlier, as I was getting dressed, to not obsess over what Beni had told me. I know—obsession was my thing, but being with Naz took some of the edge off my passion for the Fausti family.

I mean, he was one of them, but he was also a man.

That was one thing this immersion into the Faust life was teaching me. Yeah, they behaved like a pack of lions, wild, but they were also structured, with rules and regulations. Past that, though...these men were *men*.

Maybe they were different once they fell, but they still fell hard just like any other guy.

I didn't want what Beni had told me to utterly freak me out and make me do the one thing he told me not to do...run. Because in one way, I could feel the panic of Beni's words in

my chest, and my feet were starting to feel cold. In another way, being in Rome, during autumn, with Naz felt like coming home.

I didn't want to dwell on any of that, though. I wanted to put it all aside and get to know him better. Talk to him about everything and nothing. Concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other and nothing more than the breath I was about to take.

He smelled so good, and so did the air. Like that internal fire was roasting the leaves and turning them darker, all rich reds, yellows, and browns.

I sighed when I glanced at him as we walked. I had a feeling he was as conflicted as I was, and he kept going back and forth with himself on what to think and feel about all of this. His eyes were hidden behind aviators, and I wondered if that was done on purpose—he didn't want me to notice his inattention.

Things hadn't gotten awkward between us, so he was keeping things close to his chest too, but a warm gooey feeling came over me when I'd catch him looking at me sometimes.

I'd see myself reflected in his lenses.

I'd worn a pumpkin-colored blazer, a white T-shirt underneath, and ankle blue jeans with runners. I spiced it up a bit with jewelry, but it was a low-key outfit for a day of exploring and walking.

He looked at me like I was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Like I was one of the grand structures that had been in Rome for centuries, but a place he'd never seen before.

Undoubtedly, he was the most gorgeous thing *I'd* ever seen. Even in a long-sleeved white shirt rolled to his elbows, dark jeans, and boots...he parted crowds, had mouths hanging open, and cameras pointed in his direction. Italy was more than just the scenery to some women. It was also the men. None finer than Naz.

He was the best tour guide too.

He took me to the iconic places, like the Pantheon, where I hadn't realized it had an open eye at the top. Naz told me the word Pantheon means "all gods," and I sighed because...I'd watched a cooking show once where the Italian hostess called her salted pasta water "tears from the gods." She said that when she was in Rome and visiting the Pantheon, and it rained, it was like "tears from the gods" too.

I loved when things clicked and made sense.

We went to the Trevi Fountain, and I tossed in a coin so I'd return. Naz gave me ten of them—eleven with mine—to toss in.

After, he took me underneath the fountain where there's a secret archaeological site.

Vicus Caprarius, City of Water, is below the famed fountain and is an ancient apartment complex that was home to Rome's upper-class. The site dates to the first century, was discovered in the late 1990s, and showcases artifacts, like terra-cotta figurines, African pottery, mosaic tiles, and a bunch of coins.

The showstoppers are the pools that still fill with water. The tour guide told us it was because of Aqua Virgo, one of the eleven aqueducts of Ancient Rome. The aqueduct fed into the Trevi Fountain, so the water we spotted in Vicus Caprarius would eventually make its way back to the fountain.

I thought about the number eleven. Eleven aqueducts. Eleven coins Naz had me throw in. Maybe there was some symbolism. Maybe not. He was a Fausti, though, and they were known for it.

Maybe he felt it was a lucky number.

We lingered on the Spanish Steps and meandered along the Tiber River. Naz took me for a late lunch at Alla Rampa, not far from the Spanish Steps. He had wanted to take me to a "small, family-owned trattoria you will love," but I was ready to eat. It was my fault, he had offered to take me earlier, but I was so caught up in exploring, food was the last thing on my mind.

Food. Was. The. Last. Thing. On. My. Mind.

In *Italy*.

Naz said Alla Rampa's bucatini alla gricia and rigatoni alla amatriciana were good, so that was where we went. And it was close. He seemed relieved because I was starting to get testy. My sister had anemia, and sometimes I thought I did too. I felt weak and cranky when I didn't eat every couple of hours. I tried to eat small meals often to ward it off. Or it could be hypoglycemia. Either way, it caused me issues sometimes.

We were seated right away. I expected it to be touristy from the proximity of it to the Pantheon and overly busy because of it. It was bustling, but not too overwhelmed with tourists. The ambience of the place whispered Rome, with its apricot and pale lemon walls with exposed brick and dark furniture, and so did the music playing softly in the background.

I took it in while Naz seemed to take me in.

"What?" I asked when our eyes met.

"You are sweating, and your color is off. Pale."

"Sometimes I feel weak when I don't eat enough."

He stood from the table and approached a waiter. He spoke to them, gesturing with his hands, and the waiter turned around and headed toward what I assumed was the kitchen.

Naz waited outside of it with his arms crossed.

A minute or two later, the waiter came out holding two dishes. Naz said something to him, and the waiter nodded behind him with his head. Naz busted through the kitchen door and came back out a second later holding two more dishes.

The waiter was visibly sweating as he set the dishes down. Naz set his two down and claimed his seat again.

He nodded toward the food. "The protein will help. *Mangiare. Adesso.*"

He didn't have to tell me twice. I was starving and honestly feeling weak. He dipped a napkin in a cold glass of

water and took the seat next to me, lifting my hair, applying it to my neck.

I set my hand over his. “I’ll be okay. Just let me do this.” I grinned at my lame joke, but he didn’t. He was too busy watching me like I might melt into a puddle and disappear.

“Let *me* do this for you,” he whispered.

I nodded, my body craving food to get my energy up. A minute or two after I cleaned two plates, and was starting to feel somewhat better, the waiter brought out the main meals. Bucatini alla gricia and rigatoni alla amatriciana.

“Which one is yours?” I asked.

He rolled his top teeth over his bottom lip. “We can share.”

Uh, I wanted him to do that again, but I had to dig in. He asked me a question, something about a camera, but I held my finger up. “This is my Meg Ryan moment in *When Harry Met Sally*—when Sally pretends to have an orgasm in the middle of a restaurant. Except this is a food-gasm. Let me have this.”

“Should I call you Sally then?” He grinned and lifted his glass of wine to his lips.

“Call me whatever you want, just don’t call me away from this table.”

He laughed, and I could hear every ovary in the room sigh.

He watched me eat for a minute or two, before he said, “You enjoy movies.”

I wiped my mouth on a napkin and took a drink of wine. “What would make you think that?”

“It is true, no?”

“Kind of...”

“You make it sound like it is a question.”

“I do like them, some of them, but I have no idea how you would know that.”

He touched his temple. “I have an excellent memory when it comes to what interests me, *uccellino selvatico*. This is not

the first time you brought up a movie.”

True. He had me there. I wasn't used to people remembering everything I did, like I was as fascinating as a new species of bug.

I set my fork down. “I didn't notice it until you just pointed it out, but I do compare my life to them, sometimes.” I squeezed the napkin as hard as my heart was being squeezed. “My mom...she used to watch a lot of TV, when she wasn't singing. She'd watch TV and dream, I guess.”

“Do you know what she dreamed of?” He asked. It seemed like he wanted to keep me talking.

“A life bigger than what she had, maybe? Or just a different one. I don't really know.”

“I am sorry for your loss, *uccellino selvatico*. I am sure you miss her.”

“Miss her? As in...?” My heart started beating harder than it did when I'd felt weak. Maybe he knew something I didn't about her.

“She is gone, no?”

“Gone as in...?”

“No longer here with you.”

“Dead? Are you saying dead?”

He took my hand and squeezed. “I assumed that she was. Is she not?”

“Why would you assume that?” I slipped my hand from his.

He studied me for a second in that calculating way of his. “Your face clouds over when you speak of her. As if the memories are too painful for you.”

I took a deep gulp of wine and then a deep breath. “I don't know if she's living or dead. She left when my sister and I were just kids. I think...Sonny, my sperm donor, ran her off. She left without saying goodbye.” I held a hand up. “I don't want to know. I could have found her if I wanted, but...”

“I understand.”

Two words. *I understand*. I breathed a sigh of relief at that. If my mom was dead, I couldn't face it, not knowing what her life had been like after she'd left. Not knowing why she'd left us.

Lucila said it should be the opposite way around, mom should have been worrying about us, but I couldn't help but think of her in this big world, maybe without anyone to turn to, too scared to come back home.

I smiled at him. “You're not eating. We're supposed to be sharing.”

He leaned forward and traced my lips with his thumb. He said something in Italian, something soft and melodic sounding. Then he said in English, “I am good.” He motioned to the delicious spread. “Eat until you are full, *uccellino selvatico*. I will eat after.”

How pathetic was this, but... “That's the nicest thing...the nicest thing any man has ever done for me. I mean, you're not eating to make sure I have enough.” It felt like someone covering me with a blanket. It showed he cared.

“You have been dealing with boys,” he said. “I am a man.”

And there was a fucking difference.

“Still...” I rolled some pasta up on my fork. “Eat with me?” I offered him the bite and he took it.

I hoped he knew in my own way I was saying thank you and that I cared too.

My feeling that the weather might get cooler in the evening was right. It wasn't cold, but it wasn't as warm as it was earlier. It was breezier, a slight chill in the air holding a smoky scent.

After Naz and I ate, we explored Rome for a few more hours, mostly the boutiques.

On the way back to his place, he gave me his word he was going to take me to Orvieto, only a day trip from Rome. He thought I'd enjoy it.

I nodded, but it did make me wonder...was he giving me his word because he knew he couldn't break it and that meant he would have to keep me here longer or bring me back at some point—if he let me go?

Beni was hanging out on Naz's side of the building when we got back. The weak spell had taken it out of me, and maybe the past couple of days had too, so I decided to take an hour *riposo* (Naz explained it was the Italian equivalent of the Spanish *siesta*, though I wasn't sure if I got the times right or the season; I just liked to use the word in a sentence to describe what I was going to do) before we left for dinner.

Naz was firm on the time and told me he would wake me up if I slept too long. He was anxious about feeding me again. I got the feeling he was going to put himself on a schedule—reminders to feed the wild bird before she passed out.

That was exactly what I did. I removed all my clothes, slid underneath the cool sheets in his room, because he insisted I'd be more comfortable in his bed, and knocked out.

When I woke up, Naz stood in the doorway.

“All is well, *uccellino selvatico*?”

“Yeah,” I croaked. “I feel much better.” It felt like I had slept for centuries and woke up as an Italian princess in this one.

The only thing I struggled to remember, though...was he with me at any point? I sort of remembered him running his hand underneath my nose, his fingers against my pulse... Damn. Maybe I knocked out so hard he thought I was dead.

“*Molto bene.*”

“Is it time for me to start getting ready?”

“*Si!*” Beni shouted from somewhere in the penthouse.

I smiled and jumped out of bed—and froze. Naz's eyes did a slow perusal of my naked body before he turned and walked

away, shutting the door behind him. I dressed and went to run to the room he had put my things in, but my things were already in his room. I picked out my outfit, grabbed a robe and my things, and then jumped into the shower.

When I got out, I had my hair wrapped in a towel and my body in the silk robe. I spread my makeup on the counter and set my perfume down. I screeched when one of my favorite songs came on in the penthouse.

Neil and I joked that it was my anthem. It was fucking written for me.

I used my hairbrush as a microphone and started singing to myself in the mirror, dancing some. A dark shadow moved behind me, so fast, I flung my brush at a solid chest and smacked it with a *thunk!*

My hand came to my chest in a slap. “Shit!”

Naz’s eyes were moving all over the place, like he was looking for something to kill. “Where is it?” he demanded seriously.

“Where is what? My heart? I’m pretty sure it jumped out of my chest and is hiding underneath your bed.”

“Speak clearly,” he said, apparently in no mood for sarcasm or witty metaphors.

It dawned on me. “You thought I was in trouble?”

“You screamed.”

“I screeched. A little.” I sighed. “I didn’t mean to sound like someone was killing me. I was just excited about the song.”

He became completely still, like he had just noticed it. “This one?”

“Yeah. It’s my anthem. I love it!”

He handed me my brush from the floor, and I started my routine again. He stood there watching me, like I was an entraining alien he was going to befriend or maybe send back to...planet Ava. I stuck the brush close to his mouth, hoping he

would sing into it. His eyes moved slowly from mine to the makeshift microphone, and it was like he had no clue what to do with it.

I started cracking up when Beni moved from one end of the door to the other, pumping his arms up, dancing and singing too.

Naz slowly looked between us, like he didn't want to make any sudden movements and have our spaceship suddenly beam him up.

The song came to an end and Naz disappeared. I hummed the song while I started on my makeup, planning to do my hair after. I paused with a brush close to my face. The song started to play again.

Naz appeared in the doorway, leaning against it, watching me. I could tell he was listening to the lyrics this time.

This routine wasn't as exciting as my first, but I sang and danced some as I prepared for dinner. Naz watched the entire time, almost in a daze. I almost thought he might fall asleep, he seemed so relaxed.

"Is this fun for you?" I asked, setting my makeup back in the bag, borrowing Beni's blow dryer. "Watching me get ready?"

"It puts me at ease."

"Have you ever watched a woman get ready before?"

"No." He said something in Italian, his strong hands barely touching me as he passed me to get to the separate bath area.

The water shut off in what seemed like seconds, and I pretended not to gawk as he came out, his waist down wrapped in a towel. It clung to him and that huge bulge. It bobbed as he moved like a fifth limb. He stood next to me, his body heat starting to make me sweat my makeup off.

If I didn't move, I was going to end up sniffing him like a horny hound. The scent he wore was rich and spicy. It recalled Italy at midnight.

"Bathroom is all yours," I whispered.

He grabbed my wrist before I walked off. It was still slick from the shower. “You do not have to leave.”

I could acutely feel the warmth from where he’d touched me like it was making a permanent mark. “One peep show is enough for today, thank you.” I laughed as I rushed out like a girl with her first crush.

Come to think of it...it was my first. If men in poster-form didn’t count.

Because I needed to take a breath, I dressed in the room where Naz had first brought my things. I went with a black lace camisole tucked into a pair of faux black leather pants, leopard print heels that would kill my feet by the time the night was over, and a long coat that looked like it could either be cream or pink depending on the light. I spritzed some perfume on and then rushed to open the door.

“*Whoa!*” I had to take a step back because a chest was in my face. “*Shit.*”

I didn’t mean to spit it out, but he was so fucking fine. He was dressed in a black button-down shirt tucked into a pair of black slacks. His sleeves were rolled up. He had forearm porn for days. All those swollen veins...sigh.

He looked me over, his eyes moving slowly, and I could barely stand it. I probably should have stood there and took it, absorbed the feeling it sent through me, but it was too much. I wasn’t a squirmer, but he was making me fidget.

“Ready?” I asked. My voice betrayed me. It trembled.

He took a step forward and I took a step back. We danced this dance until my back was pressed to the wall, his hand pressed to the wall next to my head, and he was looking down at me. His shirt was slightly open, and I had to tame the urge to run my hand underneath it to feel the beating of his heart.

“Tell me, Ava Girardi, how many men have you ghosted.”

I opened my mouth to respond to something totally different. That was not what I was expecting. He was inquiring about my love life, or sex life, because love implied there was more to it.

“I’m not a virgin if that’s what you’re asking. What about you, Nazzareno Fausti? I’m sure you’ve ghosted a few too.”

We stared at each other, in some kind of lockdown, until Beni clapped from behind us.

“Let us go!”

Naz wouldn’t be moved, though. Not until he had sufficiently made me squirm, like I’d sworn I’d never do for anyone. He slowly backed away from me, like this conversation wasn’t over, and his presence lingered. It was like he hadn’t left me at all.

Beni met me outside the room. Naz went to his.

“Beni?”

“Yesss.”

He was in a good mood, and I noticed he’d warmed up to me some after our shared love of the song.

“What does...” I thought back on the Italian words Naz had spoken when I’d asked him if he’d ever watched a woman getting dressed, and he’d said no, followed by the words I was butchering.

Beni tightened his face. He was really working up a sweat trying to translate the garble I had mentally fed him. His faced relaxed after a second or two. “Something like...*And I will never, not after you?*”

I patted his shoulder, thanking him.

Naz looked between us when he came out of his room holding a set of keys. He set a hand on my lower back and ushered me to the door. We left in a black Lamborghini Huracan Performante. The inside of the rims was neon green, and a strip of Italian colors—green, white, red—was on the bottom part of the doors. Beni decided to walk.

“Why didn’t we walk?” I asked.

He nodded to my shoes.

“You really are a knight, you know that?”

He gave me a half grin and drove like a boss to the rooftop restaurant. It held the most spectacular views of the Colosseum. We ate al fresco, and even though it was a bit windy, the weather was perfect to eat outside.

After dinner, we enjoyed drinks, the conversation light. We all seemed to relax as the sun started to set. I stood and took my wine to the edge of the balcony, watching as it set Roman history on fire for the umpteenth time, though it could never turn it to ashes.

Not in Rome. The Eternal City.

Naz came to stand next to me, and I looked toward him. He looked down at me and our eyes met, the setting sun burning between us.

I grinned a second later. "It must be amazing to live here."

"It is my home, but so is the sky."

"Is that why you became a pilot? You have wings that can't be clipped too?"

"We build our own cages, *uccellino selvatico*, with our fears and self-appointed rules. I am as free in the sky as I am on the ground. The choice is mine where I go."

"I like that," I said. "The idea that we can be happy flying or rooted. We can be free to do whatever we want to do."

"Nazzareno."

We both turned at his name being called. A man who looked like a different version of him was standing next to Beni. A woman stood to the side. She had long dark hair and light brown skin. Her eyes were hazel, more on the light green side, with gold streaks around her pupils. She was stunning.

Naz took my hand, and we walked over to them. The two men shook hands and then gave each other a one arm hug. Naz introduced him as Valerio, his cousin, and the woman next to him as Naomi. Naz didn't mention who Naomi was to Valerio, and when he introduced me, it was the same.

I guess we all had complicated situations we couldn't put a label on.

Valerio and Naomi took seats at our table, and the conversation flowed as easily as the wine. It seemed like Naz and Beni hadn't seen Valerio in a while, and they had a lot of catching up to do. Valerio asked to speak to Naz and Beni in private. Family business, I was willing to bet.

That left me and Naomi.

We made small talk. She was a large-animal veterinarian in Africa. She enjoyed working with protected lions the most. Her family had land there. She had a soft English accent. She told me her father was of Kenyan descent and her mother was from Sweden, but she grew up in England until they moved to Africa to take over a wildlife sanctuary there.

Her eyebrows lifted when I told her I worked for a newspaper in New York.

"Vice City Press?" she asked.

"You've heard of it?"

"In this world, you'll find it hard to find someone who hasn't. I know Milo Furaha. He takes pictures of our lions."

"It's really a small world." I smiled at her.

She was warm, much warmer than the weather, and beautiful in a way nature intended. I couldn't find an ounce of fake about her. I could see her working with lions. She had a spirit as wild as a lioness. One that should never be tamed.

I glanced at the man talking to Naz and Beni. I wondered if she'd awoken the lion in him, and if she had, were they not committed because his lion was trying to tame the lioness inside of her?

Naz caught me staring in their direction and met my eyes. I quickly looked away and found Naomi bringing her drink up to her mouth, a sly grin on her face.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

I listened. "Hear what?" I finally asked when I didn't find anything out of the ordinary.

She laughed, setting her glass down. “The sound of countless hearts breaking because another one is off the market.”

“Another one?”

“Fausti.” She smiled at me. “When one falls—hearts will tumble with him.”

I laughed, and it sounded forced. Because it was. Somewhat. The other part was awkward. “*Fffff. Nooo.* It’s not like that between us.” I motioned between me and Naz like a loon. “He’s just ‘watching’ me because he was ordered to. I am who I am, you know? And I come with a contagious disease—I inflict people with trust issues. Job hazard.”

Naz said something to the other two men, and the three of them looked over at us before they walked over. Maybe he sensed I was word vomiting again. Damn. That was so unlike me. I almost felt...defeated in a way. No one had ever pulled this much unease out of me before. But I was walking an invisible line like everyone in this family did, except I was still getting used to it all.

Naomi stood when Valerio didn’t sit. Naz took the seat next to me and Beni across from me.

“You are new in Rome, right?” Naomi asked.

“She is—” Naz answered at the same time I said, “Just visiting.”

Naomi and Valerio looked at each other while Beni coughed in his glass.

“We’re visiting a club this weekend,” Naomi said. “We should all go together.”

Naz looked at me and I shrugged.

“Do you need a date, Ava?” Naomi asked.

Naz’s eyes flew up to hers. “No.” The response was blunt.

Naomi made a cracking noise at me before Valerio set his hand on her back and led her out.

TWENTY

AVA

NAZ WOKE me up early to go to Orvieto. I sluggishly walked to the car, half asleep with a steaming cappuccino in my hand. Naz said it could have been worse. He could have woken me up before dawn.

“Same difference.” I gulped the hot drink, being mindful of not spilling it in his brand-new Range Rover. He switched cars like most people change underwear. Daily.

“What is the saying...the early bird gets the worm, ah?”

“I don’t like worms,” I grumbled. “I’ll take whatever I can find, even crumbs, after the sun goes down. I’m a night owl.” I gave a lame *hoot*. “In my profession, the exciting stuff usually happens when the moon comes out. So maybe I go after rats instead of crumbs?”

He went quiet after that, and his forearms flexed against the steering wheel.

Yeah, there was still that between us.

That being a lack of trust because of who I was. But when I really thought about it, yeah, I had the means to write a detailed article about his family, anyone could—they were a massive crime family with the dynamics of a royal one—but I also had the restraint to keep secrets.

If he only knew how deep my vault of tales went. I mean...I valued my tongue more than my heart. I wanted to keep it.

“Tell me about Orvieto.” I yawned. “Why is it so special?”

“You will see.”

I cracked the window some, allowing fresh air in, and I started to wake up as we traveled.

Orvieto was off Autostrada A1, wedged halfway between Rome and Florence, located in Umbria. Perched on top of volcanic rock, it was so beautiful that, for once, I wished I had a camera. It looked unreal, almost like a painting worth living in, as the Range Rover took the sloping street to get closer to the city.

“This place needs its own film score,” I whispered. “As you approach, it starts playing. Something Italian and...soft.”

The city towered above Tiber Valley and Southern Umbria. It was lined by a stone fence, and it seemed pressed up against the sky, what looked like a golden cathedral and terra-cotta-colored clock tower standing above the rest. The entire city was a mixture of burnt orange and pale-yellow stone. Mountains dipped and rose around it, forest green and golden hay in between. I could even see the stripes of a winery slanting downhill.

The city was separated into two parts: the new town below and the old medieval town above. We took a detour, though, and traveled about fifteen minutes until we came to a sprawling piece of land with gates.

As soon as Naz’s car pulled up, they opened, and he hit the gas and took the paved drive until we came to an imposing apricot colored villa with dark wooden trim. He pulled smoothly in front and got out, coming to open my door. I grabbed my bag and stepped out, staring up at the humongous place.

“Villa Sull’albero,” Naz said, taking my bag from me.

“What does Sull’albero mean?” I shielded my eyes and turned to him.

He took off his aviators and set them over my eyes. “In English...like a house in a tree.”

“A bird house?”

“Birds do nest in trees, yes?”

He took my hand and led me into Villa Sull'albero. I walked with him, thinking of why I had called it a bird house instead of a tree house. The bird symbolism had been strong in my life as of late, and I was starting to feel like a Fausti by recognizing it. And that Naz hadn't corrected me on it made my head spin with thoughts too.

We were met at the door by an Italian man and woman who greeted Naz and then me after Naz introduced me. Again, he didn't give me a title, and I understood why. What was he going to call me? His charge? That sounded like I was a royal of some kind and he had to watch over me. His prisoner? That didn't sound right either, because if this was prison, sign me up.

Villa Sull'albero, I found out, had a staff, cooks included. No surprise. The place had seven bedrooms and nine bathrooms, and a mosaic pool with statues that peed. The view was spectacular. Rolling hills surrounded us. It even had orchards and an olive grove.

“How many acres is this?” I asked.

“Twenty-five hectares.”

“This is heaven.”

“Even for a bird who is afraid to crash?”

“Even for a bird who doesn't like *risky* landings.”

“Everything is a risk in life, Ava.”

“Some more than others.” I set his glasses back on his face. “What are we doing here?”

“This is my place,” he said. “Marzio left it to me.”

He took my hand and led me to a table outside, where we ate lunch underneath what seemed to be a canopy of hibernating lemon trees. He was eager to get me to eat. I think he might have even set a timer on his phone.

After we left our things at the villa, we headed back to Orvieto to spend the day. Naz parked in the town underneath

the one above, and we walked it. Even though I walked everywhere in New York, unless I took a cab, my legs were burning by the time we reached the top.

I couldn't catch my breath, though it had less to do with the exercise and more to do with the city itself. It was like walking into a fairy tale.

Naz handed me what tasted like a homemade protein bar, packed with nuts, and we explored.

I almost felt like I was touching the sky.

Orvieto looked over the valley below, which Naz told me had been carved out by the winding Paglia River. Orvieto's cliffs had given the Etruscans a natural form of protection from attackers.

Naz motioned around. "Orvieto was abandoned until the Middle Ages. It became a hideout for popes during plagues, pandemics, and plunders."

"I like your alteration, Nazzareno Fausti. Tell me more."

He smiled and set his hand on my neck. It was such a natural thing for him to do, I didn't even notice it until he squeezed to get my attention. I'd been staring at him.

How could I not?

He was a walking, talking, gorgeous piece of scenery that seemed to break from the land and be set free—just to get tourists to visit and take an interest in the history and culture of Italy.

Centro Storico, the old city, wasn't that long, maybe a mile long from start to finish, but it was packed with old *palazzi* turned into hotels, trattorias, wine bars—Orvieto was famous for their white wine—and places to shop. The streets were narrow, and alleys were named after noble families from the medieval era.

Fortebraccio included, which Naz told me had morphed into Fausti somewhere along the line.

Naz pointed to a beautiful palazzo, which resembled more of a castle. "Maurizio Fortebraccio was here during medieval

times. That was his home.”

“That’s really cool,” I said. “I feel my history in New York, but it only goes back a short time. You must feel like you’re walking in your ancestors’ shoes here.”

He shrugged. “I know who I am, even when I am flying above my ancestor’s footprints. I carry them with me.”

“That’s an excellent thing to know, especially when so many of us don’t.”

“You are Italian, no?”

“Italian on my dad’s side. Irish on my mom’s.”

He touched my nose, where I had three freckles there that darkened in the sun. My sister had them too.

“Yeah.” I laughed. “We got those from her.”

“Pieces of her to carry with you, ah?”

I never thought about it that way, and in that moment, I cherished the dots, like she had left them for me to always remember who she was to me. Too bad those dots couldn’t lead me to her too.

Looking around, I sighed. This place was a place to remember.

It seemed like Naz maybe understood my train of thought, because he said, “You do not take pictures.”

“No, not often.” I smiled when he made a face—*go on* it seemed to encourage. “Pictures are meant to capture lasting memories. A moment in time when everything feels right.” I paused. “Or they’re supposed to. Things have changed some, but...not all memories stay good. I don’t like looking back on something that was so right in the moment and feeling how much it changed. How bad it got.”

We walked for a minute, and I window-shopped along the cobblestone street. I wanted to buy my sister something for her new places, the one in Italy and the one in Florida. I’d never done anything like that before. Buy something for someone as a gift. Unless takeout counted.

“What do you think about that planter?” It was mosaic, and maybe Lucila could start a garden. She was good at all that.

“*Si.*”

I could find something for Minnie, too, and even buy Lilo one of the medieval flags. I laughed at that, and then I gasped right after. Naz put his arm around me and pulled me to him so fast, I fell into him some. He had his camera out and facing us. I didn't even have time to smile before he took our picture.

“Let me see that!” I went to snatch it from him, but he held it away from me, a shit-eating grin on his face. “What? Let me see!”

He turned it towards me, and I took it from him, pulling it close to my face, like I needed to see my freckles up close or something. The thing was...Nazzareno Fausti just took a picture with me. I wanted it to be good, which fed into my belief in not taking pictures, because one day it might turn bad.

I sighed.

It wasn't all that great.

I looked like I'd been struck by Naz the lightning god.

I was falling into him, but it almost looked like he was pulling me close, and I was taken off guard by his...overwhelming electricity.

Without asking, I scanned through his photos. At one, I held the phone up to his face and he pushed it back some, setting his hand over mine, pulling the phone away so he could see it better. The picture was of the both of us at the rooftop restaurant with the views of the Colosseum. It was the moment after he came to stand next to me while the sun went down. Rome was below and behind us, the Colosseum in shape, but it seemed like a fire burned between his body and mine.

He was looking down at me, and I was looking up at him.

The fire between us had a name.

Ardor.

It was the first word that came to mind.

“Who took that?” I hoped my voice was even, or a little crispy, but it sounded...strangled.

“Beniamino.” Naz’s eyes lit up with the heat coming from the photo. “This memory cannot be darkened, ah? Since it will forever be preserved in the passionate fire of the sun.”

It will forever be preserved in the passionate fire of the sun.

If I was a bird in his eyes, he knocked me from the sky when he spoke that way. The man was a poet, like his grandfather, Marzio.

“Yeah,” was all I could get out. I kept scrolling, looking through his camera roll. All the places he’d traveled filled it. In a few he’d taken selfies, but even then, he’d held the phone out, making sure to capture whatever was in the background.

“And you call me a bird?” I acted like I was looking through more of his scenic photos, but I had landed back at the one of us in eternal Rome. “You’ve been so many places.”

“It’s a broad world, no matter how small it seems.”

“What it must feel like to be your kind of bird.”

“A lonely one?”

I looked up from the phone and met his eyes. With that vulnerable look in them...lonely, like he said...he could take down entire villages of women willing to save him from it.

I handed him his phone back after I hearted the one of us in Rome as a favorite. “Look around, Naz. I always did in New York. Birds flock together. Rarely have I ever seen one without another one close by. You’re never alone. Because like me, you have wings. You fly.”

We started walking again, silence between us.

“What are you thinking?” I whispered.

“You are a devastating heart attack.” He set his hand over his heart, like he was trying to keep it inside of his chest.

My laughter seemed to echo around us, then...silence again. His devastating heart-attack comment made me think

about hospitals, and since I didn't want to bring up Sonny, I asked him about his dad.

"Is he...okay?" I wasn't sure if he was going to trust me with the information, but I wanted to ask to show that I cared. Lothario wasn't a popular figure in the Fausti family, which maybe for him was a step up from just being considered a spare, but he was still Naz's father.

"He is awake now and dealing with a new life. He will be airlifted to a hospital in Rome tomorrow."

"Ah," was all I could think to say. I wanted to tell him Lothario should talk to Sonny. He'd had a few close calls over the years, especially since he dealt with dangerous bookies, but it never seemed to faze him. He always ended up in the same place he'd always been. In front of the TV in his room, a case of beer on the side table, the back of his head our only view.

Naz's phone beeped and he said, "Time to eat, *uccellino selvatico*."

"You really set a timer?"

He tapped his temple. "I usually have no problem remembering anything. However. I have learned heart attacks are distracting."

"Where should we go?"

"You decide."

I turned in a circle, lifting my pointer finger, and when I stopped, I pointed, "There."

He gave a sharp nod. "There it is."

We headed in that direction.

"Are we going back to Rome tonight?" I asked.

"No. We will stay here a day or two."

We would stay until the weekend, then go back to Rome in time to meet Naomi and Valerio.

“What’s the story between Naomi and Valerio?” I wondered if they were even a couple.

“It is not mine to tell.”

There it was. The lack of trust between us.

“I don’t want specifics. Just...something. Are they a couple? Dating? Married? Or...it is it complicated?”

“The last,” he said, holding open the door to the trattoria for me.

Naz led me to a table, and a waitress came and took our orders. She came back with two glasses of white wine. Naz pushed mine closer and took a sip of his.

“Okay. It’s complicated.” I picked my glass up, swirling the fragrant liquid around some. “Is it like me and you complicated?”

He turned his face to the side some and lowered his eyes. He was trying to understand what I meant by the question, but it didn’t seem like he wanted to ask.

“Is she...beholden to him?”

“Are you beholden to me?”

“Okay, wrong word. Is she in his *care*?”

He stared at me. He was thinking over the question. “She is in love with a lion.”

A beat passed.

“Yeah. Okay. That makes sense.”

Another a few beats and he didn’t say anything.

“What did I miss?” I asked.

Our order arrived and the waitress set the plates down. She left and Naz motioned to my plate.

He said, “*Molto bene*,” as I set my fork between the pasta, about to twirl. He watched me eat for a minute before he cleared his throat. “She is in love with a lion.”

I wiped my mouth and took a sip of wine. “If she’s in love with a Fausti, then yeah, she is. What’s the issue there?”

After my words were out, it was like his face totally blanked over, before his eyes rose a little, like he had just realized something. It was like watching dots connect to form a picture.

“What?” I asked.

“My *cugino* worries,” he said, almost absentmindedly. “Naomi takes care of them in Africa. She is attracted to them.”

“She’s attracted to the Faustis.” I need clarification.

He lifted a finger. *One.*

“Yeah.” I laughed a little. “If a woman can take on more than one Fausti...she’s not a woman. She’s Mother Nature.”

Naz grinned. “How do you feel about Orvieto?”

“My feelings are telling me... I’m glad we’re staying for another day or two. Why don’t you live here? Or do you sometimes?”

“The villa is vast. Too large for a single man.”

“The tree house is too lonely for one wild animal.” I could understand that. Even though it had staff, it was still beautiful in a way that requires more than one to share it, or that beauty would turn into a haunting loneliness. I knew about that.

A rent-controlled apartment in New York.

A dog.

Emotional attachments.

Financial responsibilities.

All shackles imprisoning me to...an empty life.

How funny, but not in a hilarious way, that views of life can change when we’re moved from our usual spot.

Before I left New York, it was the thought of being caged by commitments that made it hard for me to breathe.

In Orvieto, in that moment, it was the loneliness. The idea of never finding my life's true direction and following the passions of my heart. The thought of being another...Edna.

“*Si.*” His voice was raspy. “I enjoy it, but only in thought. It has the power to stir a sense of loneliness in me that follows after I have left.”

After I have left.

I imagined it.

Naz gone from my life.

Not sitting with me in this small trattoria located on volcanic rock. Not showing me around narrow streets and through alleys, giving me history only his could rival. Not hearing the beep of his phone when it was time for me to eat. Or looking at me like I was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. A touch so hot, it could only be translated into one word in any language: *mine*.

My mom was there one minute. The next she was gone.

My hands gripped the table as my heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. I couldn't catch my breath.

“Ava.”

Naz's voice was in my ear, but I had to concentrate on taking one breath at a time. Of taking control of my heart...of my fucking life.

I'd built it in such a way that I could fly free—run and rat the streets, the only attachment the passion burning deep inside of me to find...

I looked up and my breath started coming even faster. Naz and the entire room swayed.

I'd always flown to his family.

To him.

I heard the chair scrape against the floor, and a cool breeze flowed over me, and then his arms were wrapped around me, carrying me out.

“All is well, *uccellino selvatico*,” he said, his voice calm and clear. I hardly bounced in his arms as he carried me through the town. When he got to the edge, he told me to open my eyes and breathe deeply, because... “You are flying. You are free.”

The entire world seemed like it existed below us.

A cool wind surged up, and my hair caught flight, twirling above my head.

I knew from below, looking up, it would look like we were pressed against the sky, and maybe, just maybe...we were flying free. Together but alone at the same time.

TWENTY-ONE

NAZZARENO

“A KINGDOM DIVIDED CANNOT STAND,” Valerio was saying to Beni and Aristide.

We were on the rooftop of my building in Rome, waiting for Ava to finish getting ready. The women all waited inside. We did not mind speaking in front of Naomi of family business, but Aristide did not want to speak in front of Zeta, his date, and neither did Beni, since he barely knew his date’s name. Naomi separated herself from it on her own.

“If I am going to concern myself with the politics of lions,” she’d once said to me, “I will do it with my own pride.”

The men had been discussing the switching of power and all that it had entailed, smoking cigars, and having a drink before we left for the club. As far as Luca Leone Fausti was concerned, all was settled on the power front, but what had happened in Venice on Ponte dei Pugni still made me uneasy. Leandro’s insubordinate attitude as well.

I set my glass of whiskey down and walked to the edge of the balcony, looking over a red-skied Rome, pulling on the end of the cigar, tasting the flavors through my nose and feeling the scented smoke touch my lungs. The sun set the entire city on fire before the darkness ate it whole.

My phone rang.

“Nazzareno,” I answered, controlling the slow flow of smoke from my mouth.

It was my bride-to-be, Elettra Buratti, checking in. She heard my father was out of the hospital in Venice and had

made it safely to Rome. She and her mamma were planning the wedding and wanted to know a good time we could get together to discuss it all.

I did not say anything.

Elettra Buratti was a beautiful woman with an intelligent mind for numbers, but sparks did not fly between us on the first meeting. She was not someone I would gravitate to in a crowd, though she told me I was someone she would. She said we had met a few years prior, but I did not even remember her.

She laughed. “You are probably not interested in all the details. Unless you are?”

“Not particularly.”

“I thought so. I am okay with that. Would you like me to narrow it down to two choices and then you can decide? Or I can involve Belaflore.”

If they involved my mamma, she would take over. But it was Elettra’s choice, and I told her so.

“*Bene.*” She sighed. “You have been okay? I know things must be hard and busy with Lothario in the hospital. A boating accident.” She gasped. “I cannot even imagine it! Belaflore told mamma you will be going to visit Lothario tomorrow. I will come with you. It will do him good to see us together and hear about the plans we have.”

It was not her fault my life had come to this point. Where I could barely stand to hear her voice on the other end. It was leading me to a point of no return.

“Elettra.”

“Yes?”

“Do you really want to marry me?”

“Or you asking me...for real? Or just in general?”

I was not sure when it became a natural occurrence for a man to ask a woman for her hand in marriage over the phone, but she did not sound phased by the prospect. I wondered if she truly understood the family she had agreed to marry into.

“In general.” I leaned over the balcony, setting my hands over it, watching as the smoke purred to the sky.

“Yes. I must admit something to you. We met all those years ago, and I...I had a crush on you ever since.” She laughed, embarrassed.

Not like the woman in my penthouse who blazed a trail when it came to her words and owning them.

I told Elettra we would talk soon, and we hung up. I finished my cigar and turned at the sound of laughter. The girl Beni brought was dancing on the roof, acting as if she was roping a wild animal and howling.

Beni sat, watching her, smiling.

The three of us—myself, Aristide, Valerio—were all dressed similarly. Black suit jacket, white button-down shirt, and black slacks. We all wore signet rings on our little fingers with a lion stamped on them, the letter F behind the face of the beast, even Beni. Gemstones the color of our birthstones created the eyes.

Beni wore a hot-pink shirt underneath his black suit and a childish grin on his face when he was howling with his date.

Valerio and I locked eyes but did not say anything. We did not have to.

My father had it correct. He was different.

Aristide stood on the other side of the roof, talking to Zeta privately. The conversation was whispered, and when Zeta’s eyes met mine, she hurriedly turned them back to Aristide.

It had been an hour since my eyes devoured the woman inside my penthouse. They were starving. After our time in Orvieto, the sugar in my blood would disappear if I did not see her every few minutes, even if she was lounging around with her black glasses on.

I fucking loved those glasses.

They screamed *ravage me in the library*.

Valerio stood when he noticed our two making their way outside. I fixed my suit and went to join Valerio. Naomi stepped out first, saying something over her shoulder to Ava. When Naomi cleared the view, Ava came into focus.

Her hair cascaded down her shoulders in bright blonde waves. Her blue eyes were almost neon in the fading light and against the dark makeup over her eyelids. Her lips were a pale pink.

Her body was on fucking display.

She wore a tight white dress that had a gossamer type material over one shoulder that drifted below her knees. The silky material immediately caught the soft light and shimmered against the darkness. Her heels were high and as eye-catching as the dress.

Fuck.

She was gorgeous.

My eyes could not get enough of her.

I was not a man who harbored many regrets, but agreeing to this night was one of them. I ached to stay in with her, peeling that dress off slowly, nothing left but skin and bone after.

Laying her bare to me and claiming what was rightfully mine.

This woman.

A woman whose eyes broke with sadness when she spoke about the things that turned her blood cold and froze her with fear. Those same eyes burning through winter when she spoke of the things she loved—when she looked at them.

Her eyes were burning when she met mine across the rooftop.

Her eyes were on fire, but her body had turned cold.

She was mad.

Beyond mad.

Pissed.

Whatever it was, I could tell she was trying to hide the hurt it had caused.

Something had hurt her.

I could read her as if she were a book.

Because she was mine and our stories had always been tangled.

I knew it the moment I spotted her at the event in Venice.

She wore a symbol to send me following in her direction.

On the cloak she thought was lost were two angel wings done in crystals. Underneath candlelight, they had shimmered and caught my eye.

The same as the tattoo on my back, but they were inked into my skin.

She had always been.

My brother came to stand next to me. He squeezed my arm. He spoke in Italian. "She knows about Elettra." My brother put another glass of whiskey in my hand. "Do not be upset with Zeta. She did not know it had not been announced."

My angel's eyes were still locked with mine.

She squared her shoulders, tipped her chin up to me, and accepted a glass of red wine Beni's howling date handed her.

She was going to make me suffer for this. Then she was going to try to fly away from me after she made me bleed.

I might kill someone tonight over that fucking dress.

If not.

We might kill each other.

I downed the whiskey, the burn sliding down my throat and rushing through my veins.

The night was still young.

We would see what fate had in store.

If I thought she would have been silent on the way over to the club, I would have been wrong. I was not wrong, however, because I knew she was going to hide the hurt until the talons broke through her skin and came after mine.

She had never cared so much.

Neither had I.

She was not as chatty as usual, but she still spoke to me as she did before.

She did not try to race from the car. She waited for me to open the door for her and help her out.

She did not pull away from me when my hand went to the small of her back, but I could feel the tremble of her muscles through the fabric.

Not her skin, her muscles.

The hurt disguised as indifference, and soon anger, could not be contained. It was making its way to the surface, inching the claws closer and closer to the edge.

She would not have to fight through layers to get to me. I would give her my chest to carve out. The heart inside of it was hers. Then she would find her way to my soul. And I would be a dead man without the hope of more without her.

I glanced down at my *uccellino selvatico* as we made our way to the door. She usually glanced back, but she was keeping her eyes on what was up ahead—my cousin's club, the crowd, the night in front of us.

She was not looking at her present, me, but to her future.

Aristide eyed Beni and his date, and then grinned at me. They were already dancing to the music coming out of the establishment.

Galileo, one of our many cousins, was a successful international businessman and had opened a string of these

clubs worldwide. They were named after whichever city they were in. This one had ROME lit up in bright letters on the building. I had been to most of them since I traveled so frequently, and they were each tailored to fit the vibe of the city.

It was opening night for ROME, and the line snaked around the street. A few cheers went up, the name Fausti being shouted, as we bypassed security and were allowed entrance.

All of Galileo's clubs could be described as rich, and they all had women dancing on poles. The one in Paris had the women in top hats, tight black velvet body suits, black stockings, and heels.

Rome had them in sheer white dresses that fell just below their thighs, high heels, and golden flowers in their hair. The decor was all velvet, but red and gold.

Beni gave a *whoop!* after a server handed him a glass of whiskey. "I love a good welcome!"

"Yesss!" his date shouted over the music, dancing around him.

Ava rolled her eyes.

"Not feeling too warm toward the Fausti *famiglia* tonight?"

Her eyes snapped to mine. "Not particularly." She took a step forward and I took a step with her. Then she stopped, turning to me, placing a hard hand against my chest. Her nails pressed against my shirt, and I could feel the restraint. She was holding back the urge to tear me to shreds. "No. That's not fair. Not the entire Fausti *famiglia*." She butchered *famiglia*. "Just one member of it."

Her blue eyes seemed unreal in the lights of the club. The darkness of her makeup only made them more spellbinding. Her lips were a heavenly pink, and if her mouth ever told me no, denied me, she would send me to the 7th circle.

I refused to make excuses for my behavior, for the claim I had on her. We both knew she belonged to me, and God help me, I belonged to her.

She should have known, though, that not everything in my world is just. Often, we have to fight for what we want. We're pitted against death to measure how much we want whatever is being denied to us.

My arm wrapped around her, and she gasped when I pulled her into my body. I leaned down close to her ear and whispered, "This is the reality of the Fausti *famiglia*—" I made sure to enunciate the word "—that you adore so much, ah?"

She shoved against me, and when I allowed her some space, her eyes burned deep into mine. I felt the fires of hell in the deepest part of me. A part that had always been protected.

Naomi and the two other women came close. Naomi encouraged Ava to dance with them. She backed away from me, her eyes still on mine.

"It is what it is, right, *Capitano*?"

She started moving her body to the slow, sensual rhythm of the music. A server passed and handed me a glass of whiskey, but my eyes never left her. The poor excuse for a dress, unless she wore it for me only, was catching the light, making her spark in the darkness.

This club was filled with men of my blood. Those small sparks were going to attract their attention, and once they did, they were going to be drawn to that face, that body...

Her dangerous curves. Her small waist. Her tettas. Her legs. They were so well defined and sculpted, the lights highlighted each muscle as she moved.

Her *culo*...

I took a drink of whiskey, holding it in my mouth, letting the burn linger.

...deserved to be molded and preserved.

Ava Girardi was a fucking masterpiece.

I craved to have her tear me to shreds. To put all that she felt on me so I could feel her deep inside of my bones.

I wanted her to fucking mark me below the skin.

Whenever I moved, there she would be, with me.

I ached to ruin her too—for any other man that even dared to look at mine.

There was a madness inside of me for her, and I could not control it.

She had a dangerous obsession.

So did I.

Her.

Keeping my eyes on her, I took a seat on a plush velvet seat and set my whiskey between my legs. Three men stood in front of me, watching her. I took another drink of whiskey and flung the rest on one of their backs. I refused to raise my fucking voice.

He turned around, ready to clash horns.

I used my first two fingers and made a simple move motion with them.

He hit the two men next to him, said something in a rushed, whispered tone, and the three of them moved.

My glass of whiskey was replaced before I could even miss it.

Ava was still moving her body.

A man was approaching from behind.

Our eyes met, and the lion's eyes on my signet ring caught the overhead lights and sparked as brightly as her dress.

He moved in a different direction.

She looked in the direction he had gone and back at me. I lifted my glass to her.

Her lips pinched, and she started moving forward, the fire in her veins sending her straight to me. She was moving her body in a sexual way—like the women working the poles—and mouthing the words to the song.

“If I was your woman...”

You are, my wild bird, but we're going to have to bleed for this happily ever after. If a man like me even gets those.

She could not read the thoughts in my mind, but my eyes felt as drunk on her as my body on the whiskey.

Her scent drifted past my nose when she was close enough. It was her usual perfume mixed with sweat, and my cock strained even harder against my pants.

She set both of her hands on each side of the chair, leaning in close. "No touching." Then she really started to move for me. Her head was back, her eyes turned to the lights, and she was making faces like she would in the bedroom while her body mimicked getting fucked.

I would show her how it felt to truly get fucked.

She gasped when I lifted her off her feet, and then she started to beat against my back. "Put me down, Naz!"

I did when we were in a private room.

She stumbled back, but not because I had set her down hard or unexpectedly. It was because the tension between us was rocking us both.

She came at me at the same time I went for her.

We stopped just a breath apart.

"Let's see how strong that legendary Fausti restraint is," she whispered. "Don't touch me, Naz." She shoved me back, and I only moved because she was pushing me toward the seat. It was placed facing the window in the room. Private dances were offered for a fee.

Ava stood in front of it. She started to dance again.

She was slowly burning me, my want for her licking every inch of my skin with flames.

I was close to combusting when she started teasing me.

She ran her hand between her breasts, closing her eyes and breathing out, as her hand moved further and further down. Her fingers slid back up, and she slipped it inside of the dress, giving me a glimpse of her breast and nipple.

My cock was a fucking sharp weapon about to tear out of my pants.

My entire body strained to be close to hers, my skin rubbing against hers, pulling her hair and fucking her into oblivion.

I could smell her desire in the air, and I licked my lips, trying to taste her in it.

She was too fucking far.

I wondered if there were restraints in the room. My control was beyond being tested. It had already snapped, and I was holding on by my teeth. I would tie my own hands down.

She touched herself underneath the fabric, then claiming it was too hot in the room, undid the dress, slipped it off, and flung it in my face. It fell over my cock but did not hide how hard it was.

I growled low in my throat when my eyes feasted on her tetas. They were fucking perfect for her body. A handful. Her nipples were rosy, stiff little peaks begging for my mouth to suck on. Her hips were hugged by thin straps of white velvet, only giving me the shape of her *cucchia*.

Berries were one of my favorite fruits, and suddenly, I was starved for them.

For hers.

So juicy and so fucking sweet.

She slow turned, giving me a full view of her ass in the thong. She bent down low, stroked her legs as she came up, and then turned to face me again.

She smiled at me. "This is allowed, right? Looking but no touching. Since we're here and there are private shows." She pointed to the window. "I'm not sure how much this would have cost you, but...you're getting it for free. Just think of it as a parting gift. A memory of me when I'm not here." She shimmied out of the underwear, and her thighs glistened with want.

She started to touch herself.

She let out a surprised noise that collided with my growl as I pushed her body against the wall.

“No touching!” she shouted at me.

I lifted my hands.

“It’s the same thing!”

My grin came slow. “Boys, I see, have given you this impression, ah?”

She shoved against my chest, but then tried to pull at the fabric of my shirt. She took the lapels of my suit and strangled them. “Men who *omit* are no better than boys who don’t know how to fuck properly yet!”

“You have had plenty of experience with men and boys, ah?”

“Fuck you, NAZ FAUSTI!” She slapped me across the face, and I turned my cheek, offering her the other side.

“Nah,” she breathed. “Your other cheek isn’t even worth the pain of hitting you again.”

I looked up and our eyes met.

She whimpered, before she made a strangled sound in her throat. “You could have told me!”

“I did not want my personal life to be front-page news.”

“Bastard!” she seethed. “You did this on purpose. You took advantage of the attraction between us. You made me fall for you so I couldn’t break away, not cleanly anyway, when I found out you’re getting... *married!*” She had shouted the last three words, and even though they were supposed to sound strong, her voice trembled on the word *married*.

“Fuck,” I snapped, curling my hands into fists and setting them on each side of her head, locking her in. Slowly, at my own peril, I leaned my head closer, and set my forehead against hers. I told her I was sorry, *mi dispiace*, the words leaving my mouth for the first time in my life.

Her words were the truth. I did not want her to know. I wanted us to be free to fall without any restraints. What

existed between us needed to be felt, explored, absorbed, even if it would not last forever.

Just for a moment.

A second.

Minutes.

Hours.

Days.

A month that would get us through the rest of our lives.

I was so fucking wrong. No time would be long enough with her.

“Do you love her?” Her voice wavered.

I smiled, but it was far from genial. “Love is a toss-up when it comes to this romantic and ruthless family I share blood with. My gamble did not pay off.”

She nodded and looked away for a second before she met my eyes. “I wanted you to feel how I felt,” she whispered. “I can be with you, but I can’t touch you, even though it’s killing me not to! I’ve never felt this way before.” She was losing it, her words rushed. “I’m so fucking terrified of it. Of not having...you in my life. I don’t know how it happened, but you’ve become vital to me somehow. And it doesn’t matter what your last name is. *A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.* A lion by any other name would still roar and have a mane.

“I don’t know what to do. How to leave this all behind.” She took a deep breath. “How to let you go, Nazzareno Fausti. It feels like...letting my entire life go. Where do I go from here? I have nowhere to go! Not even a stupid rent-controlled apartment in New York. I have...no one to love. Not even a geriatric dog my cat would hate! I’ll be as empty as Villa Sull’albero as Edna—for the rest of my life.”

I shoved away from the wall and took my coat off. I helped her slip into it and buttoned it up. It was longer than her dress, and it swallowed her form. The sleeve shielded our hands as I led her out of the club. All the energy from before had been

drained from her, hopelessness taking its place. She almost lagged behind and didn't put up a fight when I picked her up and carried her out. She tucked her face into my neck and breathed me in.

In the car, she turned away from me and faced the window. She set her head against it and closed her eyes.

She did not tear me to shreds from the outside, but on the inside, my heart's lifeblood was bleeding out at her feet.

I carried Ava into the penthouse and set her down on my bed. She faced away from me and curled in on herself like she could stop her own bleeding. I stared down at her, until my feet moved me toward the door.

"Turn the lights out," she whispered.

Her voice was dead, and it haunted me. I flexed my fingers to relax them. The tension was a storm inside of me. I sent my fist through the wall when I was outside of my room. My knuckles split and the blood ran freely. I took out my phone and made a call.

In under five minutes, men stood guard at my place.

"No one in and no one out," I ordered. "Your fate is hers if anything should happen."

I sped through the streets of Rome, the Ferrari breaking one minute into half of a second. It did not take me long to get to my ending destination. The gates opened after my identity was confirmed. I parked in front of the sprawling villa and did not even turn the car off.

Elettra stood in the doorway, wrapping her silk robe tighter around herself. "Nazzareno, what is going on?"

"We need to speak."

She took a step back and invited me in with a hand. I followed behind her as we made our way deeper into the house. She pointed to a seat when we came to a room for lounging. It looked out over a sprawling, manicured lawn with fountains.

She grabbed my hand and looked over my knuckles. “What happened?” Her eyes snapped to mine.

The touch felt foreign. It did not belong to me.

I took my hand back and waved it. “I came to speak to your parents.”

“Not possible. They are spending the weekend in Florence with friends.” She tilted her head. “I know our parents made the arrangement between us, but I control my future. You will speak to me if it concerns me.”

“Good,” I said in Italian. “I do not want this marriage.”

“You agreed to it.” Her posture turned rigid.

“That was before.”

“You have met someone?”

I looked her in the eyes. “*Sì*.”

“Ah.” She backed away from me and sat on a chair. She crossed her legs, giving me a glimpse of her long legs. “Do you love her?”

Something about her demeanor rubbed me the wrong way. Rarely were my instincts wrong. This woman had a vengeful streak. If I admitted to her how I felt about Ava, I was not sure what she would do.

“It does not matter.” I shrugged. My shirt stretched against my shoulders, and I felt I might burst through it. It felt like it was shrinking against my skin. “I want her for my own reasons.”

She tapped her chin. “That is unfortunate, isn’t it?”

“Unfortunate,” I repeated in Italian.

“*Sì*. You agreed to the marriage. Gave your word. I know what that means, Nazzareno Fausti. You will owe me blood if you break it. Not only that, I know the grief it will cause your family. Boating accident? Luca Fausti took your father’s legs.” She touched her temple. “My father knows these things. He tells me things. I will not go quietly. I will shout it to the entire world just how an honored Fausti’s word is worth zero these

days. No family worth anything will touch yours—ever again.”

My smile came slow. “You put too much faith in your family’s wealth.”

She stood and came to stand in front of me. “My family goes back just as far as yours. My family is not only rich in money, but in reputation. That is why your father wanted this marriage. He knew what it would do to *his* status. The *spare* was carving a path for his lineage.” She took a breath and released it slowly. “It is also more than what we are speaking of. We both know it. I can demand things, like...payment in the form of blood for an arrangement broken. I will go to Luca Fausti and get him involved. I *will* start a war over this. Your faction will not be able to survive it.” She stood on her toes and whispered in my ear, “You are worth that much to me.”

I took her by the arms and set her away from me.

She sighed dramatically. “I know what you are thinking.”

“Highly doubtful.”

She laughed.

It was never a good sign when a woman laughed in that way, as if she had just skinned a cat and was about to go out on the town with its fur around her neck, blood soaking her gown.

“I do! You do not love me, *bla, bla, bla*. But you will, Nazzareno Fausti, you will. Love takes time to grow between two people. I love you. I loved you from the moment I looked at you. I have dreamed of a future with you. In time, you will love me the same. You will love our children and you will love their mamma for giving them to you.”

I was at a loss for words. She believed every word she had spoken. She was possessed by something words alone could not fight. I did not believe I could fight her at all—unless I planned to kill her.

“Okay.” She waved a hand in front of her face. “I will do this. For you. For us. I will allow a mistress, or two, if you do not fall in love. If it is physical alone, okay, get it out of your

system. If it is more and I find out...*no*.” She waved her hands in front of her face. “Let us not even go there. I will be the only woman you love. And no, I will not sleep with you before the wedding to test the waters. You are in, and I will stay a virgin until the ink from our signatures has dried. Now *go*, make a man of yourself, or whatever it is they say.”

She set a hand on my shoulder and tried to push me toward the front door. I walked, but not because she forced me. She slammed it after I stepped outside.

I turned and stared at the door, not knowing what the fuck had just happened.

Make a man of myself?

Test the fucking waters?

Did we have two conversations in two different places?

Her laughter echoed back to me, and I shivered.

I sat in my car, somewhat dazed. My phone rang. I sighed and picked it up.

“My son,” my father’s gruff voice came through the line. He sounded weak. “I have not seen you.”

“I was ordered to take care of business,” I said. “Mamma has been keeping me informed. You have done well.”

“Business?” he almost scoffed. He might have sounded weak, but defeat was absent from his tone. “Does this business pertain to making an oath of fealty to your uncle?”

“I have not.”

Silence stretched between us until he spoke again. “Break your word to me and to the Buratti family and you will be forced to. This will have irreparable consequences.” He took a deep breath and sighed it out. “I will see you tomorrow.” He hung up, the silence quieter than his had been.

A knock came at my window. Elettra motioned for me to roll it down. I did, but only a crack.

Her eyes flitted to the villa and then to me. “We need to talk,” she whispered. “Take me for a ride.”

TWENTY-TWO

AVA

I WASN'T sure if there was anything lonelier than reaching out for someone who wasn't there to hold you back. In so many ways I was hardened, strong enough that no one could get through the armor I'd built piece by piece, no place more protected than my heart. But then something special felt like it came into my life, and I opened myself up to it only for it to be snatched away from me.

The loss reminded me why it hurt to have a heart.

I was that little girl waiting for arms to hold me again, constantly looking and searching for something to desperately steal the anxiety and pain—anything.

My sister accused me of using vices to numb the pain. I'd always rolled my eyes at her and told her to go psychoanalyze someone else. Because my sister had issues too. She was addicted to chocolate. And not in the, *oh, I have to have it because I love it* kind of way. She was truly hooked on it. I'd seen her have a panic attack once when she thought one of us emptied her stash. She was like a woman on the worst hormonal episode of her life, times ten, and it made her mad in the head.

I'd gone out and bought her over a hundred dollars' worth because I'd given the last of it to Minnie. She wouldn't stop crying for Lucila and it was the only way to get her to quiet. I wasn't good with kids, and the crying thing baffled me. Minnie did it so easily.

For me, all my emotions got stuck in my chest like I had indigestion.

The thought made me remember when that had first started. It was the day after Sonny stood up from our table and screamed at me, “SHE’S NOT COMING BACK! SHE LEFT YOU. SHE LEFT HER.” Meaning my sister. “SHE LEFT US. SHE. IS. NOT. COMING. BACK.”

I wouldn’t stop asking for my mom, and when he refused to answer me, I made up a song and sang it constantly. I even made a dance to go with it.

When he screamed the blunt truth at me, I stopped singing and dancing.

I started again in Naz’s bathroom.

Even though his bedroom was so dark I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face, I closed my eyes tight, trying not to see or hear what happened after Sonny had knocked my life from underneath me. But the memory found the crack inside of my heart and slipped through it.

“IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT! YOU MADE HER LEAVE!” I’d started crying and stomping my feet as Sonny planted his ass in his old chair. I did this for hours, until the only thing I remembered was having to stop because I’d felt so drained, and Molly’s arms as she carried me to the room I shared with Lucila.

Molly’s arms were strong, but they never fit. Not like they should have. It shouldn’t have been her carrying me. It should have been Sonny or my mom.

Both were gone, just in different ways. Sonny had checked out everywhere but physically, and my mom...she was totally gone, except for the memories she left behind.

I still didn’t know if she was dead or alive.

In this moment, though, it should have been Naz’s arms reaching out to me, holding me close to keep the cracks from ripping me apart.

I wasn't the enemy, no matter what his family labeled me as. Over the years, I'd defended them to people who hated what they stood for.

Instead of stealing my heart, in the Fausti way, he should have been protecting it.

No matter how tightly I closed my eyes. No matter how hard I curled into myself.

Nothing was making this better.

I'd come a long way from that girl, but she still existed inside of me, now with woman-sized hurts and lingering issues.

The thoughts I'd had at the trattoria in Orvieto—of Naz no longer being a part of my life—were haunting me. I'd spent my entire life in the center of life, or close to the bottom, to protect myself from this.

I told myself if I wasn't too happy, if I wasn't claiming this or that as mine, and I kept my focus straight ahead and my head down, I'd be protected from what had happened to me before.

The crash.

The center, or close to the bottom, wasn't that far of a fall. It couldn't almost kill me like the loss had done before—that was too high of a height.

I was wrong.

No matter where I was, how far up or down, a fall was a fall, and it all depended on how I stuck the landing.

I sat up and sighed. His jacket was still over my body, and the arms were so long I had to roll them up to find my hands.

Even his jacket swallowed me up whole.

A fragile bird in the mouth of a mighty lion.

I felt too jittery to stay in the bed. In the darkness, my thoughts kept flashing like neon signs, and I couldn't dim them. I wrapped my arms around myself and padded through

the empty penthouse. The weather was turning colder, and I could feel it clinging to the marble floors.

Naz was right about this place. Even though it was spacious, it wasn't like the villa on the outskirts of Orvieto. One person could exist here without the ghost of loneliness following him or her around. It seemed like a place where the frequency and lengths of stays didn't matter to the walls.

I didn't have a room in mind, so I just drifted around. I found myself on the top floor where it seemed the roof was made of glass. It seemed like ferns grew wild from the slats, and so did some kind of purple flower, but I knew it was more than that. I just couldn't figure out the logistics of it.

The windows were arched, and the floor was made of either stone or tiles that were supposed to resemble stone. More greenery bordered the square pool glowing blue in the darkness. On each side stood two statues of naked women with birds on their shoulders. A few green chairs and loungers were placed around the space to relax on.

The room was humid and had no chlorine smell, so I thought maybe saltwater. The water looked so peaceful, almost like a blue lagoon.

I removed Naz's jacket and my underwear and left them on a lounge. I stuck my toes in first to gauge the temperature. It was warm. Once the water was up to my belly, I slid under, gliding like a...

Jellyfish.

No heart.

So jelly of them.

I grinned at my lame joke.

I made a few laps before I stuck my face under and just let the water hold me. I couldn't hold my breath for too long, but it was nice all the same.

WHOOSH!

A huge splash and then arms hauling me up had me spluttering. The shock of it had made me breathe in, and I

started to choke.

“What the...?” I coughed out.

“Ava!”

“Naz! What the—” I wheezed. “What are you doing?”

The water swayed around us, and when I could finally open my eyes without them burning, he was staring at me.

“What the fuck are you doing, Ava?”

“*Me?* I was swimming. What are *you* doing?”

“Saving you. Having a possible heart attack.”

“You thought...you thought I’d drowned myself?”

“I thought you were already drowned.” He took a breath. “Your hair was floating, and...fuck.” He slapped the water, and it popped us both in the face.

“I’m not that desperate.”

We stared at each other until the water calmed.

He reached up and tucked a strand of clinging hair behind my ear. “Birds belong on land, not in water this deep. It weighs down their wings.”

“They occasionally enjoy a bath.”

He nodded and an awkward silence started to fall between us. I went to push away, to head to the steps and then hide in the room he’d first shown me to.

“No,” he said, holding me close to him. He was still in his suit. The white shirt thinned with the water it seemed, clinging to every one of his muscles. “You will not run from me.”

“Listen,” I breathed. “This has been fun. It really has. But I want to speak to Luca. It’s time for me to go. We both know it’s for the best.”

“No.”

“No? You don’t get to decide—”

His hands moved to each side of my head and his lips pressed against mine. I wanted to fight him, to push him away,

but I couldn't. The seconds to this moment had been building, and I...needed it. More than my next breath.

I gave in to it.

I gave him everything.

I let him taste the bitterness of my nonexistent tears and the sweetness of my surrender.

His lips were incredibly soft but firm at the same time. They were gentle, at first, getting to know mine, and then his tongue touched mine and the heat increased. I wrapped my arms around his neck and fell into the fire between us.

In that moment, all that registered was him, and how deep it felt like he was inside of me, even though he wasn't.

His kiss was a thief, and it was making its way to places I'd always locked.

I pulled back before it could get that far. "I should—" I motioned toward the steps. But I needed a minute. The water felt like it was swaying around me, even though neither of us had moved.

"Ava," he said my name so passionately, so reverently. "Look at me."

I took a deep breath and released it slowly. "I can't. I can't do this."

He snapped something at me in Italian. I was almost positive he ordered me to look at him.

I did.

His eyes were reflecting the water, and they almost seemed teal—blue and green mixed. With his coloring, jet black hair and deeply tanned skin, it was almost impossible not to be hypnotized by him. He had the power to make me feel like I needed to heal him, whatever was hurting him, because a man like Nazzareno Fausti rarely let his guard down. And I could feel it crumbling around him, being washed out in this lagoon in the middle of Rome.

"I do not love her."

“I know. You told me earlier. But you’re still getting married.”

It seemed like he wanted to look away from me, but his pride wouldn’t allow him to. He shrugged. “It will not mean anything. It is just for show.”

“You’re still going to sleep with her.”

“She wants children.”

“With the Fausti name.”

He nodded slowly, like he didn’t want to make any sudden moves and scare me. “It is complicated between our families.”

“Let me guess, and you can tell me if I’m right. Your parents made the arrangement with hers. She’s probably some heiress, or some famous name, or someone in high society. Someone that will pair well with the Fausti name. Both sides want this arrangement badly. Especially since you are the first son of Lothario, a direct heir to Marzio. Am I getting this right so far?”

He nodded.

“She wants you for herself, but understands it’s only an arrangement, and like Rosaria, is willing to...allow you to take other lovers.”

He sighed. “I went to see her. I was looking for a way out. She said some things that made me question her...” He touched his temple. “She met me outside before I left. We took a ride and discussed it in private. Her house is monitored.”

Why did that burn me so deeply, when he said, *we discussed it in private*? I had no claim on this man except for the one my heart had convinced my head I had, but I wanted to hurt him as much as he was hurting me suddenly.

I tamed it down, though, because we needed to talk this out so I could leave. He wasn’t going to let me out of this pool if I didn’t hear him out. But I already knew where this was headed. I’d gotten a glimpse of the dead-end road in New York while wading through bloody water and plucking a picture of Rosaria Caffi from a dead man’s empty chest.

A chest void of a heart because of this man's family.

"I'm sick of playing this guessing game. I don't want to be right anymore because I already know the truth. Breaking the arrangement with her will start another war in your family."

"My father will break ties with me, and I will be required to swear fealty to a different faction. No one will touch me if I go back on my word to Elettra and her family. I gave it when I agreed to the terms. It will be a marriage of show. That is all."

"Except for those few times in the bedroom when you make babies with her."

"She will not budge on that."

I bet she wouldn't.

"If I accept this deal—which, let's get this straight. I will be your...mistress?"

He grabbed me by the arms and stared into my eyes. He wanted to say something but couldn't. I would have a label then, and he couldn't deny it. He would love me in the dark.

Which was not surprising. My entire life was spent in it, searching for a route to this man. I was just too late and had missed the daylight.

"You will keep me in your penthouses, in your mansions, but for public events I'll be hidden. In public, in general, I'll be hidden. Will I be the only one?"

"You are fucking killing me. You are *the one*. I lo—"

I held a hand up. "Don't say it, don't say it, don't say it," I chanted, just like I did when Sonny wouldn't give me attention. I couldn't deal with the words I knew Naz was about to say.

Because love didn't hide.

I may have never been in it before, but I knew that. Even Kirill Balabanov, the Russian mobster in New York who was obsessed with me, never hid his feelings.

He never hid me.

Yeah, he'd try to abduct me from time to time, lock me in his penthouse when he wanted me to stay put, but he never hid me from the world.

“Ava!” he roared.

I stopped chanting, and the quiet around us suddenly seemed so loud.

He ran a hand over his head, and he looked around, like he wanted to hit something or pace, but water made it hard to do. “There is nothing I can say or do to make this better—right now. All I fucking know is that I need you. I need you like a heart needs a body. Like lungs need air. I did not see you coming.” He laughed, but it wasn't funny at all. It was a sad sound. A regretful one. “Then your cloak in Venice...it made me take notice of you.”

“My cloak? Why?”

He blinked at me. “You did not notice?”

“Notice what?”

“The pattern.” He turned and showed me his back. “The crystals. They are the same as my wings.”

I traced the shape of the wings and his skin puckered.

“I didn't...” I didn't even notice.

He turned toward me. “I know you are scared. It is okay to be afraid to crash. But do not leave me. Do not say no to me. Stay with me. Let me love you, *uccellino selvatico*.” He said something in Italian, and I blinked at him.

He used his thumb to dry a droplet of saltwater from my cheek. “My words translate to: my love is not a cage. My love is the air. You can fly all you want, but you will fly back to me. If you say no to me, my air will be gone, and I will crash. If we both go down, we go down together.”

My sister never outright said it, but she thought I made bad decisions. And I had a feeling if she were here, she would tell me this was another one.

Possibly the worst mistake I would ever make because my heart had never been on the line before—just my life.

But what if this arrangement he was offering me was enough for a while longer?

What if I just stole the moments between the one we were in and the moment he made vows to another woman?

I didn't have room for regrets.

I never wanted to look back on my life and regret this moment.

What if I said no and never got over it?

Life is short, until we're forced to live with a decision we can never take back. Then the seconds tick by like you're waiting for payday to eat again.

Wasn't it best to have a few moments of happiness than a lifetime of nothing special?

I was already on a path to Edna status. Staring at a poster day in and day out, talking to it, wishing for it to speak to me so badly, I couldn't have a normal relationship.

I wouldn't commit to forever.

Only this moment.

The moments we had left before he took his vows.

I won't say no to him. I won't say anything at all.

I'll just lean in and...kiss him.

My arms wrapped around his neck, my lips pressed against his, and he growled low in his throat before he took us both under.

TWENTY-THREE

AVA

UNDERNEATH THE DEPTHS, Naz kept me pressed to his chest, our lips together. Our feet touched the bottom, and when he pushed against it, we flew upwards.

After we broke the surface, I took a breath.

A second later, my lungs were straining again, but this time it wasn't from the deep depths and holding my breath—or maybe it was, but it was the intensity of Naz's kiss, and the air he seemed to be breathing into me.

He was kissing me like a man caught up in an airstream, the current pulling him past my lips, even though his tongue caressed mine. It was like he was coaxing my heart and soul out with something both had been starving for—a gentleness layered with fierceness.

His touch was as warm and soft as the water, and he glided his fingertips up my arms, directing me to set them around his neck. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he moved us toward the steps.

Water that seemed neon blue in the darkness dripped down our bodies as he carried me inside his penthouse.

I went to look away from him, but he refused to let me.

“Eyes on me, Ava,” he said. “This is as vital as being buried deep inside of you. The connection. It will take our bodies higher than the sky.”

I whimpered against his mouth, and he kissed me, and I might as well have been underwater again. It was the same

sensation, disorienting, no control, but at the same time, it was breaking the surface after the crash and flying across the sky—free as a bird leaving its weights behind.

He stopped walking and just...looked into my eyes. “Do not be afraid of this. Do not be afraid of me. Do not be afraid of us, and what you are feeling.”

“How do you know what I’m feeling?” I whispered.

He set my hand over his heart, and it was beating as hard and as fast as mine. “I am feeling it as well—it is the moment before you carve out my heart and leave your picture in my chest to replace it. A picture no amount of time can touch.” He pressed my hand even harder against his chest. “Bravery does not always mean fighting, Ava. It also means we know when to surrender to our fate with grace.”

Surrender.

That was a word rarely used in my head dictionary.

Because it was a fucking scary one.

It meant setting my weapons down and removing my life’s well-constructed armor.

I went to kiss him, but he didn’t kiss me back.

He wanted an answer from me.

With quivering bones and a throbbing heart, I nodded and touched my forehead to his. He breathed out and pulled my lips back to his, flying me to heights I was lost in.

I wasn’t sure what room we ended up in, but the lights were turned out, and he set me down on something cold. I could make out the shape and texture by running my trembling hands along it. A plinth made of marble.

A small spark came through the darkness, and sulfur dioxide floated in the air.

Then his face was lit by a single candle flame.

It brought the room to life, though it made it seem hazy, more romantic.

Softer.

I liked that.

The silky light helped me settle into my bones, accept that this body belonged to me, and this man was going to crave it despite the skin dented underneath the armor.

Our shadows rose and fell along the wall like magic.

My hands reached a little further down, looking for something to hold on to, but all I found was a decorative, cool shape underneath my palms. Part of the stone had been chiseled to resemble a thick, twisted cord that hung around the pedestal. I wasn't sure if it was part of the main stone or carved in a separate piece and attached.

I brought my hands up some but left them dangling at my sides naturally. My hair had mostly gone to one shoulder, and it landed halfway down my arm.

Naz watched as droplets of water slid down my skin, his tongue taking the route along the shape of his lips.

My heart skipped a few beats and my breath trembled out.

He removed the wet shirt, slacks, socks, and shoes. I was so in tune to him, I could feel the cold wetness clinging to my skin as if I had just removed my saturated clothes.

Even though he hadn't touched me since he'd set me down, it felt like we were one already, his body an extension of mine.

Other things felt like an extension of mine, too, but those were too deep to even bring to the surface of my thoughts, not when the descendent of some ancient Roman warrior stood before me naked.

The candlelight fell on him like it was in love with him. It highlighted his high cheekbones, long, straight nose, and sharp eyes. The green color softened his darkness some, but not enough to give away the monster lurking beneath.

When my eyes met his, I realized he was giving me a chance to take him all in, memorize all his lines and paths, like they created a map of Nazzareno Piero Fausti.

He had been taking in my lines and paths too.

As he came to stand in front of me, his hands curled into fists, as if he was restraining himself from touching me. He looked down at me, and I was surprised I was still breathing by the time our eyes broke and he crouched down in front of me, his knees touching the marble, his ass touching his heels.

I shivered when his hands came to my feet, slowly making their way to my ankles. “Eyes on me, Ava,” he breathed out, his voice raspy.

I could barely hold them open.

At his touch, I found myself as lost as if his lips pressed against mine.

I’d never been touched like that.

Looked at like that.

It was adoration in its purist form.

A reverence filled with respect.

His mouth started at my feet and kissed its way up.

Higher and higher.

Every inch of my skin.

As he did, he whispered words in Italian, words I knew were vows.

His legs lifted him as his kiss reached my thighs, my stomach, between my breasts, over my breasts, up my chest, my neck, my throat, my chin...

When his mouth claimed mine, it was with a much harder kiss, and it sent an electrical current through my veins, down into the tips of my toes, like I was about to shoot sparks. His arm wrapped around me just before my body fell off the plinth. I wrapped my arms around his neck, he lifted me up, carrying me to the bedroom.

He set me down, lighting more candles. The room had that hazy feeling about it again. He walked over to me and gazed at my body until I was writhing against his sheets, fisting them in

my hands, my body begging for the sweet freedom only his body could give me.

“You are beautiful, *amore*,” he whispered. “And I am about to ruin you for anyone else but me.”

And after this, your soul is going to disconnect from your body whenever your wife demands it. Whenever you're with her, it'll be me you see.

Those were the thoughts inside of my head. Thoughts that brought me back to a more romantic time because he did. The castles, the riches, the beautiful scenery...the honor and the devotion.

All I said, though, was... “If I’m ruined by this love, so are you.” I called it for what it was, love, and he seemed to breathe even faster when I did.

A quick breath or two...

His body came at mine, and mine went for his, and we tangled like the cords around the plinth. But it was controlled chaos, every one of his touches precise, pressing on every one of my pleasure points, sending my body into a delicious swirl.

His tongue searched deep inside of my mouth, and just that alone made me feel like I was made of air and floating. His hands rooted me to my body, his fingers stroking my skin, and my legs parted for him.

His eyes were dilated, and they went straight to my thighs. He said something in Italian, and even though I didn’t understand the language, I knew it had something to do with how wet I was for him. His eyes became even more hooded, almost closed, and when his mouth closed over my nipple and his hand came between my legs...

I moaned so loud, he made a *mmmm* noise deep in his throat as his mouth came over mine. The kiss was hungry, and the more I moaned into his mouth, the deeper his tongue would go. His tempo was perfect against my slick center, and the pressure between my legs started to increase.

The pleasure moved over my body like a slow-rising fire.

“Yes,” I whispered, stroking his neck. “Right there. *Mmm...more.*” It seemed like he read the signals of my body, because my entire body was coiled tight, about to orgasm.

“Not yet,” he rasped out.

I whimpered when his touch stopped, but sighed when he started to kiss me again, and then I gasped when he entered me in a thrust that made me clench around him so tight, he cursed and made a sound low in his throat.

We both stilled, the pleasure indescribable.

He was thick and long and...he was stretching me, filling me up until it felt like I couldn't breathe. He raised my leg and moved, pushing into me even deeper. I closed my eyes and let out a long, deep, pleasurable sound. It was met by a low growl in his throat.

The physical side of this was on another level, but the deeper connection...was unlike anything I'd ever experienced in my life.

I knew I'd never experience it again with anyone but him.

He started to push into me even harder, but his strokes were slow. His whispered words in Italian only pushed me closer and closer to the edge.

It was sweet madness.

When I couldn't stop what I desperately needed, release from these chains, I let go and came around him with a cry. He started to pump into me faster, and when he tilted his head back and groaned deep in his throat, so deep, I could see the vibration of it, he came inside of me.

That wasn't sex.

That was making love.

I'd finally understood the idiom...*killing me softly.*

Naz had come in like a tiptoeing thief in the night, and once inside, made his permanent mark. A soft claim that was as hard as the strongest fuck.

He did what I always thought was impossible.

Claimed me down to the bone.

For a second, we just breathed each other in, until he pulled out, pulling me close, his arms around my body like iron bars.

But they didn't feel like a cage to me.

They felt like a protective home.

I wasn't sure how long I slept for, but when I woke up, I was still wrapped in Nazzareno's arms. I'd decided that I liked to call him by his full name rather than a shortened version.

It didn't fit him.

Even if he wasn't over six feet tall, he'd never be the shortened version of anything.

I turned my head a fraction and peeked at him. He was asleep. And not only did he have me wrapped in his arms, but his entire body seemed to shield me.

It felt good to feel so...safe. Safer than I'd felt in years, even if I hadn't noticed how unsteady my feet had felt in the world from carrying so much armor.

I'd become numb to it, just like the pain.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

I wasn't sure how I felt about any of this.

I had a long and perilous road ahead of me.

My journey to find the Fausti family wasn't for the faint of heart, and I knew that from the beginning, but my heart wasn't weak.

It was just jealous.

When I thought about...what was her name? *Elettra* and Nazzareno together, it was like I was in hell, watching her body and Naz's tangled in the sheets. It would play like some

horror flick that went straight to DVD. In this case, though, it was played to torment the jealous.

I'd save that for later.

I'd face it when the time came.

Yeah.

When it was time to say goodbye.

I hadn't given him my word on that. I hadn't said yes or no to him. I hadn't said anything, and I was proud of myself for not caving into the only man I'd probably ever love.

The only thing I'd silently vowed to him was surrender for the moment.

My head made the screech noise from a record when it's turned in the opposite direction.

Love.

There's a word.

It wasn't as scary as I thought it would be, thinking about it as I was wrapped in a ruthless knight's armor, who only had a soft, romantic spot for me. But love was not one-dimensional, and I had a feeling it was going to show all its sides as this love affair carried on.

Because I knew one thing for certain.

Love never leaves, no matter how much we want it to. It's not like people, who leave whenever they want. Unfortunately, like kids who hadn't asked to be brought into this world, it gets left behind, clinging to whoever still cares enough.

I ran my hands over Naz's smooth, sculpted arms. He was so warm, I didn't know if I could stand to be this close in the summer.

If we lasted until summer.

The winter months would have to preserve the time and love between us.

There was that word again.

It came so naturally.

So did thinking about all my problems without having a plan for each one, which was not the norm for me. I was a woman who was mostly alone in a concrete jungle, dealing with men who felt more comfortable meeting at night. Edna had taught me to try and see ten steps ahead of them.

Number one on my list of problems, and my only problem, besides the arranged marriage thing:

We didn't use protection.

I know. I know. No need to lecture me, brain.

I'd had a pregnancy scare before, right after my first time. But it wasn't a true pregnancy scare. I'd found out protection was not one hundred percent safe and had a slight freak out. I could have sworn I was pregnant, even though nothing had happened to give me the scare.

I'd stolen pregnancy tests for a month after. (I can't remember exactly how old I was, but I was young enough to still depend on Sonny for money, even when I didn't rely on him for anything else.) When my period came, I took one more because I'd read an article about a woman with a hormonal imbalance that spotted for three months into her pregnancy. She thought she had her period.

I was pretty sure it was going to be okay, though, according to my fertility calendar.

With all the wrinkles worked out of my head...my bladder started screaming at me. I tried to ease myself out of the hold Nazzareno had on me, but I couldn't. He held me tighter, and I started wheezing, laughing some. He was doing it on purpose.

"I have to go, Nazzareno!"

"Is that what you call me, *Signorina* Girardi?"

"That's what I'm calling you now."

"Try again."

I sighed. I really had to go. "*Capitano.*"

"*Molto bene.*" He planted big smooches all over my face. Not meaning to, he stuck his finger in my side, and I wiggled

like a worm, trying to get away from him, while laughing like a loon.

“I really have to go pee!”

“It seems I have found a spot, ah?” He bit at my neck, but he let me go. He hissed out a breath when I gave him my naked backside. “That *culo* is mine when you come back to bed.”

I stopped and looked at him over my shoulder. I was sore—inside and out. He hadn’t been too rough with my body, but he was just a physically strong man. My insides, though? Those were the most tender. They were healing in places and tearing to shreds in others.

He made a *come here* motion with his pointer finger, and I laughed, running to the bathroom.

After I did my business and washed my hands, I checked my reflection in the mirror. I was a hot mess, but somehow... my skin glowed, like I’d swallowed the candle Nazzareno had lit earlier.

When I walked out of the bathroom, I stopped in my tracks.

He waved a rose contraption at me. His cock was already hard, standing out like a sword about to be used for battle.

“Do you always travel with this?” He hit the button and it vibrated.

I went to snatch it from him, but he held it above my head. He brought it closer to me, and I hesitated, acting like I was going to let him have it. Then I jumped and tried to snatch it again.

He was too fast.

He turned from me and put the rose to his nose and inhaled. “Use this often on yourself?”

Oh, fuck me. I was never embarrassed by my lady toys before, but seeing him sniffing it like that...the flame from the candle caught fire inside of me, and the *whooshing* heat felt like it rushed to my cheeks.

Nazzareno started laughing. It was husky. “You are deep in thought about this...what is this called?”

“The Rose 5000. Best on the market.” I sighed. “A woman has to do what a woman has to do to get hers. I was traveling alone in foreign countries with a man who goes by the name of ON *on* my ass. I wasn’t taking any chances with anyone, and I have needs.” I planted my hands on my hips.

“You do.” And just like that...his face turned to stone, and his mood changed. “Do you like using this toy, my little birdie?”

He took a step closer to me. I took a step back, my hands already reaching out behind me to feel before a wall came at my back.

“It felt pretty good.” I shrugged.

He took a step forward.

I took a step back.

He floated the rose underneath my nose, like he wanted me to smell it. “Smells like you. Smells like *my* woman.”

I sighed. The possessive tone to his voice did things to me. I had never liked it before, but when he did it...*yes*. It fucking turned me on.

My back hit the wall, and he crowded me in. He set his arm next to my head, and the scent of his cologne wafted in the air. I breathed it in, but it wasn’t doing me any favors. It was making me feel wobblier.

His proximity was reminding me that my thighs were sore, and so was my coochie. Suddenly, my skin felt cold and hot at the same time. All this because my bones had memorized the feel of him moving inside of me, but my flesh was hungry for it.

His finger curled and he slid his knuckle down my shoulder, around my breast, until he started to caress my nipple.

Up and down.

Up and down.

Just the tip.

My eyes closed and I breathed out. They flew open when he twisted the stiff peak, and they met his in an ecstasy-filled stare. “Tell me, my little birdie,” he said in a grated whisper as his curled finger moved even lower, “does my *cucchia*, my sweet berry, prefer the feel of a toy or your man.”

When he’d said my *cucchia*, his sweet berry, he’d made it to my coochie. His bent finger straightened, and he started to caress me between the legs. He slid it deep inside of me, dragging it up, sliding it back inside.

I gripped his shoulders, my body moving in to his, convulsing at the sheer pleasure flooding my veins.

His mouth came to my ear, and his breath was warm and soft when he said, “What did I tell you about the difference between boys and men, ah? Men do not need toys; those are for boys. I have erased every memory, every future thought, of any other man. I will do the same to this fucking toy.” He snapped his teeth close to my ear on the word *toy*.

My body convulsed again, this time harder, and his low laughter as he pulled away was dark. I blinked up at him, and his laughter matched his eyes.

They were dilated, pushing all the green out, making him seem as dangerous as his laughter.

Oh shit.

I placed my hand against his heart, and instead of the beat of a tender lover, it was the beat of a bloodthirsty lion about to give chase.

I’d read once that a lion could clear a football field in six seconds when on the hunt. I pushed against my lion’s chest and took off, hoping for a ten-second start.

He caught me around the waist with an arm before I could even get out of the room.

“Nazzareno,” I breathed, my nails sinking into his arm.

His nose nuzzled my neck, and he bit at it. “You cannot escape me, my little birdie. No matter how high you fly. We both know the beast inside of me was created with wings to catch you. I will always bring you back to me.”

As he carried me over to the bed, my nails sunk deeper into his arms, but it was only turning him on. His animal-sized cock was pressing into my ass, and I moaned.

“So fucking responsive to me,” he said, and I could tell it pleased him.

He set me down on the bed and ordered me on my knees. He knelt behind me, and turning my face toward his, plunged his tongue deep into my mouth. His left arm snaked around my chest, his fingers barely brushing my nipple.

When I started pushing against him, wanting him inside of me, *wherever*, willing to beg for it, plead for it, he placed the rose between my legs and turned it on. It made a sucking motion, and I was already starting to buck into it while he was devouring the moans from my mouth.

Later, I’d realize just how fucking skilled he was. What he was doing to my nipple, the soft brush, while the rose sucked against my center...he was an assassin in the bedroom. But in the moment, my body was being flooded by sensations, wiping clean any thoughts except...*more, so fucking good, more please.*

Our tongues lingered as I broke the kiss. He licked me from the corner of my lip to my ear, swirling his tongue over the shape of it, before he whispered, “Does my woman like this *toy*,” there was that snap again, “sucking on *my cucchia?*”

“Yes,” I rasped out.

I made a garbled noise when he entered me from behind in a thrust so hard, he had to keep me in place with his arm around my chest.

“AH!” I screamed out. He hit my uterus. Maybe rearranged it. It was burning like a bitch, but the burning seemed to melt straight into the insane pleasure, heightening my body’s reaction.

A numb body suddenly starting to feel everything.

He took me by the hair, twisting it around his fist, while keeping the rose pressed close, so close, it felt like my *cucchia* was overflowing with blood too fast. A pulse throbbed from the front and within, and they were about to clash and combust.

He started to fuck me like an animal.

The grunts. The growls. The...intensity. I could feel every stroke of him gliding against my sensitive walls, and with the sucking...it was...

“Fuck!” I screamed. It was too much. He was too big. Too thick. And he was applying an insane amount of pressure from the outside *and* the inside...I was about to explode. I didn’t know if my heart could take it. I never thought I’d cry surrender, but he was...more than enough. “Just you,” I barely got out.

He pulled my hair harder, leaning us back, his cock going so deep inside of me, not even my heart could hide. “Tell me again.”

“Just.” I breathed in and out. “You.”

“Just me.”

“Just you!” I screamed. “Just you, *Capitano!* The toy can fuck off!”

He flung the rose so hard across the room, I heard something break. But nothing had abated. My sensitive nub was still pulsating, but it was just sensitive instead of burning, tingling like a bell that had been hit by a truck.

One touch, and it was going to send me flying, while his cock did, too.

Still using my hair to guide me, he started to move slower, easing me into the rhythm again. I clawed his thighs as he started to pump harder.

“My beautiful Ava.” His voice was hoarse and almost in awe. “You bring out what every man craves from his

woman...the beast inside of his chest.” He growled low in his throat.

Our bodies started to slap, his humongous balls hitting me from behind, and...his hand snaked around front, and all three combined...

I screamed out when it felt like ten orgasms hit me seconds apart. My entire body convulsed as he spilled himself inside of me, grunting as he did.

I was afraid to move, to even breathe, because my entire body felt like a nerve about to go off again. I wasn't sure if I could take it. My heart was in my throat, and my lungs burned. Sweat dripped off my body like I'd just gotten out of the pool. My middle toe felt stiff, like I was about to get a cramp in it.

Nazzareno breathed something Italian in my ear. Reminding me to breathe probably. It burned to take a breath, though.

He'd sprinted after me on the football field, and I was forced to run.

He caught me anyway.

We were wrapped around each other for a few seconds before he pulled me down to the bed with him. He kissed my shoulder, pulling me even closer, causing me to gasp.

“Take a breath,” he whispered. He set his hand over my chest and pressed me harder into his body. “In. Out. That is it.”

It seemed like our bodies synched together, and my breathing pattern started to mimic his, along with our heartbeats.

It was even more intense than what we had just done.

My eyes drifted close for a second, but when he moved away from me, they opened. He walked naked to where he had flung the rose. His ass was perfect. Tight and muscular. His balls were huge and round.

He turned around to face me, and...he was hard again.

He held out the rose for me to take when he came to stand next to the bed. I took it from him and flung it.

“No,” was all I said. He had ruined it for me.

Nothing compared to him. Everything else seemed to... hurt.

I was going to have hell to pay when it was time to leave him.

He threw back his head and laughter barreled out of him. He slipped into bed next to me, pulling me close again, kissing my neck. “Ah.” He breathed against my skin. “*Carino così.*” He kissed me even harder. “*Carino così.*” He planted one on my cheek. “Get some sleep, my cute little bird.”

“Why?” I yawned. “Do we have to be somewhere?”

“*Sì.*”

“Early?”

He laughed, this time it was breathy and rough. “*Sì.* My father values punctuality.”

I lifted so fast, we almost butted heads. I pulled the covers above my breasts for some reason. “You’re taking me with you to the hospital?”

“*Sì.*” He placed his pointer finger in the middle of my forehead and slowly pushed me back down to the pillow. He coaxed the blanket from my strangling fingers. “Aristide will meet us there. You will wait with him until my meeting is over.”

He kissed each of my nipples, then swirled his tongue around each one, before he started to suck. My uterus contracted, and I sighed out a breath.

He spoke in soft Italian before he released me from his hold. “Sleep now. Dawn is not far off.”

I closed my eyes, but sleep was as distant as the night.

TWENTY-FOUR

AVA

AS TIME usually does when something unpleasant is looming, it flew.

One minute I was wrapped in Naz's arms.

A minute after he was inside of me again.

A minute after that it was time to get dressed.

Then we were on the road, headed to the hospital for him to have a meeting with his father.

The longest parts of the night were the times we spent locked into each other. Those moments passed by in a slow, romantic haze, but the others...a fast-moving blur.

He took my hand over the console and brought it to his lips, kissing every finger. "You are nervous."

"No," I breathed. "Just...a little anxious. The last time I saw your father, he was walking into the event in Venice."

"You were not nervous then."

"No."

"Why now?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Hospitals make me nervous—I always feel like if I go in, I might never come out. Not ready for that day yet. And...even though I know this is how things are done in your family, I hated to see it come to what it did between your dad and Luca. Even though Ed predicted this."

His eyes snapped to mine.

“Ed as in *Edna*. You probably know this already, but she owns Vice City and has always been a mentor to me. She’s been in love with your grandfather since she was young. No other way to put it. She’s infatuated with him.”

He dark eyebrows drew down. “You mean obsessed.”

“Yeah, and that’s a lame term for it. She has never gotten over him.”

“The only woman my grandfather loved, romantically, was my grandmother. You could say he was obsessed with her, and she the same with him.”

“Grazia Angeli, your grandmother, was a beautiful woman.”

Grazia had been a young actress in Italy at the time she met Marzio. She was also an heiress to a luxury Italian race car brand. Her film career was just getting started. After she met Marzio, she gave it up to marry him and have a family.

“Sì. She was also intelligent, talented, and sharp—when it came to family business. My grandmother was just as protective over my grandfather as he was over her.”

Was that a dig at me? He thought I wouldn’t protect his secrets?

That was fair, but...we’d shared so much. I couldn’t see how he could trust me in a relationship, no matter what the label of it was, and not with his secrets. Maybe he’d keep family business to a different side of him, but sooner or later, he would have to trust someone.

Maybe he thought Elettra, being his wife, would be more trustworthy. But we were pitted against each other, and in my view, both of us had the capability, and ammo, to try and wound him through his family.

“I know talk is cheap.” I looked down at my hands. “But... all these secrets I’ve witnessed behind the gates are safe with me. Even though I find information on criminal families and report on it, I also keep their secrets. And if you’ve ever read my articles about your family, I’ve never held back about the

things I know, but I've also never tried to purposely darken who they are.

“This might be hard to believe, but I respect your family and your history. Even before I met you, I dreamed of them being *my* family. Maybe my intention in the beginning was to get more of a bird's eye view from behind the gates, but... intentions can change, just like feelings.”

I wasn't sure why I let all that flow. I'd never felt the need to defend or prove myself to anyone, but it felt right to do both with Nazzareno. Maybe because I truly trusted him.

He glanced at me, and all I could see was my reflection in his aviator's. Our eyes held, even if I couldn't see the look behind the glasses, and then he snapped his attention back to the road.

“When you look at me that way, I feel the empty spot in my chest.”

Same, I wanted to say, but only held his hand tighter.

We were so close to the hospital, and even though I would be waiting with Aristide, I still felt involved to a certain degree. Luca had ordered Nazzareno to watch me, and I was sure Luca ordering Lothario's son to do anything, especially after what had happened, wasn't going to go over well with Lothario.

If it were me, and my sister cut my legs off for a position in our family...I would expect my kids to avenge me or something. But Edna and I would have long, deep, rambling conversations about this family in her office at night over takeout and too many drinks. We'd offer ideas and take notes on the things we knew versus the things we felt about the dynamics of the family. One thread would lead into a labyrinth, and I loved being lost inside of it with history as my compass and my intuition as the flashlight.

I knew, with almost entire certainty, that if Nazzareno or any of his brothers tried to avenge what had happened to Lothario, it would only lead to more war among the family.

Nazzareno never confided in me how he felt about all this, but he was almost...indifferent about it, which told me a lot. He probably didn't want his father to challenge Luca in the first place. Maybe he felt the position had always been rightfully Luca's and his father should have bowed out gracefully, even being thankful for the short time he ruled.

“Bravery does not always mean fighting, Ava. It also means we know when to surrender to our fate with grace.”

I was never down to surrender to my fate with grace. I'd always challenged it, believing I wrote my own fate, since the choice was mine, whichever road I went down, good or bad. Those two sentences told me a lot about who Nazzareno Fausti was, and how he survived this family.

The only thing Edna and I had always agreed on...it was a tightrope to walk if what we believed was true about all the ruthless rules. Then add romance into the mix...and the world had itself an ancient family who had found a way to preserve its core in modern day.

Sort of like finding a prehistoric dragonfly in a chunk of age-old amber. All their unwritten laws were engraved in its shell in the same color. The center was gooey, and warm, and would ooze out if cracked...the romance. It was still alive inside of this ruthless shell. It was protected it at all costs.

Leandro, though, seemed to be all shell, no soft center to give him balance.

I would never tell Nazzareno this, because it just seemed like comparing siblings, and that wasn't fair to him, but Luca's faction, his sons, always seemed to excel at that—balancing the two.

Just like Luca.

Just like Marzio.

Just like Nazzareno.

As I got to know him, I liked to think he got a lot of that balance from Marzio. Just like the color of his eyes. I wasn't sure if Leandro was more like Lothario or not, because I didn't know them personally, but...if Lothario was more like his last-

born son, I worried about what Nazzareno might have to do someday to keep him in check.

His vengeful face at the prison was hard to forget. He wasn't as memorable as the man with dead eyes who went for my throat, but he'd made an impression.

Aristide seemed more like Nazzareno, though I never talked to him much. It seemed like he was purposely avoiding me. But Nazzareno seemed to trust him more since I'd properly met him.

Nazzareno swiftly pulled into a spot at the hospital. He braked without sending my head forward, even though he had been going fast. He looked me over once more in a heated way. The same way he'd been looking at me all morning.

He stepped out to open my door.

I looked myself over once more.

Even though I wasn't going to be directly involved in the meeting, I'd dressed for my audience. The Fausti *famiglia* presented themselves in a certain light. I refused to look like a pauper among the royal court, even if I was only a meddling reporter in their eyes. And as I'd found in France and Italy in general, even exhausted new moms still made a statement with their styles.

I'd bought the dress I decided to wear in Paris. It was a long sleeve, off the shoulder midi dress that fell right below my knees. I paired it with black slingback pumps. The weather had grown crisper, not truly cold yet, but my black coat with faux fur trim felt nice wrapped around my body—another layer. I'd done my hair in soft curls and added tasteful jewelry. Fake, but tasteful: a knockoff watch, cubic zirconia studs, and a gold vermeil dome ring I'd brought from a New York street vendor.

Nazzareno held his hand out to me, and I smoothed my clothes down once I'd stepped out. Being with him always felt like such an event. He turned heads wherever he went. Even in Italy, he was a crowd-stopping statue among gorgeous statues. And he commanded the room. I'd never felt a man's presence

like his before. It felt strong enough to stop rush hour traffic with just a hand lift.

He was all Fausti.

He dressed like one too. Expensive everything. Suit, long jacket, shoes. The air even clung to his cologne, and it seemed to melt and drift.

He turned to me and lifted his glasses. The sun was out and hit his green eyes as he looked down at me. “You do not belong in the Fausti *famiglia*.” He pulled me close when I looked away. He took my chin in his hand and refused to let me look away from him. “You are too good for them. Even me.” His voice was rough, but tender. He kissed me the same way.

As he led me into the hospital, I was somewhat dazed. His soft always felt like the hardest touch I’d ever felt, but at the same time, it was that warm, gooey center from the amber that made the blood in my veins tingle.

At the entrance, he stopped and bought a red rose from a vendor. He drifted it underneath my nose, and a mischievous grin came to his face. I met it with a smile, and we both laughed some.

Nazzareno checked the time on his watch.

“Are we late?” I held the rose a little tighter, and felt the thorn pierce my skin. A droplet of blood blossomed, as red as the petals.

“No. Early.” Nazzareno took my hand and put my finger to his mouth to stop the bleeding as we moved further into the building.

We both stopped short when we saw Aristide standing with two women. I recognized Belaflore from her pictures with Lothario and from the event in Venice. A stunning woman stood next to her, and both of their eyes took me in before they hardened.

I yanked my finger from Nazzareno’s mouth, about to put it to my side, but he snatched it and held it close. I could tell

the two women had caught him somewhat off guard. Maybe he thought they would be waiting with Lothario.

“Nazzareno,” his mom said, but it was almost a snap. She gave him her cheek and he kissed it before he kissed the other.

Instead of him going to the other woman, she went to him, kissing his cheek.

“Ava,” he said. “This is my mamma, Belaflore, and this is Elettra Buratti. Mamma, Elettra, this is Ava Girardi.”

Belaflore’s eyes took me in from head to toe, like she was judging every piece of me, and once done, found me not to her standards. Rich people by birth can always sniff out people who are trying to look rich. And it had been my experience, they let them know they’d been found out just by the looks on their faces. In Belaflore’s case, it was her pinched expression. Then her eyes widened some.

“I remember you,” Belaflore said. “You were at the event. Part of the press.”

“The press?” Elettra’s face twisted, and she looked up at Nazzareno. “Is this a joke?”

“Yes,” Belaflore answered for him. Her eyes stilled on the blood on my hand before they moved to Nazzareno’s lips. “A joke told through his uncle’s orders.”

Judging by Elettra’s eyes, how fast they calculated Belaflore’s words, she was a wise woman, and by her clothes and just overall demeanor, she had always been wealthy. An heiress of some kind, probably like Grazia Angeli.

I took a step away from Nazzareno, but he put his hand on my back, and smoothly moved me next to him.

“I do not want to be late for the meeting with father. Aristide.” He looked at his brother and then quickly glanced at me, but he said nothing else, even though something passed between them.

“Before the meeting, your father wants to see you and Elettra together.” Belaflore beamed at this. “We need this, son.”

I hoped she was going to follow up with...*We need this to make our family better. To bring light to a dark time. To help heal the wounds.* And even though I didn't expect it, it didn't surprise me when she started with, "It might be a chance to prove to the family—" Her words died in her throat when she looked at me.

She was going to bring up family business but couldn't. I wasn't a part of this family. But it gave me a glimpse into this faction of it. Not only had Lothario been ready to battle to the death for his position, and almost had, but I got the feeling his wife had encouraged it.

What kind of woman thinks of business before her husband's life?

The kind in the Fausti family who are equally as power hungry as the men.

I admired a woman who was just as career motivated as a man, if that's what she wanted, but I'd always admired the Scarlett Faustis of this world too. She'd never taken a backseat to her husband, but she seemed to maneuver through this world with grace somehow.

I liked the contrast between Scarlett and Brando. She was the lace to his leather.

Belaflore and Lothario together just seemed...ruthless to me, the romance lacking.

Belaflore said something to Aristide in Italian, and he looked at Nazzareno. Nazzareno nodded and whispered in my ear, "Stay close to my brother," before he started to move with the two women toward wherever Lothario was.

I watched as Elettra took her place next to him, a power couple in this world, and as Belaflore talked nonstop, Elettra wrapped her arm around his. Just before they disappeared out of sight, she turned to me some, and our eyes met.

It was a look, as a woman, I understood right away.

You might be the mistress, but I'm the wife.

You'll be considered trash, while I'll be the prize.

It wasn't smug, but it was definite.

And she was right.

She knew her place.

I would know mine.

I released a breath that hurt to let go.

“Have you ever considered speaking to *Zio* Luca's wife, Margherita Granchio?”

It took me a minute to remember Aristide was there. For the first time since I connected with Nazzareno, I felt totally alone in the world.

“Why?” I breathed out.

He stared at me for a second, then shook his head, like he had decided something. After his next words, I knew what it was. He wasn't going to touch that question.

“For what it is worth,” he said, “Nazzareno did not know Mamma and Elettra would be here. They were supposed to be having breakfast while he had the meeting with father.”

I nodded.

“We will wait for Nazzareno down the street.” Aristide touched my back briefly and we started to walk toward the exit when Belaflore called his name.

We stopped and waited for her. She was rushing toward us. Breathless by the time she made it. She snatched my wrist and I tried to snatch it back, but her grip was like burning iron shackling me. Aristide said something to her in rushed Italian, but she silenced him with a look.

Like the iron had come back to burn her, she flung my hand down. I resisted the urge to rub my wrists, but I refused to do it in front of her.

“You are like the other ones,” she spit at me. “Hypnotizing these men and making them fall at your feet with your witchcraft. Not my son! He will not take a whore and then marry her. I refuse to allow it! Even if I must kill you myself!”

“Mamma.” Aristide’s voice was strong, but still pleading somehow.

Everything that was so romantic before had turned ruthless, and words were failing me. Usually, I had no problem with them, especially when I felt backed into a corner, but this woman...she was the very definition of Lothario Fausti’s wife.

If I challenged her back, it would only make things worse...for me. I didn’t have a right to. I had no pedestal to sit on, not like the one Nazzareno had set me on. Because he would be the only one seeing me that way. The entire family was going to see me as another mistress.

Aristide’s comment about Margherita Granchio came together with what his mom had said...

He will not take a whore and then marry her.

That was what Luca Fausti had done, but only after his father had been killed. Because Marzio had probably arranged Luca’s marriage.

As quickly as Belaflore had charged toward us, she turned and disappeared.

“That’s why you wanted me to talk to Margherita Granchio,” I whispered to Aristide. “You think she can...talk to me.”

I didn’t want to use the word “help,” but that was almost what it felt like he was offering me.

He shrugged. “Let us go.”

As he was leading me out, my eye’s connected with Leandro Fausti’s. He was leaning against the wall, a hand in his pocket, and as we passed him, he snapped his teeth at me, a slow grin coming to his face probably at the look on mine.

TWENTY-FIVE

NAZZARENO

THE DEEPER SHE went in my world, the more I felt like I was losing the woman who flew into the darkness of Venice to find me.

She claimed she loved my family, wanted to be a part of it, but I had come to realize love and hate could both exist at the same time, in the same space, each taking a side.

It was the same for ruthless and romance—same principles, different names.

No matter what names they went by, Ava was learning sometimes there was no separation of the two. There was no bringing them together in harmony.

I had not meant for her to ever come face to face with Elettra Buratti, or even my mamma. I had not given titles while introducing them, but I could feel the tension while the two women fell into roles.

After embracing my father, I took a seat across from him in a plush chair, an emotion I could not describe other than *scalding* frothing in my heart for him.

He had the power to stop this thing between Elettra Buratti and I, but he wouldn't. Not even on his deathbed. And by the looks of him, he had been close. He had the yellowish hue of someone who had been knocking on death's door but had been turned away. His eyes were lowered, as if he did not have the energy to lift them. I could see the outline of his legs through the covers. Long legs like mine that had been severed in close to half.

He cleared his throat, and my eyes met his.

Elettra was talking for two people, stuffing the conversation with wedding details, and he would nod occasionally or make a sound of consent, but his hard stare was on me.

Perhaps because I had never challenged him before.

He might have been bedridden, but there was nothing wrong with his perception.

He read my body language as well as I was reading his.

He knew a war was brewing in my soul, and he was not sure if he could stop it.

However, I had to reign myself in.

Ava knew of my family through immersing herself in it through history books and even social media. Yes, we could walk back in time through pages and words, but unless our feet are on the ground and our eyes open in that time, pieces go missing. Especially when my family hid a lot of who they are—our rules and how the penalties for breaking them could vary depending on the alleged crimes.

We did not have a court system like most countries.

We were mostly tried by our fathers in our kingdom.

I was guilty in my father's eyes.

My mamma had influence over this ruling as well.

Whoever had made the king seem more powerful had been mistaken. The queen always won, and she never had to take a step on the battlefield to do it. But it was my mamma's place in his life to do so, to give him an ear to listen and her eyes to see things he might have missed, but she was as hungry for power as my father.

She, too, was seeing Ava as a threat to the arrangement between our family and the Burattis.

If my parents came together on this, Ava might find herself in the middle of a battle. A fragile bird caught between warring lions.

That was why I had to pull back some, not make any sudden movements or become clouded by anger. I allowed my father to feel some of it, but I would take my time planning my next steps. He lost his legs, yes, but he gained Leandro's. My brother would lead for him, and he would go straight to Ava to get to me.

Aristide had texted me and told me Leandro had been waiting at the exit of the hospital, and how he had snapped his teeth at her, then grinned.

A knock came at the door. My father gave permission to open it.

Leandro strode in and went to my father's side, embracing him, before he tried to do the same to me. My father immediately dismissed Elettra, and she stared between me and my brother for a second before telling my father goodbye and leaving.

Leandro sighed, about to open his mouth, but my father ordered him to take a seat.

Another knock came at the door, and my father told whoever it was to enter. Aristide walked in and our eyes met.

"Where is she?" I asked in Italian. He was not supposed to be at this meeting. He was supposed to be with Ava.

He looked between our father and me. "Beniamino."

I could feel my father's stare on my face. He dared me to look at him.

I did.

"You are not in control of this family." He pointed to his chest. "I am. Now let us start this meeting."

Leandro came in hot. He stood, pacing the room, discussing all that had happened since the switch of power. He was throwing serious accusations around about *Zio* Luca, and after, they started to discuss what had happened on the "Bridge of Fists."

Valerio had already spoke to Aristide and me about it the night we went to Galileo's Club ROME. I believed Valerio's

accounts more than I did Leandro's. He had a habit of taking the truth and making it seem much more appealing to my father—whether it was in my father's best light or not.

If not, Leandro knew it would anger him. Mamma did the same.

It was not even bending the truth but having a talent of being able to strengthen it by their words.

My father's eyes lit up when Leandro said that *Zio Luca* had been wounded, but it went out some when he found out he was still alive.

He sighed. "My brother has his fist around this family's neck."

"Fists can be broken!" Leandro shouted.

"Calm down, son," my father said in Italian. "Now is not the time to exhaust yourself with anger. We are at a crossroads. We cannot just rush down one without planning." He looked down at himself and sighed again, and I thought I heard him say, "least of all me." "We must take into consideration the family's support. I am assuming after what happened to me, most of them are in support of Luca."

Leandro stopped in front of my father's bed and hung his head. "*Sì, Padre.*"

Even though my father did not move, it seemed like he sat back in bed and allowed it to almost swallow him whole. His eyes went distant for a second before they came back to us.

"We should—" Leandro started.

My father held a hand up.

"Fight the entire family," I suggested in Italian.

My father's eyes snapped to mine. Aristide narrowed his eyes at me in a way that clearly said *silence is worth your peace, no matter how much it costs*, and Leandro did a slow turn toward me, his eyes full of hate and anger. He always was a hotheaded bull, even as a kid.

Leandro held a hand towards me. “You think this is a joke! You are making a mockery of our family, our ways. You are over there pouting like a baby!” He drew his hands into fists and rubbed them against his eyes, making *waaa waa waa* sounds, like I was crying. When he pulled them down, they were still balled into fists.

“You have never taken your role as first born seriously. Neither has he.” He raised a fist toward Aristide. “This is because he follows a fool! You sit there and add nothing of worth to this conversation. All because you are hooked on one woman. What are you pouting for? You are getting two for one. A gorgeous wife and a—”

I flew out of the seat and grabbed him by the collar, crashing his back against the window. We hit a vase on a table. It cracked, and releasing one hand, I snatched a sharp-edged piece and held it to his throat.

“One more time,” I seethed in his face in Italian. “Disrespect her once more and you will challenge me.” I touched the glass to his chin, ready to spill lifeblood.

I would never fight Leandro. I would just kill him. As young men, we would sword fight, and I knew what a vicious opponent he was.

A few seconds ticked by, and since he didn’t move, I took it as his surrender.

He might have been merciless with a sword, but I was fast and smart. Those qualities bested impulsive any day.

“Meeting over,” my father said, his voice sharp and full of command.

I dropped the glass and backed up, fixing my suit. When I turned, I had an audience. Mamma and Elettra stood close to the door. Aristide’s eyes were hard on the wall. My father’s were hard on me.

He shook his head, and as I left, he said, “My son is the same as my father.” He sighed long and hard. “Such a waste.”

TWENTY-SIX

NAZZARENO

I AM SEVEN YEARS OLD, and my name is Nazzareno Piero Fausti. My father is Lothario Leone Fausti, and his father is Marzio Piero Fausti.

Today, I pick up a sword and learn how to use it.

This is my blood right.

My grandfather will be teaching me my first lesson.

I have heard things about my Nonno. Things such as... what a skilled opponent he is. How strong he is. How fast. How smart.

I want to be all these things.

The room my father left me in to wait is dim. It is inside the old barn at one of Nonno's many properties. A farmhouse on the outskirts of Orvieto. He has a much grander villa there, but he chose this as the place of my first lesson.

My father says it is because Nonno believes money and power do not make the man. Character is grown from the seed being planted in the soil. We must get our hands dirty and fight to put roots down. Blood, sweat, tears, all must be sacrificed for the fight. Then, as we continue to grow, one day we will bear the fruit of our ancestors—he says this fruit is olives from the ancient olive tree.

This fight makes us humble, but it also teaches us what it means to be a man in our family.

I have the second of the third on the list checked—sweat.

It is summertime, and the inside of the barn feels as if it's swelling with heat. Cool sweat drips down my face, and I imagine it making salty tracks along my cheeks. I lift my hand and wipe my brow, so the salt does not keep burning my eyes.

The door opens and sun oozes along the floor as my grandfather steps through it. My grandfather is a tall man with wide shoulders. My father and uncles all resemble him. I am told I resemble him too.

I see it, especially in the eyes. We share the same color. Nonno calls them olive-color, but my cousin, Rocco, says they are mossy. Whatever that means.

Nonno carries two swords with him. One is longer than the other, but both are about the same width. The handles are the same as well. A cross with the side profile of a lion. The difference is in the color of the two lions' eyes. The bigger sword has gems for Nonno's birthday. The other one has mine.

He is wearing boots, and I watch and listen as the hay crushes beneath them as he makes his way toward me. I stand taller, lifting my chin, ready to greet him respectfully.

"Nazzareno." His voice is deep and rough.

"Nonno, sì."

He touches my head, like padre at church does in benediction. He speaks to me in Italian. It is all he mostly speaks. "Tell me, grandson, are you ready for your lesson today."

"Sì!"

"Ah." He grins, patting my head. "Very good."

He hands me the smaller sword, and I did not expect it to be so heavy. It weighs me down for a second before I adjust to its weight. I lift it up and turn it in the light. A spark of silver hits me in the eyes and I blink, running my hand along the blade.

I suck in a breath when it cuts me, blood welling up instantly, staining the blade. It burns like hot fire, especially when the salt from my skin gets into it. I look up at my

grandfather, worried I did something wrong. He did not tell me to touch it.

He grabs my hand, lifting it up to the light. The blood runs down my arm, dripping onto the hay. He says something about a stitch or two, but then puts my hand close to my face.

“Allow this blood to dry on your blade in honor of what it has taught you—a lesson you will never forget, ah? Will you touch it again in the same careless manner, Nazzareno?”

“Nonno, no.”

He nods. “The words of a smart man who has learned his lesson. Smart men will avoid getting cut twice by the same blade, unless it involves a woman. If it involves a woman, rarely are men smart anyway.” He drops my hand and chucks my chin. “I will also be teaching you a lesson you will never forget today. How to handle this sword.”

He walks around me, eyeing me with focus.

“If I handed this weapon to you and did not give you instructions on how to use it, how would you hold it?”

Careful not to touch the blade again, I position my hands where they feel most comfortable. Lifting the weight, I swing it out. It comes down with a clank on the ground that almost sends me over.

Nonno stares at me for a moment before he nods. “We have work to do, but first, I am going to tell you what my father told me, his father told him, and so on. I also told my sons. Your father will reiterate these wise words of our ancestors to you as well. Do not forget them, Nazzareno.” He takes my bloody hand and presses it against my chest.

It stings, but I do not dare to move or make a sound. I allow the beat of my heart to speak to the cut and stop the bleeding.

“This is an age-old tradition our family decided to keep. It rarely lives in these times, but in us, it will live here.” He presses my hand against my chest more forcefully. “While boys are out using toys and acting like boys, we are men. We challenge other men who question our honor, who challenge

our beliefs and disrespect our women. Who try to steal their hearts away from ours. This sword in your hands, and knowing how to use it, separates the men from the boys. You will no longer be a man with only a handsome face and riches, but a man with substance. A sword takes not only discipline, but skill. It makes us strong of mind, of heart, of body. In our family, it is a means to work out our issues like men.” He taps my temple.

“If we are smart, Nazzareno, and learn how to discipline ourselves, it also leads us to romance. Ruthless is only half the battle, ah? There are two sides to this world. Ruthless and romantic. Everything in between is folly, and romance is fading like a rose in winter.”

He set his hand over my chest, almost pushing me back some, but I held my feet in place.

“You, like your father, like your uncles, like your cousins, all of those who carry the Fausti name, will carry romance within you. We will preserve the rose, like warmth keeps the roots safe during seasons of frost. However, not all men will be able to balance both sides of who they are. In time, Nazzareno, we will see if you are one of them. If you are...you are a son of not only my blood, but of my heart.”

He stands taller and looks down on me. He winks. “Ladies, even if they are not accustomed to it, will appreciate this about you. Romance should make the world go around, ah?”

“Si!”

He throws back his head and chuckles, then sighs. “All right, Nazzareno. Let us see what we can do together.”

He puts me in position, and for hours, he teaches me the basic skills of sword fighting. At the end of the lesson, he even picks up his sword, and we have a mock battle between us.

I could not remember having so much fun.

I feel like a man.

A man who is ready to learn how to balance both his ruthless blood and romantic heart.

As the light dims outside, my seed has been planted and all three offerings checked on the list—blood, sweat, and tears—for me to grow my ancient olive tree.

Nonno squeezes my shoulder as we are walking to the door. “A secret between us, Nazzareno: Your father is as skilled with a sword as his fierce older brother, Zio Luca, but where Luca uses his mind and is even-tempered in a fight, your father can be reckless and hot-tempered. Your father does not say it, or he would lose his tongue, but I know he believes the part of my heart that is romantic is a waste. He cannot see that I can carry ruthless blood and a romantic heart inside of me.

“Romance is not just for fools, Nazzareno. Neither is love. It is the opposite of ruthless, ah, but the contrast is remarkable. We feel both on a level most men would not dare to when we allow both attributes to coincide next to one another. It is like setting two opposite colors next to each other. You can truly see the difference between them then, but also admire how one brings out the best in the other.”

“Red and green?”

“I imagine red and gold.” We stop at the door, and he looks right into my eyes. A reflection of his. “Remember this when you are silently resisting your father’s opinion, and he brings up my name, ah?”

“Sì.”

“Now let us eat!” He roars like a lion. “A celebration in your honor.”

I roar, trying to sound like him, and he roars with laughter.

The door closes behind us, and we walk into the pitch-black night together. My grandfather’s shape fades into the darkness, but his words are an eternal fire in my romantic heart as it pumps ruthless blood.

TWENTY-SEVEN

NAZZARENO

AVA CONCENTRATED on my hand as she finished bandaging it.

I stared into the sink at the penthouse in Rome. Blood streaked the surface, along with a few pieces of paper from bandage wrappers. I had cut myself with the broken shard of glass from the vase I had broken.

Different time and place, but the cut reopened an old wound.

Ava's hand caressed the bandage, making sure it was firmly in place before she sighed and washed her hands. The blood swirled in the sink, and a streak was left behind.

When she moved, my eyes moved with her. She came to stand behind me, wrapping her arms underneath mine and setting her cheek against my back.

Dozens of words from the hospital echoed inside of my head—what my brother had said about Ava, what my father had said about my grandfather—and the two sides *Nonno* had helped me bring together in harmony were suddenly at war.

Spilling blood in Ava Girardi's name made my mouth water, but another part of me knew what it would cost the woman behind me. She was coming dangerously close to being the center of a war, and if that happened, there would be no going back—for either of us.

Leandro's show in the hospital, when he'd snapped his teeth at her, was a taunting warning.

I had never played with my food and did not plan to start. If Leandro would have made another disrespectful remark, the hospital staff would not have had enough time to save him. He would have bled out from his throat.

It was symbolic.

That was the path his voice had to take to form words.

I closed my eyes and held on to her hands.

Even though she was close to me, she barely looked at me. No other woman had ever gotten under my skin the way she had, and her quietness weighed on me. I realized why when our eyes met through the mirror and she looked away again.

Her expression was conflicted enough to turn haunting.

Her two sides were at war as well—the side meant to be by my side, and the side wild enough to spread its wings and try to fly away from me.

Her position behind me sent a cold chill through my usually hot veins. It felt symbolic to me, like I was seeing her in my rearview, her expression haunting me until I closed my eyes for the final time.

She gasped when I pulled her around and set her in front of me, my arms wrapping around her while our hands stayed entwined. I set my lips and nose against her shoulder, breathing her in.

“Change your clothes. Casual with layers. Wear your boots. Pack your things.”

“Where are we going?” Her voice was full of gravel. “And for how long?”

“You will see. And for a few days.”

She nodded and went to break out of my hold. I refused to let her go until she acknowledged how deep inside of me she was, and that I would never let her go. She was as vital to me as my heart. When I was finally satisfied with the look in her eyes—high on the freedom only I could give her, even behind the cage my hold made—my arms opened, and she went to pack her things and change her clothes.

I did the same, but it only took me one bag and ten minutes. Ava was still getting her things together when I went to Beni's side of the penthouse. I told him where I was taking Ava and to have one of the pilots bring our things.

He walked me to the door. "Be safe, *cugino*." He set his hand on my shoulder and squeezed hard enough for me to feel it.

I nodded and met Ava at the door on my side. I looked her over from head to toe. She squirmed some, like my hand was caressing her skin.

I had done my job. She could feel me without me putting a hand to her body.

She was under my skin.

I was under hers.

"I didn't ask before, but I want to know now," she breathed. "When is the wedding?"

The air stilled between us, and it felt like it might crack if either of us made a move.

"Summer."

The date seemed to fly out of my mouth, shatter a piece of her, and ricochet back, doing the same to me.

Out in the universe, the fractured glass clock started *tick, tick, ticking* between us, its hands loud, looming, even if the date was not near on the calendar.

She nodded and I snatched her hand, keeping it in mine as I pulled her back into the penthouse and into my closet. I removed her long coat and hung it up. I pulled my own coat off another hanger and slipped it over her arms.

I grinned. It ate her up.

"You are so fucking gorgeous wearing my clothes." I took her by the lapels and pulled her in, kissing her until her knees grew weak and it was my responsibility to hold her up.

She broke the kiss, breathless and holding on to me.

I turned some and grabbed a beanie from the dresser and set it on her head, pulling it down some. Her blue eyes were bright, even in the dimness.

She touched her head and then her arm. “Hat. Bomber jacket.” She looked down. “Boots.” She looked up. “Are you taking me flying?”

“In a sense.”

Taking her hand, I led her toward the door. We stepped out and I locked the place up before we started walking down the street.

“This is a really nice jacket, Nazzareno.” Her eyes flickered to the patch with the Italian flag on one arm, and then to the other arm, the Fausti insignia.

“It has special meaning to me. It is the first jacket I ever flew in. It represents who I am. I am wrapped around you now.”

She sniffed the collar, and when she noticed I’d caught it, she grinned some.

“You smell *really* good.”

“I am *really* good.”

She laughed. “You are, and not only because you’re a Fausti.”

We entered the building I had renovated and turned into a state-of-the-art place to store all my vehicles. Her eyes widened as she took it all in.

“I figured you had a lot of cars, but damn. This is more than a fleet.”

“Some were inherited. Others I just enjoy.”

“Are these considered *toys* for men?”

“Nah, just an added tool to get the woman.”

She threw her head back and laughed again. It echoed inside the cavernous space. And suddenly I believed the words and stories of my mamma and *padre*—this woman was a

strega. She had bewitched me, and I was under her spell. *Per sempre*.

I knew it, yet I did not fucking care.

Her laughter seemed to float down, and quiet settled between us like it had done before, but this time it was not as dangerous.

“What is it about my family that has put a spell on you?”

She blinked at me, like she had never expected me to ask. Once the surprise seemed to fade, she turned fully toward me, our hands connected, facing each other as if we were standing at the altar. Perhaps she had connected the thought in my mind through my eyes, or she had just noticed it as well.

She sighed, then took a step into me, turning some.

“You,” she finally breathed. “I mean, it didn’t start with you. It started with your grandfather. Edna, like I told you, is still obsessed with Marzio. The day she found out he’d died, I thought maybe she would too. But before then, after I first saw a picture of your grandfather in her office, he had stolen my attention, and then the more research I did, the more I got to know your family and have a feel for them...they stole my heart. It made the one in my chest not ache as much.”

She sighed and turned toward me again. “Look at you, Nazzareno. You are a dream come true. You somehow marry the ruthless and romantic. You would stand against your family for the woman you love, in her *honor*. You would live for her. You would die for her. You would pick up a sword like men used to do in her *honor*. You instinctually seem to know when to be hard and when to be soft. You’re not just a gorgeous face and statue-worthy body. You have substance to back it all up.

“And women...we don’t experience that kind of phenomenon every day. It’s the kind of stuff we read about in books. Fairy tales is more like it. Except...you are the prince *and* the villain. You are a man of honor. You are also a man who would pillage a village for the woman he loves. That’s why I love the Fausti family. I’m not sure if it was a choice or

not to become dangerously obsessed with them, but standing here...I'm so fucking glad I did, even if this is all I'll ever have of you—in the darkness.”

When she spoke of my family that way, her eyes seemed to burn with passion, just as they did for me. Somehow, though, I knew she had separated us. I was not my family, but a single part of them.

“Ask me anything about my family.”

Her eyes rose. “You trust me with your secrets?”

“With my soul,” I said in Italian. Then I translated it.

Her breath accelerated and she gripped my hands tighter. “Why did they kill Tigran?”

“He got too close to what did not belong to him.”

“Did Rosaria Caffi love him?”

“That is not something I know. I do not get close to her. She is looking for something I cannot fill.”

“My guess has always been that Rosaria Caffi and Rocco Fausti have an arranged marriage, and it's not a happy one. It must be hard to be forced to marry someone you barely have anything in common with, for the sake of appearances.”

“Depends on the couple. If both sides are amicable and set on each other, I know some legendary couples who have started out this way. I also know some train wrecks who keep the body count behind the...gates, as you say.”

She looked away from me for a second, before she met my eyes again. “What about you? Do you think you'll be happy in your marriage?”

“It is not a true marriage, Ava.”

“It *is*.” For the first time, I heard bitterness in her voice. “You're going to stand in front of an entire congregation, I'm assuming, and make vows to her. You're going to give her children. In my eyes, there is truth to the marriage. It's not just for show. Because you'll both get kids out of it.

“How fair is that going to be to them? You run home to a *mistress* whenever you can—one you keep and love in the darkness, while you set their mom in the light, but keep her lonely there. For show. Like one of those statues of a heartbroken woman who people interpret because the sadness can be felt.

“It moves us because it makes us feel. It makes us constantly wonder...what was that thing that happened to her? That thing that was so powerful, she was able to cast her sadness in stone for eternity?” I opened my hands to give emphasis to the question.

“It is not like that for all women. Some women use us for our name and what it means in this world, just as our family uses theirs to make stronger alliances.”

“Those ‘alliances’—” she made air quotes “—are innocent children who didn’t asked to be brought into this fucking mess of a world, already messed up because of who their parents are, and what they feel, or don’t, for each other.”

“You are taking your feelings and casting them in stone, Ava. You are the statue, but a harder one to read. Everything about you is strong, determined, but there is a secret passageway in those blue eyes. When the light hits them just right, I can see the place where your deep sadness resides.”

“You’re not allowed to interpret my interpretation of this.” She slid her hand out of mine, crossed her arms over her chest, and lifted her chin.

The *fuck around and find out* stance.

“Or how to feel about this,” she continued. “My feelings are my feelings. The end.”

I went to the wall that housed all the keys. The safe was made with indestructible materials and the newest technology, but it also had a secret emergency latch that released the lock if the power went out.

A biometric palm reader scanned over my hand, and the lock clicked open. I searched the keys until I came to the set I

was looking for, then locked it all up again. I grabbed two helmets from a vast collection hanging beside it.

I walked over to a motorcycle sleek enough to look like a racer but comfortable enough for riding two up. Aristide was a brilliant automotive stylist and had designed this bike. It was matte black with gold trim. The body was reminiscent of a Ducati, but Aristide Fausti was making his mark on the world through his unique designs.

I nodded to the bike. “Get on, Ava.”

“If I say no?”

“We both know you will not.”

She bristled before her eyes slowly melted into a narrowed position. “You can’t say no to me either, can you?”

We both knew the answer to that. I would do anything this woman asked of me.

That was the most dangerous thing about a woman who could bring a Fausti to his knees. She could ask him to start a war with his own blood and he would do it.

If she desired it, he would find a way to fulfill it, if it did not disrespect the love between them.

My eyes locked with hers and I nodded.

Her shoulders seemed to fall with the weight of the power she suddenly held. Even though the order to get on the bike was at the center, it was only a proxy for the real issue between us.

What I would and would not do for her.

If she asked me to go against my family, I would, even if it started a war between us. I could tell she was not ready for that. Because she was considering my feelings and the position it would put me in.

She sighed and came to stand in front of me. I rubbed my knuckle against her lips, and after she closed her eyes, I took my position on the bike, and she took hers behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist and holding on tight.

The weather was mild for a bike ride, even for early December, and we only stopped twice for a break. I wanted Ava to eat and see some of the sights along the way. She made a few comments while we were on foot, trying to figure out where we were going, but I refused to tell her.

Naples was only a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Rome, but we were traveling around an hour past to Candela. The streets in this area were quiet, and the piazza was already decorated for the season. After I parked and helped Ava off the bike, she took it all in.

“This is beautiful. And I love how it’s decorated for Christmas already. I didn’t even realize we were nearing December. Time here has stopped for me, except for this morning.” She did not go on, and I got the feeling it was because she did not want to start the same conversation from before again.

“Come.” I took her hand and kissed it. “We will go for a walk.”

“Yeah, that sounds nice. My ass is asleep from sitting on the bike.”

I laughed and she stopped walking, looking up at me. “You have to stop doing that.”

“What am I doing, my little birdie?”

“Laughing.” She motioned to my eyes. “Paired with those hypnotizers you call eyes, you could lead me to my death and I wouldn’t even blink.”

My movements were slow as I leaned down and kissed her. As I moved away, she blinked at me.

“There,” I said. “You are working properly now.”

She laughed, and we both grinned as we continued our walk.

Ava pointed ahead at a villa. “Must be doing some work. Oooh, I wonder if it’s one of those Italian villas you can buy for one euro if you fix it up? This place seems small, but it’s so quaint. Actually...romantic.” She started to sing “That’s Amore,” her hip bumping mine while she swayed to the sound of her own voice.

The villa’s doors were open, and workers were coming in and out. The sound of a saw buzzing met us from outside, and the scent of fresh paint lingered in the air. We strolled past and she glanced inside.

“What a beautiful—” She stopped short, her eyes narrowing, before they popped open in surprise. She looked up at me, and the next thing, she was pushing against my chest to get my back against the wall. “You did this,” she whisper/hissed.

“*Si*. Your sister—”

“I know about my sister! Both of my sisters are here. So is Lilo. The thing is...your family...*kissed* his uncle.”

I could feel the strain in my face. I did not understand this. Perhaps the first thing in my life, and I had spent time all over the world, including America.

Ava must have sensed it. “Kissed his uncle goodbye, Nazzareno, as in...the kiss of death.” She lifted on her toes and whispered in my ear, “Stole his heart.”

“Tigran,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“I was not the one who stole it.” I took her hand and led her inside. The work continued, as if no one new had entered.

Except for one man who noticed.

His dark eyes went to Ava before they locked on me. He was somewhat shorter, but his muscles filled out the shape of his plain white shirt. He was wearing jeans and work boots.

I knew right away there was something dangerous about him.

“Lilo,” Ava breathed, and I could feel the tremble of her hand.

His eyes swung back to her. “Italy looks good on you, kid.”

Her smile trembled and her eyes filled with tears. I released her hand, and she ran to him. He wrapped his arms around her, absorbing the blow.

A low growl vibrated deep in my throat. She knew this man and had history with him. I could tell they were close.

I wanted her closer.

I stepped behind them and set my hand on her back as she pulled away from him. His eyes and mine met again.

“Nazzareno, this is Brio Valentino, or Lilo, my sister’s husband. Lilo, this is Nazzareno Fausti.”

He nodded at me. I nodded back. Neither of us offered a hand. Time would tell if we would.

“Ava!”

The three of us looked in the direction of the voice. A young girl with a fierce look on her face barreled toward us. She flung herself in Ava’s arms, and Ava picked her up, spinning her around.

“Min!” Ava held her tighter. “You’ve grown so much. I barely recognize you!”

“Don’t be sil, Ava.” Min rolled her eyes. “It has not been that long!”

“It feels like it,” Ava muttered into her hair.

Min looked up at me. She tilted her head. “Who is this?”

“This,” Ava nodded to me, “is Nazzareno Fausti. Nazzareno, this is Minnie, my baby sister.”

“I am no baby, Ava!”

“Of course not.” I knelt some and took her hand, kissing it. “Pleasure to meet you, Minnie.”

She backed up a pace, giggling. “I like you, Nazzareno.” She looked up at Ava. “Do you like him like Luci likes Lilo?” She had an exaggerated way of sounding out her vowels, especially the letter *O*.

The three of us looked at Ava.

“Way to put a girl on the spot, Min.”

“Ava?”

A woman appeared from somewhere deeper in the villa. She had stopped, like she had seen an apparition and was too afraid to come close in case it would disappear.

The love in her eyes was apparent.

She must be Ava’s sister, Lucila, and they were opposites. Lucila was tall and thin with long brunette hair, bangs framing her face, and her eyes did not hide her love. The dots on her nose were the only connections to Ava, it seemed.

Ava nodded and barely got out, “Luci.”

It seemed at the same time, the two women collided, grabbing on to each other.

My eyes were on them, but two other sets of eyes were on me.

One set from the floor. The little girl, Minnie. She smiled up at me, and it transformed the serious set of her face.

The other eyes were darker and seemed to hold serious questions about my place in Ava’s life. Lucila’s husband. Tigran’s nephew. Brio Valentino.

“We have never done this before!” Minnie ran to her sisters and wrapped her arms around their waists. They each set an arm around her and pulled her close.

Brio laughed, but it was the internal kind that only makes a man’s chest make a “huh” noise.

I was looking at him when his eyes turned toward mine this time.

It's easy to learn a lot about a person when the eyes truly watch and the mouth is silent.

This type of display was new for the sisters.

I could speculate as to why. Distance. Different personalities. But I would wait to form a solid answer after I was around them longer. I could tell right away that Luci was the maternal figure, and Ava was the lost child who was always getting into trouble.

Brio seemed to be the center of it all. A rock. A man the sisters could depend on.

I held my hand out to him. He looked at it before he took it.

"My uncle was a good man." He seemed to stand taller. "He didn't deserve—" his eye flicked to Minnie for a second. "The fate he was dealt."

Even though he was guarded, I could feel his respect for his uncle. I also respected him for having the balls to bring it up. Most men cowered when a Fausti was in the room. He was giving his uncle a name and life, even though my family had killed him.

I nodded but was as honest as he was. I spoke in Italian. "Some rules cannot be broken. We must know which ones we can break with a clean fracture, and those that will destroy us."

"Love," he replied in Italian. "Or what he felt was."

"Love is the only rule worth destroying ourselves for," I said, continuing in the same language. "Your uncle died as a man of honor."

"Honor." He spoke in English. "That word means something different to me now. I do agree about love, though. It gives meaning to life and death."

Honor. The word means something different to me now.

He had been a man of honor but was exiled from his home because of a dispute with another man in the same life. Perhaps from that experience, the shape of his honor had reformed to fit his *famiglia*.

“*Si.*” I nodded. “We are in agreement then.” I turned and found Lucila staring at me. She nodded once, and so did I. It did not seem like my place in her sister’s life needed to be announced. She already knew.

“Come on, Ava,” Minnie said, pulling her in the opposite direction. “I want to show you my room! Lilo says I can have a pet. I had to leave Milkshake behind. Remember my bunny? Luci said no snakes, though!”

“Come on, *Luci,*” Ava said dramatically. “No snakes? What kind of bullshit rule is that?”

Lucila laughed. “One that will keep me sane, because I won’t be up all night worrying if it got out or not.” She rubbed her stomach. “Especially with the baby coming.”

Ava rubbed her sister’s stomach after, and it was such a loving embrace, Lucila took her hand and held it. They started talking about Lucila having the baby in Naples, Florida as Minnie pulled Ava toward the direction of her room.

Brio stared after them, the lines around his eyes relaxed.

One of the workers asked him about a paint color, and after he watched the ladies disappear, he answered. Then he went into the kitchen and started working. I took off my jacket and set it aside. I rolled my sleeves up and grabbed a work bucket.

He stopped gazing at the space where the cabinets should be and looked me over. “This is where a Fausti proves he has more than just a legendary name to carry around.”

“I do not have to prove anything.”

He nodded. He turned toward the refrigerator. “*Birra?* Wine? Water? We’re having pizza for lunch. Lucila and Min love the pizza here.”

“*Birra.*”

He grabbed a Morena and handed it to me, then took one for himself. We each took a drink and set the bottles on the counter as we started to work on installing the cabinets.

“You don’t give me Fausti soldier vibes,” he said, his eyes concentrating on the job in front of him. “I get the feeling

you're directly connected to Marzio.”

“My grandfather.”

“Yeah, you resemble him.” He told me the cabinets were custom made and how they were going to go. “I bought the entire line of villas here. The one-euro places. I’ve always wanted to give back to the country most of my relatives immigrated from. It’ll be nice to raise our children here. Give Minnie a place to always call home. We bought one for Ava too.”

We looked at each other.

He shrugged. “The Girardi sisters are like birds. Lucila is the songbird. Ava’s the wild bird. Then you have Min, who thinks she is a bird.” He grinned. “She loves all animals. Ava, though, she’s never found a place to land that hasn’t felt like a cage. I thought if we found her a place, close to her sisters, and just bought it, she’d at least call it home sometimes.”

A worker came in and told Brio two men were at the door with bags.

He looked at me. “Yours?”

I nodded and went to meet them. I gave them the name of a hotel and told them to bring our things there instead. It was not far. The Valentino’s villa still needed a lot of work, and I did not want to impose on them.

One of the guards handed me a small leather bag. After they left, I set five thousand euros down on the counter in the kitchen and told Brio the rest of the money would be in his account before sundown. It was a good idea to keep Ava close to her sisters, but he would not be paying for it.

Anything she needed, I would give her.

He took a drink of his beer, eyes on me. He set it back down on the counter. “She looks different. Softer, even though she lost some weight. She looks healthy.”

“She has been under my protection.”

“She’s always needed protection, because her obsession has never been a healthy one.”

“Her obsession with my family.”

“Your family. Losing her heart. Same thing.”

“Her mamma,” I said. I understood what he meant. Ava did not want her heart. It hurt too much after her mamma had left.

He nodded. “It’s a complicated situation, for all of them. Ava buried the pain with focus, and the things she focused on only led her to dangerous situations.”

“You took care of the sisters.”

“Lucila. Yeah. Ava. To a certain degree. There’s a line with Ava. Cross it when she doesn’t want you to, she flies.” He took another drink of beer. “I’ve heard things, even if I’m not in New York anymore. You’ve been letting the world know who she belongs to now. I’m guessing because you know her history and all the dangerous men she’s dealt with in the past.”

I went even deeper than the paperwork Rocco had sent to me. I had my own men fly to New York and find out all there was to Ava Girardi. Once I realized how deep her work into that life, and my own, went, I branded her with my name.

“It is a warning. She belongs to me.”

“Good. Because there’s something going on in New York. Someone came into her office before she left for Venice. I don’t know how much you know about Vice City Press, but Edna’s family made it a fortress in New York. No one gets in unless they have clearance to. It was by sheer luck Ava got in when she was no more than a kid. Old man Giannini, who built it from the ground up, knew not everyone was going to love what Vice City stands for—especially since they report on business better left to the dark. Whoever got into her office was the same person who got her into the event in Venice.”

“Olivier Nemours,” I said. “He’s been a plague on my family.”

“I’ve never heard of him, but someone let him into Vice City.”

“Another worker,” I surmised.

“Must have been. But that place is a haven for the workers inside. I’m assuming you dug deep into Ava’s past, so you know she basically lives there. She used to eat, sleep, breathe work. That’s why she ran to Venice. She knows her safe place has been compromised. I found out Edna left Vice City to Ava once she dies. That’s not going to go over well with her family. Maybe it’s a disgruntled nephew who wants it for himself. She has one of those who works there.”

“I will take care of it. I will take care of her.”

“She’s not the type of woman who calls for help often. Two people. That’s it.”

“You.”

“I’m one of them. A man by the name of Kirill Balabanov is the other. She stopped calling him after he tried to take her to Russia. He was deported back for bad behavior. He still comes back, though, and if she feels desperate, she’ll call him. But she doesn’t have me to call if he tries to keep her again.”

“He wants to cage her in.”

“He knows her spirit is wild. He’s tried to lock her in before.”

My alarm chirped at me. It was time for Ava to eat.

Before I could leave to find her, Minnie came barreling into the kitchen, Ava and Lucila behind her.

“Time to do a pizza hop, Lilo and Nazzareno!”

Ava and Lucila looked between Brio and me. Brio stood beside Lucila and set his arm around her neck, and she reached up and took his hand, entwining their fingers.

Ava narrowed her eyes at me as we all filed out and left. Ava and I walked side by side, and she kept glancing at me without saying anything.

I was quiet throughout what Minnie called the pizza hop. We tried different pizzas from different pizzerias in Naples. In one of the pizzerias, a man with the Fausti tattoo on his forearm was staring at Luci and Ava. I stared at him until he

met my eyes. He took me in, and when he realized who I was, he nodded once out of respect and turned back to his order.

My face, which belonged to Marzio Fausti, was stronger than the tattoo on my back. I did not even have to show it to let our world know who I was in it. My position in the family was closer to the king than his.

My thoughts, however, were on Ava and her life in New York.

This Kirill Balabanov.

He seemed to think getting her to stay put took force.

A cage.

He did not know her.

He would never know her like I did.

I could get her to stay with me with only a whispered word, a soft touch.

Because her bones knew mine.

Her blood knew mine.

Her heart knew mine.

She was mine.

And there would only be one man she called when she needed anything.

Me.

I opened my arms to her when we took a seat at a bar. She flew to them, and I locked her in. Instead of fighting, she relaxed into the safety of her protective home.

TWENTY-EIGHT

AVA

“YOU LOOK DIFFERENT.”

After spending the day at Brio and Lucila’s “new” villa, we were walking the street of Naples at night, admiring all the decorations and doing some shopping. Brio and Nazzareno walked a couple of paces behind me and Luci. Minnie was wedged between them.

She seemed infatuated with Nazzareno. It had always been Brio. And he seemed a little jealous. He was the only brother in her life, and Nazzareno was working his way there.

I smiled and then shook my head, knowing it was only a short dream.

Of the way we were in that second.

He was getting married.

I had to keep reminding myself of that.

Even if we walked these streets after he said his vows, it would never be the same.

We were both free in that moment.

I cleared my throat and answered Luci. “Yeah, I’ve lost some weight. You know this already—Italy is a country of walking and the freshest foods. I eat more than I did in New York, but I’ve lost weight. Plus, Nazzareno eats what I would consider a Mediterranean diet, even if he doesn’t call it that. Olive oil, olives, nuts, and fish are staples in his pantry and fridge, and I started eating them with him. Drinking a glass of red wine every evening too. I feel much better.”

Even when I'd feel great in New York after cutting back, my face always seemed puffy, like I held water weight in it or something. Once a woman even stopped me on the street on my way to Vice City and told me I was swollen because I was holding in childhood trauma. It was causing an autoimmune issue. I told her all I was holding in was leftover alcohol from the night before, then told her to get lost.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?" she had called after me. "Give me the chance to unblock your blocks!"

"For how much?" I'd shouted back. Everything had a price, and I wasn't a poor sucker who didn't know it.

"\$25.99!"

So, for basically twenty-six bucks, I bought myself some good face cream and one of those marble rollers, and I didn't have to unblock anything. I even treated myself to an at-home-office spa night once or twice a week. It was only a temporary fix, but Italy seemed to cure me of it in a much deeper place. And for free.

"No, this change has nothing to do with your physical appearance," Lucila said. "Even though I can see it, you have lost weight, but again, not what I'm talking about."

"Are you telling me my blocks have been unblocked?"

She hip-bumped me. "Be serious."

I sighed. "Okay, let's hear it."

"I'm not lecturing you."

"I know," I said. "I want to hear it."

"Are you happy?" she blurted.

"Why so blunt, sister love?"

Her face pinched, and before she could say anything else, I answered.

"Yeah, I am."

She pointed at me. "*That*. Right there. That's where the difference is coming from. You haven't been happy since Janis

left.”

“You mean mom.”

“I mean our incubator.”

“Incubator. Sperm donor. How romantic is must have been when they made us.”

She stopped walking and so did I. Nazzareno and Brio stopped walking too, but Minnie kept pulling them. She had both their hands in hers. They let her pull them to a stand with purses, but they were not moving any further.

Luci sighed. “I don’t care about how we were made. I only care about what happens now. And it makes me so happy to see you finally happy. You would have never even admitted you were happy before. It was too much of a risk, even though you took exceptional ones every day and night to get here.”

“I did, didn’t I?” When Luci put it that way, I looked back on my life and realized some of the stupid shit I’d done could have easily gotten me killed.

Edna, Neil, and Andrea always made such a big deal about my birthday, probably because they didn’t expect me to have another one. I’d even gotten a bullshit ribbon at work for the most dead bodies stumbled upon at Vice City. It was like the darkness was drawn to me.

“*See!* There it is again. You would have never realized how much danger you were in before, or even cared. Now it seems like you do—you care about you. All these changes are happening deeper than skin, Ava. It’s like you’re healing. And that’s making you look different. More beautiful.”

“More beautiful?”

“Bitch.” She plucked me on the forehead, and I took a step back, laughing. “You’ve always been beautiful. You always will be. But now you feel better on the inside, and I’m so thankful for it. I don’t have to worry as much.”

I looked away from her for a second, meeting Nazzareno’s eyes. He was watching us with that curious stare of his, like he wanted all my secrets. “I made you worry a lot.”

“You know you did,” she said.

“I just didn’t care.”

“Didn’t seem like it.”

I wrapped my arms around my sister and pulled her close. She held me back.

“I’m sorry, Luci.”

“For making me worry?”

“For everything,” I whispered.

We pulled back some and looked each other in the eye.

“You did all you could for me after mom left,” I said. “I know it wasn’t easy.”

“It wasn’t easy on you either. We all cope the best way we can. But it just feels so nice to talk about everything. We stopped talking and it seemed like we all went to our own worlds.”

“Our own snow globes.”

“You always loved snow globes.” She grinned.

“Yeah.” I laughed some.

We locked arms and started walking again. Nazzareno, Min, and Brio followed.

Luci sighed. “It’s time for us to talk, Ava.”

“I thought that’s what we’re doing?”

“You know what we need to talk about.”

“I don’t want Sonny to ruin this, Luci. We haven’t connected like this since...a long time.”

“He’s not going to ruin it. If anything, the truth will, because it’s going to change everything you’ve always believed. It’ll take some time to accept, and it’s going to hurt before it gets better.”

“Does Sonny come out looking like Daddy of The Year after this truth? Because I’ve always been around, even if I did

my own thing. No one can change my memories of the back of his head.”

“No,” she said, “he’s not, but Janis isn’t going to be the innocent little dove you imagined her to be, either.”

I stopped our forward stride and glanced at Nazzareno. I took a deep breath and blurted, “Do you know if she’s still alive?”

“Yeah, she is.” Luci hesitated. “Did that worry you?”

Only every second of every day, until I started burying it. Then it would crawl its way to the surface of my dreams at night and turn them into nightmares. I’d imagine her cold, hungry, scared, and not sure who to turn to. Bleeding out on the side of some road while faceless shapes left her to die alone in the darkness, her soft, begging cries as haunting as screams.

“I just never knew...what happened to her,” I said. “I worried about her.”

“I think we need to sit.”

“Are you feeling okay?” She didn’t look pale, but Lucila had anemia, and sometimes she’d just pass out.

“Yeah. It’s just...heavy, emotionally.”

Nazzareno, Min, and Brio caught up to us. We found a cute little outside coffee bar, and Nazzareno ordered us warm drinks before he offered to take Minnie to see a nativity scene in the piazza. Brio went with them. It wasn’t that far, and it seemed like they were taking shifts watching Minnie and watching us.

Luci’s eyes were on Minnie, but they seemed kind of distant. “Do you remember when we were kids, how sleepy we would get?”

The question surprised me. “Umm...kind of.”

“You were younger than me, but I remember. The teacher made a big deal about it.” She took a sip of her drink. She had a milk mustache.

It wasn't the time for jokes, but I really wanted to make one.

She eyed me and licked it off. "I know you like a book, Ava Girardi, but now is not the time. Not when I'm pumping myself up for this." She took another drink, this time avoiding the froth mustache. She sighed. "The thing is...not only was Janis having multiple affairs on Sonny when they were together, but to get to do it, she was..."

She looked away from me and took a deep breath.

"She was what, Luci?"

She turned and faced me. "She was drugging us."

"Bullshit." The response was automatic.

"It's not, Ava. So many people suspected it, especially Molly, and when Sonny went after her because of it, things got heated. A man she was having an affair with was waiting outside of the house for her. It was the day I got sick and stayed home from school. The day she left. She left because one of her side pieces hit Sonny with his car, and she knew she couldn't drug us anymore. She was done with us, Ava. She'd hit a wall being a mom and left—for good."

It was like the truth punched me in the head, and everything I remembered about that time flew around in shattered pieces. Behind those pieces were memories that I had blocked out, and snippets of things I hadn't remembered in years stepped forward.

Or maybe after Luci had said it—about us being drugged—everything came into focus.

"You were sick because you were having withdrawals," I said.

"Yeah."

"I'd been sick a time or two too."

She nodded. "Sonny had confronted her about it before, after Molly brought it to his attention and the school started asking questions. Janis said she wasn't giving us that much. Used a few excuses. We started having some issues when she

stopped, and maybe we were getting on her nerves because we were sick and whining. Or maybe going out was too much of a temptation for her and she had no one to leave us with. Whatever the reason, or reasons...she started giving us stuff again.”

“Sonny ran her off.”

“From what I hear, he was going to kill her. I think he gave her the benefit of the doubt before he knew for sure. I mean, what kind of woman drugs her kids, right? He was having a hard time believing it, but that day...he was out for blood.”

“For us.”

“Yeah, and maybe a little for himself. She’d been screwing around behind his back—with *many* men.”

“Why the fuck didn’t he tell us this, Luci?”

She set her hands against the sides of her cup. “He doesn’t even know we know. He didn’t want us to know, because...I think he didn’t want to hurt us that bad. He wanted us to think he’d ran her off, so we wouldn’t think our own mom didn’t love us.”

“He let us hate him all this time.”

“He did—out of love. I mean, Sonny is not going to win any awards for being the best dad of all time, but he cares, in his own way.”

“The day he got hit by the car...that’s the day he stopped working.”

She took a sip of her drink and nodded. “Or shortly after. My memories are a little blurry. The man was going to kill him with his car, but he only got the chance to hit him once. Sonny still sustained injuries from it.”

“All those times he gambled...”

“I think he was doing it for us. Hoping he’d win to help out.” She looked toward her husband and their eyes met. “Lilo’s known about this since the day he met you in the principal’s office, but I didn’t find out until right before we left New York. The way I feel about chocolate, Ava...”

“That’s your substitute addiction.”

Her eyes met mine. “Yeah.” The word seemed to float out. “And I think...you have them too. Or had them. A lot of them. We carried with us what she left behind in us.”

I turned my eyes to my cup, watching as steam wafted from the hot liquid into the chilled air. “How is he? Sonny?”

“Going home,” she said. “Bonny is helping take care of him.”

“Good,” I said, and the word was strangled. I sighed. “Now I know why you said I’d regret that conversation we had.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“You were right.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I regret a lot when it comes to Sonny too. I took care of him out of obligation, but I had my own resentment toward him. I was just silent about it.”

I had been, too, but Lucila was right. Her resentment sat quietly stored in a jar in a dark place. Mine had been hitting the lid, desperate to get out, a rabid bat going for his blood.

“Lilo has put things in perspective for me too. We were just kids, Ava. Kids who didn’t have a clue what was really going on. We were probably dazed most of the time, then, *BAM*, our mom is gone, and we have no clue what the fuck is going on. Sonny becomes almost like a...zombie after, and he thinks he’s doing it to protect us. It’s a lot to take in, especially as a kid. Now that we’re adults, though, we realize...most people, even a parent like Sonny, are just doing the best with the hands life deals. We can get angry, blame, cry and scream, but there comes a day when we own that our life didn’t start the best, then move on and make sure we do better.”

My mind and heart were in chaos, and I couldn’t iron all of this out while sitting in a festive piazza, beautiful Italian families out smiling and laughing.

Like I did the night of the event in Venice, I felt eyes on me.

Nazzareno had taken a seat on a fountain not far away, and he was staring at me. I couldn't look away because everything inside of me yearned to fly to him.

“Are you in love with him?” my sister asked softly.

“You know the answer to that,” I whispered.

“I do.” Her touch was tender as she moved a piece of hair from my eye. “I just want to hear you admit it.”

“I am. So in love. It's hard to breathe sometimes.”

“I can see why. He's...what's even a word to describe him except for perfect? Perfect for you. And there's substance to him. He's not just a gorgeous face and body. There's a foundation there. He's so good with Minnie, too. He'll be a good dad.”

Of course, my sister would look for that quality in him. She'd always wanted to be a mom, despite what I'd just found out our mom did to us, and she wanted a father to her children who would love them just as much.

“He's pretty much perfect,” I said.

“Pretty much?” She laughed a little.

“He's engaged to marry someone else, Luci. It's common for them to have arranged marriages. I was a dollar short and a day late when I showed up in his life.”

“Common for them? You mean the Fausti family?”

“Yeah. They mostly all marry up, not down.”

“You don't think you're good enough for him?”

I broke the connection and turned back to my sister. “I'm not. I'm me. He's him. We're worlds apart.”

“That's bullshit and you know it. Or you should. Money's not everything, Ava.”

“I know, but in the eyes of his family, our relationship can't go any further than the darkness.”

“What are you telling me?”

A sigh I couldn't control slipped past my lips. "I'm telling you he gave his word to marry someone else before I came along. A pasta heiress who will compliment his family. If he breaks his word, a war will break out between him and his family. They have rules...sometimes complicated ones. So... he'll marry her, give her babies and a life worth envying on the outside."

"But on the inside?"

I smiled, but it was weak. "He'll have me."

"He wants you to be his mistress. Tell me you didn't agree."

"I didn't. I didn't say anything. But...he'll break it for me. I know he will."

She turned her head. "He's watching you like Lilo watches me."

"It's intense between us, Luci."

"Yeah, love usually is. Or it is for me too."

We grew quiet. I watched Luci as she watched the man I loved.

"If he breaks his word to his family, and bad things start happening, you'll feel guilty," she said. "Something you're not used to feeling."

"I know. Everything I've always needed is staring me right in the face, but I can't have him. I've done a lot of bad shit to get to what I needed, and then fate's like, *nope, you can't have him because of it*. That's karma, Luci. And if I do ask him to break his word, something might happen to him...and I couldn't live with myself, because there's no living without him now. But...I'm not sure if I can deal with loving him in the dark either. Watching as the world believes one thing, because she's set on having kids with him, and knowing I'll never have the same chance. I don't know if I even want kids, they're not something I *ever* wanted, but he gives me ideas. Ideas I've never dared to dream about."

"Is there someone higher up he can talk to?"

I set my drink down before I spit it all over her. My sister was a trip. “You mean like a manager?”

“You know what I mean. I thought this family was so romantic? This is romantic, the love between you two!”

“It is, but...it doesn’t exactly work like that with them. He could talk to Luca, but if he gets involved, he could take a rule, bend it some, give it a new shape, and what we’re facing now can become much worse.” I thought about how Luca had sent me into Malum, and his reasons had been a poisonous web we had to sidestep, even though there was a romantic reason at the heart of it.

Luca knew there was something between us.

“I knew the Faustis had a complex dynamic, but shit. It’s like they’re...their own kingdom or something.” She exhaled. “I’ve always worried about you, Ava. You’re my baby sister, and with Minnie, we’re all we have. I wanted to stop you from this, from getting here, because...your obsessions were dangerous, but now in comparison, those were only risky. This obsession is downright frightening.”

My eyes stung with unshed tears. “He’s not going to let them hurt me.”

“I can tell, but what happens to you then?”

I die too, but I kept the thought to myself.

I was dying a little every day for this love, but it was also giving me life.

A few moments with him were better than a lifetime of nothing, I reminded myself.

Damn that movie.

Damn everything Janis had left behind for me to remember.

“Incoming,” my sister said.

She didn’t even have to say it. It was like I knew when he was moving closer to me, and before he set his hand on my shoulder, I felt the warmth of his palm there. When he did, it

was a brand on my soul that lit up in the darkness. The blood in my veins rushed with warm endorphins, and my lungs were anxious for my next breath. My heart sang, sounding like my sister's beautiful voice, and my bones danced.

“Time to eat, *uccellino selvatico*,” he said, his voice husky. The sound of it carried a sad note.

It sent my body in the opposite direction.

I closed my eyes and nodded, two tears slipping down my cheeks.

TWENTY-NINE

AVA

MY EYES FEEL SO HEAVY. *I keep yawning, and it's making them water. I wipe the tears from my cheeks even though I'm not crying.*

I almost feel like I want to.

I feel weird...like I want to run, but I'm as sleepy as I get after lunch when the weather starts to get hot. My heart is pounding, like when I run around at recess at school, but my head feels fuzzy, like the TV when the cable is off.

I yawn again and shake my head.

I look over to where my sister is sleeping in her own bed. She's knocked out, snoring. Her hands are crossed, and her face looks so pale, like she's a ghost. I force my feet to the floor and tiptoe over to her. I can't tell if her chest is moving, and it makes me feel afraid.

"Luci." I shake her.

She doesn't wake up.

"Luci!" I shake her even harder, and she makes an aggravated noise at me. She starts talking in her sleep. She mumbles, but I think she's saying she's too tired to get up. She just needs a few more minutes. She thinks it's almost time to go to school.

School is later, I think. It's hard to tell. I think I had fallen asleep, and something scared me awake.

Maybe it was my heart.

It feels weird in my chest.

It's pumping too fast.

I need to tell my mom.

She gave me medicine before bed, because she said I needed it, but it's not helping.

The house tilts as I walk. It's like the walls are coming at me. I keep hitting them with my shoulder. It reminds me of the time dad took me and Luci to the store and let us ride the small carousel as we were leaving. We kept wanting to go around and around, and he let us. When we got off, we were both dizzy and bumping shoulders. Luci even puked.

That was fun, though.

This isn't fun. It won't stop.

It's kind of scary.

The house is dark, except for the TV's light in mom and dad's room. I follow it until I come to the door. It's cracked. Mom is slipping a fancy dress over her head. It sparkles against the light. She's watching an old black and white movie as she dresses. It's a musical, and she's singing along to it.

Her voice makes me feel warm, and so does the television. We don't have one in our room. And she only lets us watch hers when she wants us to sit in front of it. We're not allowed to get up until she tells us to, because it's our TV time.

That's what she calls it.

She rarely lets us watch cartoons, though. She says we have to watch movies that will teach us things about life.

I dunno know what that even means, but...we're forced to watch only the movies she likes.

It's okay most of the time, because she gets in bed with us and watches them with us. She likes to pause them, telling us about the scenes she likes the most.

Luci falls asleep a lot, unless there's singing involved. I can't sleep as easily as Luci can. There seems to be a monster inside of me that keeps me up. That's what mom says, anyway.

Mom's voice gets louder, and she's dancing around, looking for something.

Her shoes. She slips them on, and they're high.

"Mom?"

She stills, her back to me.

"Ava." She says my name like she's irritated with me. I know she's pinching her nose without even seeing it. She does that a lot when I get on her nerves.

"I don't feel so good."

"You have to give the medicine time to work."

"I fell asleep, but I woke up. I don't feel good," I repeat.

She kicks both shoes off, and after a second, she picks them up and throws them at the wall. I flinch. She hit a picture of her and dad and cracked the glass. It's tilted now instead of hanging straight.

She turns around and I take a step back. She's really mad. But she's so beautiful, it's hard to look away from her. She did her makeup really pretty, and she smells good.

"Get in your room!" She points.

"But I don't feel good!" I whine. "My stomach hurts." Everything seems to hurt but I don't want to tell her that. She'll only get more upset with me.

"You don't feel good because you're fighting your sleep."

"I'm not fighting."

"You are! You need to sleep!"

"I can't!"

She grabs me by the shoulder and starts shoving me toward my room. "You're such a brat. Such a brat! I do everything for you, everything around here, from washing your clothes to feeding you, and this is how you repay me? By fighting everything I tell you to do!"

"I don't feel good, mom!"

“You’re a liar.”

“I’m not!”

“Shut up, Ava! Just. Shut. The. Fuck. Up!” She stops and pinches the bridge of her nose again. Then she’s shoving me, and my feet twist and I fall.

As I’m going down, I reach out my hand and cry, “Wait, mommy!”

She looks down at me after I hit. “See? See what you’ve done! If you would just listen to me, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Tears are sliding down my cheeks, and I don’t even know where they came from. I just don’t...feel good. I want to cry really bad. Sob it all out. I just want her to hold me, but she’s so angry. She leans down and picks me up by the shirt, setting me on my feet. She shoves me in the back and makes me walk on my own.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“You should be. One day, you will understand how this feels. To have kids of your own who are ingrates. A woman needs to be set free. Marriage and kids are a filthy cage. You know what happens to a bird when it’s caged, Ava? It goes crazy! I’m going crazy here. Sonny is the worst husband, and his kids are just like him. Always needing me!”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat because she’s talking about me and Luci and dad. I don’t know how to not need her. I don’t know why I just can’t sleep. I don’t know why I feel so sick.

She mumbles about marriage and how she hates him and how he’s killing her spirit.

Dad is killing her spirit?

Maybe that’s why she’s hurting so bad?

She’s so angry and sad. It’s kind of scary, but I don’t want to be afraid of her because she’s my mom. She lets us watch television and eat anything we want, even sweets. I go for the fruity candy, and Luci always goes for the chocolate. Luci’s

always so happy when we're eating candy. And that makes me feel good, because I don't want her to be sad, either.

"How did I do this to myself?" She starts to sob. "How did I let him knock me up? He did this on purpose to TRAP ME! I HATE MY LIFE!"

"Mom." I tug on her hand. She's crying even louder. "It's okay."

She flings her hand away from me and accidentally slaps me in the head. She doesn't seem to notice. But it stings really bad from the ring she's wearing.

"If you remember anything about me at all, remember my face right now." Her makeup is running down her cheeks in black ribbons. "This is what being locked in a cage looks like. It suffocates you! Don't make the same mistakes I did. Don't let a man trap you and knock you up! Fucking Sonny Girardi and his spawns!"

She runs toward the room with our snow globes on the mantle. Dad had given one to me and one to Luci. Luci is more into the dolls he brings home, but I love the snow globes. There's an entirely new world inside of it, and I like to make up stories about what's going on. And he showed me if I turned it upside down, the snow starts to swirl.

"Look," he'd said, shaking it up. "The snow is like chaos in this world, but no matter how bad it gets, it always settles, Ava Bird."

A crash brings me out of the thought, and I scream when I realize...Mom took a snow globe and smashed it against the wall. I try to tug on her arm before she grabs the other one, but she's too fast and too strong.

My foot suddenly burns.

I look down.

Blood.

The glass cut me.

She's looking at it, too, but she's not doing anything.

She rushes toward our room, telling me I shouldn't have been playing with glass, that Sonny should have never bought such ridiculous things for kids...

I rush behind her, leaving a blood trail on the floor.

She gets to Luci's bed, and I take her arm to stop her. I don't want her to hurt my sister like she did the snow globes. Maybe she might pull at her arms and hit her like she accidentally hit me. I think my head might be bleeding too. It feels like water is running down it, but I don't have time to feel for it. I need to get mom to stop before Luci gets hurt. Mom flings me off again, and taking Luci by the shoulder, starts to shake her awake.

"Lucila!" she screams. "Wake up! Wake up!"

"Annnng." Lucila is shaking like a doll, not able to wake up, even though she's making noises.

"Wake up, I SAID!" Mom screams in her face.

Luci's eyes blink open. "Mom?"

"Get up! Get up!"

Luci keeps blinking at her. She's trying to wake up.

"Luci," I whisper.

She focuses on me.

"Go sleep in your sister's bed," mom says to Luci. "I need to run to the store and get her more medicine. She's not feeling good. And she cut herself after she broke the snow globes, and she needs bandages."

I broke the snow globes? I'm sure she did it, but now I'm questioning if I did or not...

"Okay," Luci says, but she sounds like she did when she was talking in her sleep.

"Fuck it!" Mom lets her go and Luci falls to the bed, bouncing a little. "Get back in your bed!" Mom points at mine.

I do.

“Close your eyes.”

I do. Tears run down my cheeks, forced out with how tight I’m closing them.

My head and foot are burning me so bad.

“Now go to fucking sleep, you little troublemaker.”

I can’t, but I don’t open my eyes.

I hear Mom’s cries echoing in the house. It’s a scary sound, like someone died. Or that dead person is coming back to haunt me.

Maybe she’s afraid dad will hurt her. She said he did.

He killed her spirit, whatever that means, but it doesn’t sound good.

Behind my eyes, all I see is a beautiful songbird trapped in a filthy cage, and it makes it hard for me to breathe. I’d been feeling like that, my chest feeling weird when I take a breath, but it’s getting worse.

“Push over, Ava,” my sister’s sleepy voice comes at me.

I think I’m dreaming until I force my eyes open and see her standing next to my bed, holding her pillow. She’s swaying, and her eyes are not entirely open. I don’t even know if she hears mom crying like that. I push over all the way to the wall, so happy to have something solid at my back and my sister in front of me.

I don’t realize how bad I’m shaking until my sister’s strong arm comes around me.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, kissing my forehead. “I don’t feel good either. We probably caught something at school.”

Dad is killing mom, I want to say, but instead, I keep silent, my heart in my throat, my breaths hurting as I imagine the doors to my own cage clicking into place.

Because everyone always says I look just like my mom, and one day, I know someone is going to kill my spirit too.

THIRTY

AVA

THE ROOM WAS pitch black when I opened my eyes.

My head hurt, and my foot burned. Sometimes the scar there did.

It took me a second to remember where I was.

Lilo and Lucila's villa.

The night came back to me in a flash. Strolling the streets with Nazzareno, Lucila, Lilo, and Minnie. Telling Lucila about Nazzareno. Lucila telling me about Janis. Lucila insisting that Nazzareno and I spend our last night in Candela with her, Lilo, and Min. I didn't think Nazzareno was going to go for it, because all we had was a small mattress in a small room.

He had agreed before me.

Maybe he'd sensed how much I needed to be close to my sister, especially after everything she'd told me.

Music floated in the otherwise silent villa. Lilo on the piano and my sister humming along. Those two together are a song.

A beautiful, haunting melody.

A painful, air-stopping sob was stuck in my throat. The past had come back to haunt me too. It was like the truth my sister had given me earlier had unlocked a vault of terrible memories.

It was the first time my mo—Janis's—face was so clear to me in years. She was always just this fuzzy, beautiful memory

that stuck with me. I didn't focus on it too much, because then reality set in and I had to keep coming face to face with the fact that her memory clung to me, but at the same time, she wasn't close to me.

I'd obsess over if she was dead or not.

Because she had put that idea in my head.

Son—my dad—was killing her.

When she'd been killing us.

Our own mother drugged us.

She was so selfish, she put our lives at risk to go out and have fun.

To screw around.

To feel free of the cage our love had trapped her in.

Instead of just leaving, a clean break, which would have been the best for everyone, she left us fractured and jagged in our own ways.

My sister was a chocolate addict because her body remembered what it felt like to depend on something that made her feel good.

My dad was left physically broken, an emotionally dead man, not equipped to deal with us or life.

Me?

I was the most fucked up of them all.

All the things I'd done to feel numb again, it was honestly...shameful.

That was why I didn't feel good enough for Nazzareno. I had helped sully the cage my mom had been trapped in.

I'd dirtied my life for things that were soul corrupting.

My strained eyes turned some, and Nazzareno was staring at me. He wiped the tears from my cheek with his thumb.

"It is okay to fall," he whispered to me in the darkness, pulling me even closer to his chest. "I will tell you why."

Even though I knew what he was going to say, I needed to hear it. I needed it like my next breath.

“Because I am here to catch you, *uccellino selvatico*. This is my vow to you. I will never let you crash. Now take your rest in the cabin of my heart. I’ll fly you into peaceful skies.”

The sob broke free from my throat, but I still couldn’t breathe.

All I could do was cry.

Cry.

Cry.

And cry some more.

Just like Janis had cried all those years ago.

Except I was crying for those little girls whose spirits had turned into ghosts in the shapes of lonely birds with tired wings, because instead of being caged, they had never found a safe place to land after they were violently kicked out of the nest.

THIRTY-ONE

AVA

NO MATTER how many doctors might disagree with me, I know the truth: the emotional flu is a real illness.

I ached on the inside and the outside. I was so tired I could barely open my eyes, but it didn't all feel physical. My body convulsed every so often, my head felt like it was being demolished with a sledgehammer, and my chest felt tight.

After last night, it was like my mind was running free of memories I had suppressed for so long. Maybe my body was, too, because the emotional flu and withdrawals felt eerily the same. I remembered feeling the same sickness from time to time when I was young, probably when Janis would quit giving us whatever the hell she'd been giving us.

It explained a lot, though. Why whenever I took drugs or drank, I had a higher tolerance to them.

Janis had started us early.

That line of thought started me on another.

What would have happened if Molly or the school wouldn't have gotten involved? Sonny worked so much, he didn't have a clue what was going on. And the more Janis gave us, the more we probably became tolerant to it. She would have had to keep increasing the doses until she went to stronger meds.

Maybe she had.

Then maybe she would have pulled something like the mom did in *Sixth Sense* and started giving us poison, making

us sicker and sicker every day, until we just died from it.

There was a distinction between sleeping meds and household cleaners, but...it made me think. A drug addict will keep pushing the limits to get high. Maybe she would have too. We were nothing but a hindrance to her.

Her cries came back to me, and I shuddered.

From a child's mind, she was crying over a death of someone she loved and couldn't live without. And she was. But from an adult's mind, she was sobbing over her freedom dying a little more every day.

Our home had been the cage, and she had been shackled to us inside of it.

It had been so much easier to blame Sonny, to set it all on his back and stone him for it. Because this...

This was eating me alive from the inside.

Our own mother didn't love us.

She actually...hated us.

We made her sick.

We were cancerous spots on her freedom that were starting to spread.

I sighed, thinking about Sonny Girardi.

That was why he did what he did—hold in this secret after she left. A poisonous secret that probably started to eat him from the inside.

Sonny knew it was going to be easier for us to blame him instead of her, because this truth...it was a killer.

Luci was like him in that way. I always saw it as them being doormats. Allowing people to just trample all over them. But I suddenly recognized the strength it took to absorb the blows from the world to protect the ones they loved.

I recognized it because I didn't have that kind of strength. I had inherited Janis Nicole Hickey's cowardice. When things

got hard, or uncomfortable, instead of taking the blows and working it out, she fucking ran from the work and pain.

All she cared about was herself.

I didn't feel the maternal urge in me to have kids, but I still saw them as innocent little beings who needed to be cared for and protected. I'd been around a lot of dark shit in my life, people who seemed like they were put on this earth to corrupt it, and from that experience...I knew children and animals were the definitions of true innocence.

That's why kids and animals sense bad vibes from people and places better than adults can. There are no grey areas there. It's one or the other. Yet...they still come into the world with pure hearts, not understanding what it means to hate—not until someone teaches it to them or does something that makes them feel it.

I didn't hate Janis back then. I didn't even hate my dad.

Not until she made me believe my dad was killing her and she had to get away or her life would end.

I hated Sonny Girardi since that day he turned his back on us.

I loved and defended her even when she did.

The truth my sister gave me was a hand turning my snow globe upside down, and my insides felt twisted, my thoughts and feelings floating around, about to land in entirely different places.

Because my life was entirely different.

I loved my dad for the sacrifice he made for us—so we would never feel this pain.

I loathed Janis Hickey for being a manipulative, abusive, self-absorbed bitch, plain and simple.

Nazzareno's arm tightened around me, reminding me he was there, and I strummed my fingers against his skin. He'd been holding me like this all night, giving me a soft place to land.

We were supposed to be leaving, but instead, Nazzareno made the decision for us to stay longer.

For however many days and nights, he took turns with my sisters staying with me. If he wasn't with me, he wasn't far. Usually helping around the villa. He brought me countless meals and snacks every day, feeding me. Even when I grinned some and turned my head, he insisted.

“Have you ever tried to coax a wild bird into your palm?” He set the spoon close to my mouth and I opened. It was the most delicious soup I'd ever eaten. Minestrone. My sister said Nazzareno had bought all the ingredients and taught her how to make it. It was the kind of soup that warmed not only the bones but the soul.

“No,” I whispered, my voice hoarse.

He set the bowl to the side and went to wipe my mouth. I tried to move his hand, but he refused to let me. “You must earn their trust first. Once you do...you cannot squeeze them too tight or force them into a place they do not want to be. You must show them how loved they are, how wanted, and if it is right, they will willingly leave their heart in the cage. Then you leave the door open so they can come and go as they please, but they will always return to where their heart is. If something is special enough, the one it belongs to will always be back for it.”

We stared at each other.

I had no words.

I was too tired to form them.

He leaned in and kissed my forehead. “Rest now, little bird.”

I did, until it was time to go.

Nazzareno picked me up set me in the shower. He washed my hair and my body, then he dried my skin, carrying me to a seat after. He ran his hand over the scar on my foot, up my legs, just like he'd done the night he set me on the plinth, his lips following their trails. His lips were soft, but his kisses

were firm, and I could feel them in my sluggish blood, knocking on my weary bones.

He wasn't trying to get in.

He was already there.

He was reminding he was.

I wasn't alone.

I looked away from him. "I don't deserve this pedestal," I whispered as he dressed me.

"No," he said. "You do not."

My eyes found his.

"You deserve so much more. You deserve to reach heaven, angel."

He took me by the hand before I could lose it again, and we met my sisters and Lilo in the kitchen. They walked with us to where Nazzareno had parked the bike. We stopped in front of another villa, only two doors down from theirs.

Nazzareno nodded to it. "Roots," he said.

"We thought you might like to be close," Luci said.

"You bought this place for me?"

Luci squeezed my hand. "We all did."

I looked at Nazzareno.

"I have already gutted what needed to go. The rest...you can decide if you want to preserve the original or have it completely redone."

"When did you do this?" I whispered.

He nodded toward Lilo and Lucila's villa. "While you were asleep."

I felt like I'd fallen asleep and woken up in a different century. Everything had changed. I wasn't sure how I knew, but I felt it.

My life was never going to be the same.

I wasn't afraid of having this place and committing to it.

My soul ached for it— a soft place to land and rest for a while.

We all said our goodbyes, and I promised I'd meet them in Naples, Florida after my business in Italy was done. As I walked away, it was the first time I'd ever felt an invisible string between my family and me. It was stretching, and unlike before, it was going to pull me back whether I wanted it to or not.

We idled by Nazzareno's bike.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Surprise," he said.

We didn't go far. We went to a hotel in Naples, and then Nazzareno took me out to lunch.

"Tell me about this surprise," I said. "I need just a little hint."

He grinned. "The first one...I would not call it special, but informative."

"Informative?"

"*Sì*. The fates were kind. Rosaria Caffi will be at Teatro di San Carlo here in Napoli. The opera is Don Giovanni."

"I don't understand."

He looked at me seriously. "You wanted answers about Tigran's death. She will give them to you."

"What?"

"Are you not seeking them anymore?"

"No. Yes. I mean...she's not going to talk to me!"

"She will."

"How are you so sure?"

"The attention will be on her."

Okay, so I could see that about her. But I had no clue if she was going to want to delve into her personal life and open up

to me. I had only wanted to know because I wanted to feel like his death was worth something, even if it was over someone I didn't feel was.

Nazzareno checked his watch. "Let us eat, then we will do some shopping."

"When do I...talk to her?"

"Tomorrow night." He watched me for a second. "Are you not up for it?"

He knew damn well what he was doing—egging me on. And it was working. My spine started to stiffen, I started to sit up taller, and my curiosity pulled at the scent of blood.

Even if I had changed, there were some things that would always stay the same.

Instead of the thought scaring me, I was relieved. If I always followed my passion, that meant some things had staying power in my life.

Including love.

I smiled. "Lunch better be a good one, then, because if you're treating, we'll be shopping for hours."

He threw back his head and roared with laughter. "I will see how much damage you will do."

Challenge accepted.

THIRTY-TWO

AVA

I LOOKED out over Napoli from our fancy suite. A grin still lingered on my face as I toyed with the straps of my soft robe.

Nazzareno had just stood behind me, his arms wrapped around me, making some wisecrack about having to put his credit card out because my shopping trip yesterday had set it on fire.

In all fairness, I had warned him.

It was a bad idea to challenge me to make a dent in his funds.

He had it, so...I spent it without worry. The proof was still packed in an insane number of bags in our room and hanging up in the closet.

He was only joking, though. He seemed...proud to do it, like it made him feel like a man to provide for me. It was the same look on his face when he told me about the villa, though he had admitted that Lucila and Lilo had put up the original money for it. Then he went and paid them an absurd amount for a one-euro villa to make a point.

He was the only man going to take care of me in that way.

Even though I didn't mind spending his money out on the town, I wasn't sure how I was going to feel about it long term, given our...arrangement. An arrangement I had not fully committed to. And if I did, I wanted some independence from it.

I lifted my shoulders and brought the fabric up to my nose. His scent clung to it. I turned away from the window to go and find him, but he was making his way back toward me. He'd been dressed in a suit, the tie undone, and now his shirt sleeves were rolled up, and he was just so...fucka-licious.

His eyes met mine and lowered. He knew what was on my mind.

Except...he was followed by what seemed like a team of women, who had a team behind them carrying bags. He introduced them to me. The women were a group of stylists he'd hired to get me ready for the night.

I'd casually mentioned to him the day before how nice it must be to have an entire fashion team at your disposal, and... *tada*, I had one.

That Fausti influence and money was like magic.

While the beauty squad started to set up their things, Nazzareno took the ties of the robe and pulled me close with them. Staring into my eyes, he backed me up until we were in our suite. The door clicked with a soft *ting*, and it was the opposite of the look on his face.

His hand slid underneath the robe, caressing my bare skin, until both of his hands were on my hips, burning me down to the bone.

“What did you say to me in Rome? My woman has needs...”

“Yes,” I breathed out, closing my eyes, and then breathed in deep. His cologne and my perfume made the perfect scent in the room we shared.

If both of our essences danced through it, it was an erotic one. And I took another shuddering breath when it hit my nose at the same time one of his curled fingers drifted over my thighs.

“Open your eyes, *uccellino selvatico*.”

As slowly as his finger had floated over my skin, my eyes opened to his. At the intense look, like he was ready for dinner

after he'd been out hunting too long, my hands reached for his wide shoulders. I clawed at him, and he hissed out a breath at the same time he pulled my back toward him, my hips jutting out to give him easier access.

He said something in Italian when his eyes roamed over my soaked thighs and stilled on my *cucchia*.

“Mine,” he snapped, but it was almost whispered.

I could only nod. Words were failing me as I opened to him.

His fingers slipped inside of me, and I gasped out at the surge of pleasure. Slowly, he started to move them, until I was begging into his mouth, asking for more.

“Is this what you need, Ava?”

“Yes!”

“Tell me what you need.”

Garbled words came out before I could form coherent ones. “More of you.”

It felt like he curled his fingers inside of me, and my entire body convulsed as I rode out the drowning wave. When I could breathe again, my cheeks heated some at how fast he could make me orgasm. My eyes blinked open to his.

Nothing had cooled.

He stuck his two fingers in his mouth and pulled them out slowly, groaning as he did. “You taste so fucking sweet on my skin.” He used the opposite hand to skim my lips. “Do not be ashamed of what my body can do to yours. This man’s body bows to his woman’s only.”

My hands reached out for the wall as he got down on his haunches, just like he did the night he set me on the pedestal and started to kiss my skin.

Higher and higher, until his tongue was licking my thighs clean.

When his mouth pressed against me, breathing me in, tasting with flicks of his tongue, my cries sounded like they

were hitting turbulence.

It felt so, so fucking good.

He increased the tempo, and I sank my fingers into his hair, pressing myself against him even harder.

The Rose 5000 had nothing on him.

His fingers pumped into me as his mouth sucked and his tongue licked.

I was so sensitive from before, but my body stubbornly refused to give in. It wanted more, more, more...

“That feels so good,” I barely got out. “Ah!”

He started biting me, sucking, increasing the tempo.

Fuck.

I couldn't hold on.

I gripped him even harder, trying not to surrender, but my body was obeying his even though he wasn't speaking the order. I was like a wild woman as I rode his face, all my inhibitions free.

“*Gaungit!*” I cried out. It sounded like a foreign word, but it was a cry of delicious defeat.

Before I recovered, he had me facing the window, looking out over the city, as he grabbed my hair and turned my head away from it some, so he could see my eyes.

I was about to beg for a break. Fire still rushed through my veins, heating my body, and I wasn't sure if I could handle another go round. My clit was tingling like a bell that couldn't stop ringing.

“I don't think I can—”

“You can.” He pulled at my hair as he rubbed my entrance with his swollen cock. “You can take all of me.” He leaned in some and breathed hotly in my ear, “You are so fucking wet for me. I can still taste you on my tongue. I am starving to drink you in again.”

We both groaned when he entered me some. My hands went to the window, palms facing out, but the entire world was nothing but a blur.

All I could feel was him between my legs. All I could feel was him conquering and loving my spirit.

He growled, low in his throat, and my eyes slowly opened some. A man had stopped, talking on his phone, and he was gazing up. He couldn't see, but it was setting Nazzareno off.

He squeezed my behind as he pushed in even deeper, and I had to steady my breathing.

"No one touches what is mine," he growled out. "I will kill for this. For you. Tell me you understand me."

"I do. Ah!" He squeezed so hard, and at the same time, rammed himself inside in a thrust that sent me reaching for steady ground, even though I had barely moved. "I DO!" I screamed out.

"I am the only man you depend on. You need blood. I will give it to you. You need a kidney. Mine is yours. You need a heart. You already have a spare, the same as my rib." He thrust inside me again. "I am the only man this body and what is inside of it belongs to."

"YOU ARE!"

He growled again, but when I peeked to look, the man on the pavement was gone. It was a noise made from triumph, like his scent alone had made the man move away from me.

My hands curled against the glass because there were no sharp shards to hold on to.

"You will come to me now." He thrust inside of me so hard, I cried out, the glass fogging from my desperate breath. The way he was positioned behind me, and his hips...they were pumping upward, hitting a spot that was about to send me flying from this height and soaring across the sky.

Then I did what he ordered me to.

I came to him.

Around him.

And he came inside of me, another growl vibrating low in his throat.

It took me a few minutes to notice, but my palms had slipped, even if my feet were steady on the floor. My thighs trembled, my knees knocked, my heart raced, and my lungs burned. My *cucchia* had turned into another pulse. It still throbbed, and if he even tried breathing on it, it wouldn't be able to recover.

Nazzareno's arm came around me even tighter, pulling my body against his. He nuzzled his face in the crook of my neck, and I moaned—that small act had set me off again.

“Talk to me, my beautiful bird.”

I couldn't. He had to give me a second.

He lifted me off my feet, carrying me to the bed. I plopped over. He slipped his pants back on, picked me up again, and with a dramatic rush, charged toward the other room. The women all stopped what they were doing and stared at us. He set me down on a chair and moved in the other direction with a focus I couldn't keep up with.

A few seconds later, he had a straw to my lips, urging me to drink cool milk. My eyes lowered, before they rose to meet his.

“*Bene.*” His deep voice was like sandpaper grating against my already sensitive nerves, and I shivered.

“*Molto bene,*” I whispered.

I wasn't feeling faint because of not eating. I was feeling faint because of him.

He told the women something in Italian, barely looking at them even though I was positive they were staring at him without his shirt on. The button of his slacks was undone, and...my thighs went to open, automatically surrendering to him again, but I clasped them shut.

No.

Nope.

I never thought I could ever deny myself another orgasm from him, but both physically and emotionally, he'd exceeded all my needs, then again...there was still a small fire of hunger there. An internal bonfire he'd started in me, and I knew it would never go out.

Which was intimidating, but at the same time...so peaceful.

I wondered if love was just a bunch of mixed metaphors and contradictions. Ever since I met him, I was full of them. It was a madness I couldn't edit out of my life.

He set a hand on each of the arms of the chair and leaned in close. "Do not lie to me, Ava." His voice was serious, and so was the look in his eyes. Rarely did he show unease, but I could see it.

I reached up and touched his face. "I'm okay, Nazzareno. I'm just drained. Aren't you?"

"For you, never."

That wasn't what I'd meant, but I didn't argue. It went beyond a simple question and landed in a place inside of me that had been closed for too long.

All I could do was nod.

It took him a second, but he stood with a sigh. He said something else to the women and they lifted their tools, like they had heard him the first time and had been ready to get started.

"I will be back soon."

"Are you leaving?" I wasn't sure why that question made me feel so panicky, but fuck me, it did.

He shook his head. "I will be on the other side of the suite."

I watched as the royally fierce lion on his back disappeared and the women all got to work.

Face, hair, nails...

Instead of relaxing, all I could think about was how when he walked away from me...it felt like he was taking the meaning of my life with him.

I'd chased it for years, and since I'd caught it, I wanted to stay with it forever, but I wasn't sure how this story was going to end.

One of the women put her hand on my shoulder. "Relax," she said in a soothing voice. "We are here for you."

A knock came at the wall, and we all looked up.

Beni smiled. "You look as if you could use a good song."

"Stronger," I said. "A good stiff drink."

A few seconds after, one of the women handed me a glass.

I thanked her and took a sip. I was just being sarcastic. But since it was here...might as well indulge some.

"What is in your mind?" Beni asked.

I sighed and started with the most imminent.

"Rosaria Caffi."

He waved his hand, like he was waving off the worry. "She is easy."

I lifted my brows. He gave me a blank look. He didn't get the metaphor.

I sighed even longer. "What's Nazzareno doing?" The words were rushed, and I knew why. This was going to be my life, always wondering what he was doing after he walked away from me.

Would he be making babies with her?

Taking her out to eat and shopping—making her smile at the beautiful things he said.

Holding her hand and kissing it when he knew she felt lonely.

The things that would haunt me when he left, would they haunt her too?

Beni looked behind him before he turned toward me. “Taking or making a call.”

I closed my eyes, sinking into the chair, trying to relax, trying not to think about who he was talking to.

It was impossible, and I hated myself for it.

A song came through the speakers, and I opened my eyes. It was a 1990s hit that was probably popular everywhere at the time of release. It was just one of those songs that never quit.

Beni came dancing into the room, singing, “Ice, *ice*, baby.”

I couldn’t help it. I threw back my head and laughed like he’d stuck his finger in my side and wiggled it.

He seemed to feed off it. He kept dancing, knowing every word to the song.

Movement behind him caught my attention.

Nazzareno stood in the shadows, a death glare in his eyes—aimed at his cousin.

He was making me laugh, and he wasn’t.

Beni noticed. He grinned at Nazzareno, roaring a little, and squeezed his shoulder as he left the room.

Nazzareno took a seat close to me and didn’t move, not until I did.

THIRTY-THREE

AVA

OKAY, this was a tough one. I did *not* want to resort back to thinking of movies when something in real life resembled a scene from one of them.

That was Janis's thing. And even though I couldn't change everything about myself that was like her, there were certain things she chose to do that I realized were my choice too. But it was so hard *not* to think of a scene from one of her favorite movies in this instant.

Because...

This was my *Pretty Woman* moment, the one all women deserve.

The beauty squad had done everything to enhance what was naturally pretty about me. My eyes popped, winged liner giving them a cat-eyed shape, and my lips were scarlet red. My hair was swept up and done in a French twist, but the shorter strands were lightly curled and framed my face. My gown was white, off-the-shoulder with a plunging sweetheart neckline, and cut low in the back. A piece of fabric was tied around my hips, and it draped as long as the hem, creating an hourglass figure. I wore white elbow-length gloves.

It was a modern-day version of a dress from the 1800s, which seemed to fit, since Teatro di San Carlo is one the oldest opera houses in the world, dating back to the early 1700s.

My accessories, along with my heels, were gold to warm it up some. Including the million-dollar, or more, diamond necklace around my neck.

I ran my gloved fingers softly across it, turning my neck left and right to admire how it glimmered against the soft lights.

My skin pebbled at the memory of Nazzareno setting the cold fire around my neck, his touch warm as he'd secured it. Then he'd kissed the nape of my neck, his mouth lingering, as his eyes turned up and met mine through the mirror.

Soon after, he left me alone to check on our ride for the evening, but his presence floated in the air like his cologne.

I needed a minute to process.

I took a deep breath, running a hand down my gown as I exhaled.

Even though the event in Venice was ritzy, this one...felt different.

It felt like I was going out on a date with the most eligible bachelor in the world, but his heart was already attached to mine.

He walked into the room and stopped.

I slowly turned toward him.

Our eyes met from across the suite like it was the first time.

If my heart was a bird with wings, it would have levitated outside of my body.

He was dressed in a black three-piece suit including tails.

He was so fucking stunning. A character straight out of a romance book. A man who came into my life holding a single white lily, the tips stained with blood.

He spoke in Italian before he translated the words for me. "You are a feast for my eyes." He held his arm out for me, and I took it. "Later, after you tease a hunger like none other out of me, I will devour you."

I smiled some and he kissed my hand.

We stopped on the way out to grab my cloak. He set it around my neck, and I looked at him in surprise.

“My cloak from Venice! Where did you find it?”

“I took it,” he said, buttoning his long coat. “I planned on returning it when I found you.”

“You were going to look for me?”

“*Sì*. I had to know who you were.”

“Wait!” I removed the bandage tied around my elbow.

Earlier, while the team got to work, a private doctor had stopped by and took bloodwork from me. Nazzareno wanted to know if I was anemic or not, and if not, what was going on. The doctor had asked me if there was a possibility I could be pregnant. I told her not likely, I was on birth control, but maybe she caught the pause before I answered. She had me take a pregnancy test. It was negative. I couldn't tell if Nazzareno was relieved or disappointed.

After I threw the bloodstained bandage away, I picked up our conversation. “You could have just asked me,” I said as we made it to the elevator. The feel of the dress against my legs was cool, and the fabric was as giving as a cloud at the bottom. I couldn't fit a finger inside the top.

“Could have,” he said in a musing tone as the elevator closed. “Fate had other plans.”

The entire lobby seemed to stop and stare at us as we exited.

I sighed, not used to this kind of attention. I was sure every female eye was on the gorgeous Italian specimen of a man next to me. “I guess they're not used to seeing people dressed this way anymore.”

Outside, a man in fine livery opened the door to a royal-looking car for me.

Nazzareno gave me his hand and I took it, about to slide in. He stopped me. “They are not used to seeing an angel float through a hotel every day.”

Laughter barreled out of my mouth as I got into the car. It wasn't all that ladylike, but the things he said sometimes... they made me feel nervous and high at the same time. He could be so fucking romantic, and I knew it was going to take time to get used to it.

He held my hand as the car drove us through the streets, and when we came to the opera house, I fogged the glass with my breath.

Royals were in attendance.

Nazzareno kissed my hand. "Relax," he whispered. "You are the only burning candle here."

"What does that even mean?" I smiled.

My breath caught when he smiled back. "You are soft candlelight on the inside, and it is apparent on the outside. You have a warm glow about you that cannot be bottled. Women will be envious, and men will fall in love. Tonight will be a challenge for me."

We strolled inside arm in arm, and the beauty stopped me in my tracks. The entire place looked to be as old as it was, but it was somehow preserved in time, like something I could imagine an Italian Phantom hiding out in.

The rich crowd meandered in the lobby before the show, and a few people stopped Nazzareno to talk to him. A few were inquiring about his airline. Others were asking about his family. A few women fluttered their lashes at him and smiled shyly as we walked past. He acted as if he didn't even notice them.

I was waiting for someone to ask about his fiancé or the wedding, but no one did.

We took our seats, and after the lights went down and the opera started, I could feel his eyes on me. The show was moving, more so than I thought it was going to be. It almost felt like baseball. I was never much of a fan of watching it on the television, kind of like watching paint dry, but in person—it was thrilling. I knew how that sounded even in my head, comparing a sport to the classical opera, but...it fit.

Nazzareno released my hand, and his started to creep underneath the slit in my gown. I blinked at the stage and then blinked at him. His eyes were lowered, the bright lights in the dim theater making them seem more light olive in color, and I sighed out a breath at the intensity.

His hand crept even further up, and I relaxed in my seat some, closing my eyes as he bypassed my underwear and started to rub me between the legs.

The music seemed even louder over the thundering of my heart, and as the notes rose and fell, so did the tempo of Nazzareno's fingers as they mimicked them. My body ignited, and I gripped the arm rest of my seat, holding on and trying to control my breathing as his finger slid up and down.

My blood was a rush of fire to my *cucchia*, and I was soaking wet and pulsating, my body trying to put it out.

My hips were almost pulsing up to meet his insistent touch. My breaths were coming in pants, and sweat coated my body. What made it even more exceptional was that my mind was turned off, but the music still played as he became the conductor to my body.

Rosaria Caffi hit an exceptionally high note, and so did I. I screamed out when my body shattered like glass, and the pleasure rushed in and swallowed me whole. Except...when Rosaria's voice came down, the end of my scream seemed to echo in the theater.

The crowd got to its feet right after, applauding.

Nazzareno stood with them.

Except he was applauding me.

As Nazzareno led me backstage to meet Rosaria Caffi, I walked in a haze.

He had just made my entire body hit a note high enough to crack bone.

I was pretty sure the entire house had heard the end of my orgasm.

How was this my life?

“This is different,” he said casually, people dodging us as we walked through what still seemed like a chaotic backstage.

“What is?” I croaked out.

“You are quiet.”

I hit him on the arm, and he exploded with laughter.

“I can’t believe you did that to me—*right then.*”

“Some people feel the music underneath the skin, and some people only on the surface.” He shrugged. “I made you feel it deeply.”

Couldn’t argue with that. I’d never hear opera music again and not get turned on.

We slowed before we came to Rosaria Caffi’s private dressing room. A few people loitered outside of it. Brando and his wife Scarlett, Rocco, Dario and his wife Carmen, and Romeo and Juliette.

“Shit,” I breathed, thinking of the last time I’d seen Rocco, Brando, and Scarlett. Both times, I was not where I was supposed to be—on the outside, with the press.

Nazzareno stepped up to them, greeting his cousins and their wives. He introduced me. Even though his cousins were beyond fine-looking men, there was nothing there I was attracted to.

Nazzareno was the only man who had pull in my life.

I took a deep breath when it was time to come face to face with Scarlett again. Her green eyes were just as unnerving as they were the night of the event. Even more so because I wasn’t loaded on something that asshole had given me. I felt the true power of her stare, but to my surprise, she shook my hand warmly and smiled at me.

“I’m glad to see you made it out of the palazzo without staying lost,” she said, her voice as soft and warm as her

touch.

“No,” I whispered. “I might have been lost for a while, but I was found in that huge maze.”

She looked between Nazzareno and me, and her eyes seemed to sparkle. “Sometimes when we think we’re lost, we’re not lost at all, but on our way to where we’re supposed to be. We must have faith that our love is directing our steps.”

“That’s so deep,” Juliette said.

Romeo sniffed, but he wasn’t crying. “Sissy moves us with her words.”

Juliette rubbed his back. Carmen grinned at me.

Brando...Brando was gazing at his wife like she’d created the clouds, and he was floating in them. Okay. Maybe that was a soft metaphor for him, because he was all brooding darkness, but the truth was in his eyes.

He was so in love with her.

It was moving.

In fact, I could tell they were all in love with their wives.

Except for Rocco, who I hadn’t seen with his.

The wife I was about to talk to about Tigran Macaluso—the man she might or might not be in love with.

Rocco was talking to Nazzareno, and they seemed to have a close relationship, but I had noticed something that made Rocco stand out among his brothers and cousin.

He wore loneliness like a cologne.

If all these men were statues, he’d be the most solitary figure, gazing out with eyes that couldn’t seem to find the end to his torture, because there was another side to him still missing.

He was the kind of man who, on the inside, seemed to be...a deserted island. I recognized it, maybe because I’d been called a lonely bird before. There was something deep inside

of me that burned to show him love, to hug him tight and tell him he wasn't alone.

His gaze moved from Nazzareno to me, and he studied me for a second before he turned back to the conversation.

His green eyes were warm, but there was something cold about his demeanor. Guarded.

Maybe because of who I was.

The chilliness disappeared when his eyes roamed to Scarlett for a second, then smoothly went back to Nazzareno, who had quickly glanced at me too.

Brando had noticed it all.

These men could focus on the conversation and keep an eye on their women, like they were just smoothly sipping whiskey and smoking cigars.

Then a familiar face showed up, and I noticed how rigid Nazzareno became.

Renato.

The cousin from the event in Venice.

Renato was with his own group, and the men greeted each other before they nodded to the wives. Renato's eyes lit up when he noticed me.

Nazzareno stepped away from Rocco when Renato took a step closer to me.

Rocco's eyes narrowed as he looked between them and then at me. His searching gaze wasn't as chilled, and I wondered if it was because suddenly, I was a person of interest.

Renato took my hand and kissed it. "Peperone," he whispered.

I held back the urge to laugh. It sounded like he had just called me pepperoni.

"It means sweet pepper in Italian," Scarlett whispered in my ear, but she was grinning too.

“Scarlett.” Brando called her name and the look he sent her seemed to warn, *stay out of it*.

Stay out of what? I wanted to ask, but then I realized how Renato and Nazzareno were looking at each other. Nazzareno’s eyes were guarded, and his hand on my lower back was possessive. Renato seemed to have a *I saw her first* claim in his eyes. I was never one to be able to read an entire room full of people, but I felt the tension building between them like when the music built into a crescendo during the show.

I’d read about how territorial these men could get over women through books, but it was the first time I was experiencing it on this side of the page.

It made me fucking uneasy. I was anticipating them going for each other’s throats.

“I have been looking for you, angel,” Renato said. “You disappeared on me after you set a challenge at my feet.”

“I—” I glanced at Nazzareno. His eyes were hard on his cousin’s, but I knew I had to tread lightly when I answered. “It was a hectic night.”

Renato nodded, and his eyes seemed to harden over. “I have been told you were drugged.”

I sighed. “A man slipped something in my drink before you talked to me.”

Scarlett squeezed my arm, but it was in a protective way.

Renato ran his top teeth over his bottom lip. “I will find him, and I will kill him in your honor.”

“Do not waste your time.” Nazzareno’s voice was cold. “He has already been spoken for, or I would have already killed him.”

“*Cugino*,” Renato said, like he was just noticing Nazzareno. His voice was upbeat, but there was a taunting note underneath. “It is family news about your engagement now. Congratulations. It will be the wedding of the year, I am

sure.” He looked at me. “Perhaps you will consider accompanying me, Peperone.”

Juliette gave a cackle when Renato called me Peperone, and Romeo draped his arm over her neck, pulling her in close, grinning.

“I won’t be here by then,” I blurted out.

Renato studied my face. “It seems my *cugino* has not made you fall in love with Italy. After you spend time with me, you will. I will convince you to stay.” He winked at me.

Nazzareno went to step around me, but I stepped in front of him. His chest was hot against my back, but I forced out the words, “Spend time with you?”

“*Sì*. You have two days to collect your things from Nazzareno’s place in Rome, and then you will accompany me to Milan.”

It seemed like Nazzareno and I both looked at Rocco at the same time. His eyes were serious on Nazzareno’s as he gave a curt nod.

Luca must have made the decision.

I wondered if I would ever be able to leave without his permission.

I glanced at Nazzareno.

No, not Luca’s permission, but his.

I already knew the answer to that.

He would never let me go.

Something happened while my attention was elsewhere, trying to think this all through, because one minute I was standing in one place, and the next, I was standing closer to Scarlett. I could feel her cool breath on my shoulder as she watched the same scene.

Nazzareno and Renato standing toe to toe, their noses almost touching. Rocco stood almost between them, like he was standing in as a referee to make sure the rules of the family were kept.

I wondered what happened if they weren't?

There were books that mentioned wars between the family in general, but no specific battles that would give me insight into what might happen, especially if a woman was at the heart of it.

I didn't have feelings for Renato, or had even thought about him after the event in Venice. Maybe if I said the first thought, I could end this. I deliberated for a second before I took a step forward and opened my mouth to speak.

Scarlett caught me by the arm, and when my eyes met hers, there was so much knowledge there. More truth than any history book written on this family could share.

She shook her head at me and mouthed, "You can't stop this."

Why? Because Renato had already claimed me?

She nodded, like she'd read the thought in my head.

Fuck. I didn't even like him, but he had made a claim on me. Maybe he felt I'd challenged him at the event in Venice? Because I wouldn't dance with him?

Nazzareno had made a claim on me too.

Two opposing claims, and I knew what this situation spelled: danger.

Then there was Luca, sitting behind his desk, looking over all of us in his kingdom, moving our pieces around whenever he felt like it.

My eyes quickly looked over the men that were around us. Brando's eyes were no longer on his wife, but on the two challenging lions standing nose to nose. Dario. Romeo. The men in Renato's group. They all seemed to be salivating at the thought of bloodshed.

"These men love nothing more than shedding blood for love," Scarlett whispered so softly in my ear, I shivered. "They turn into something other than men. They turn into beasts for it."

“Because it means they earned it?” I matched her tone, but I thought maybe mine came out even lower. I didn’t expect her to answer, but she did.

“That’s a big part of it.” She squeezed my hand. “You’re intuitive—you read deeper than just the words on the surface of the page. You’ll need that keen sense to survive in this family.”

These men love nothing more than shedding blood for love. They turn into something other than men. They turn into beasts for it.

I could understand it if the man was free of obligation, free to love who he wanted in the light and dark, but Nazzareno was not free. He had given his word to commit his life to someone else.

This fight was a waste, given our situation.

As far as I knew, I couldn’t be forced to stay with Renato forever. He could try to seduce me but *try* was the main word in that sentence. Sooner or later, Renato would have to let me go, and that was that.

But after that...if Nazzareno wanted to see me again, would he still have to fight him? Or would he be ordered to stay away from me, since he had a wife and I was only the side chick?

Grr. This family and its rules were so complex!

And...

Fighting over a side chick.

Shame was not usually an emotion that washed over me, but I was being supported by all these respectable wives, and it almost sucked me under.

Even if Nazzareno’s marriage was for show, it was still going to be a marriage, and I was going to be the third wheel of it.

My attention snapped away from the thought and focused on the two growling men when Rocco said something in Italian.

A second after, a cool breeze glided over my back, and Rosaria Caffi stepped out.

She rolled her eyes at the two men. “I do not even want to know.” She looked at me. “You must be the nosy little journalist from New York.” She stepped back. “Come in.”

I looked at Nazzareno, but he was too focused on Renato to look at me. I didn’t know what to do.

Romeo Fausti seemed to make the decision for me when he gave Scarlett a subtle nod and she took me by the hand and brought me into Rosaria Caffi’s private dressing room, closing the door behind us. Rosaria was already sitting at the vanity, looking over her reflection in the mirror. She was still in costume.

Scarlett turned to me, blocking Rosaria.

“There’s nothing you can do about what’s going on outside of this room...right now.”

“You make it sound like I have a say in any of this,” I whispered.

“You’re a woman in this family,” she whispered too. “You have all the power.” She hesitated, deliberating. “The man who gave you the drugs the night of the event in Venice...do you remember what he looks like?”

I gave her the description of the man in the cab, telling her I thought they were the same. “French accent. Goes by the moniker ON. That’s all I know.”

“Oh God.” It was something someone says right before they pass out. The blood drained from her face, and I grabbed her arm, worried she might hit the floor.

“Do you know him?”

It took a second for her eyes to focus. “Stay away from him,” she barely got out. “If he’s after you, let this family take care of you, Nazzareno or Renato, until—”

“What is all that whispering about?” Rosaria called from her seat. “Is the nosy little reporter too afraid to talk to me in

private? Did you tell her I bite, *Bella*? It is the truth, I do, but not hard, unless it is requested.”

Scarlett lifted her dress some, turning around to face her. “I believe you’ve met your match. She’ll bite back.”

“*Bene*. I like it rough.” Rosaria tilted to her side some to see me. “Nazzareno did not mention what you wanted to speak to me about. I figure it is about tonight’s performance?”

“No,” I said. “It’s something I need to discuss with you in private.”

“Private?” She laughed. “You’re a journalist. Nothing I say to you will be private.”

“This is.”

“I highly doubt it.”

“Tigran Macaluso.”

The silence that stretched between us made Scarlett look between us. Then her eyes landed on the door, and a second later, a knock came at it before it opened a crack. Her husband looked at her, and it seemed like he called her to him without a word.

Before the door shut with a soft *click* and it was just the two of us, I caught Nazzareno’s eyes. He was staring behind Brando until the wooden divider shut in his face.

I couldn’t focus on that right now, though. I was in the room with a biter.

Rosaria Caffi was a beautiful woman. She was classically Italian, with olive skin and black hair. Her features were slim except for her lips. And I already knew the power she carried in her pipes. The opera world had dubbed her the songbird. She came from a long line of them.

Her marriage to Rocco Fausti was a mirror to the marriage that would happen between Nazzareno and Elettra Buratti.

“What is it that you want, Ava...Girardi, is it?”

The playful note to her tone had gone, and in its place, all seriousness.

“He’s dead,” I blurted.

“I know,” she said softly.

I studied her face carefully. She wasn’t giving anything away. Her tender tone was the only soft about her in that moment.

“Tigran is—*was*—my brother-in-law’s uncle. He was a good man. And he didn’t deserve what happened to him. I was with him moments before he died. I just want to know...did—*do*—you love him?”

She turned toward the mirror and looked herself in the eye. “Love is a complicated word in this world.” She sighed. “But did I have feelings for him? *Sì*. That is the truth.”

If that was the truth...a little hole in my heart closed. At least he had meant something to her. His death was not in vain.

I was willing to believe that.

“Thank you for your time, *Signora Caffi*.” I went to leave when she stopped me.

I faced her because my back felt exposed. This woman might have the voice of a bird, but I could tell she had claws as sharp as the men.

“You did not fight your way into this family for that information. Why are you here?”

“That’s a complicated answer with many moving parts.”

She studied me, then spoke. “Nazzareno is engaged to Elettra Buratti. My family has been friends with hers for years. I know her. In the beginning, she will be fine with your body warming his bed at night, but as the years pass, she will get sick of a cold bed. But what shall she do? She will know that her husband will not allow another man to get past her sheets, even if he has deep feelings for another woman. If she does allow another man to go deeper than her physical needs...” Her eyes narrowed. “He will kill him. He will rip out his heart and leave something symbolic in its place.”

“Like a photograph?”

“Depends on the man.” She waved a hand. “Poetic justice is to each his own.”

“What happens to the heart?” Detective Joe never told me that. If they ever found out where Tigran’s heart went.

She smiled, and it was chilling. “Again, depends on the situation, but in the one I described before, to his bride, of course. If his wife yearns to see the truth in another man’s heart—her husband will serve it to her on a silver platter.”

I almost whimpered. Rosaria had been given Tigran’s heart. I steadied my voice when I said, “Got it.”

“Do you, you poor thing?” She ticked her mouth. “You have no idea what you are setting yourself up for. You will *not* be the wife. You will *never* be the wife. This is the woman he makes vows to. This is the woman who can manipulate him into separating from his soul for a few precious moments to take a life in her honor. You will always be the woman he hides in the darkness.

“After a while...you will start to become *his* ghost. You will disappear in the villa he sets you in. You will disappear in his main life, until night falls, and he can somewhat still make out the shape of you following him around, pining for a love you will never receive.” She tapped her top tooth for a second. “This conversation does not go past this room. If it does, it will not be a missing heart you will have to fear, but any meal you sit down to eat. I will make the poison *so* sweet. That is... if Elettra does not do it first.”

She turned back to the mirror, and I was dismissed.

THIRTY-FOUR

NAZZARENO

ONE OF MY planes waited for us at the private airport after the opera. I did not change into my uniform this time. Ava was still in her gown. I kept her hand in mine as one of my pilots greeted me as we made it up the stairs. I acknowledged the welcome and we boarded.

Beni tapped his hat to us as we took our seats. The stewardesses rushed around, preparing for the flight, especially since they knew I would be taking it as a passenger. Something I had never done.

The takeoff was smooth enough.

Ava gazed out of the window as we climbed, reaching altitude. She did not protest when I unlocked her seat belt and positioned her on my lap.

“I should change,” she whispered, attempting to leave me.

“No,” I said. “Not yet.”

She nodded and rested her head on my shoulder, closing her eyes.

I expected her to demand answers to what had happened between Renato and me backstage.

Instead of air flowing through my nostrils when the scene came back to me, it felt like fire.

He was going to challenge me for her if she was not handed over to him in two days' time.

He had gone to *Zio Luca* and told him he had set his eyes on her first, I had intervened, and fate might be confused as to which one of us she should choose since I did. A few witnesses had stepped up and said they had witnessed her interest in him at Venice. Renato recounted me being there, watching the scene unfold, since I had been watching her. He claimed Ava had agreed to go with him that night, but family business (the fight between my father and *Zio Luca*) had taken priority over everything else, and she had been lost to him.

Until someone had told him about the journalist from New York who was with me in Naples at the pizzeria.

Zio Luca forgave the accusation of me intervening, since he was the one who had ordered it after the event. I had not purposely set out to confuse fate. It was just a twist of it.

My uncle was right. I had never been out to confuse fate. Because fate knows what is right and what is wrong, even if sometimes our paths to right are filled with challenges.

What they did not know was that after the blood had been cleaned from my father's legs, and I had been free to fly again, I would have searched the world over for her. I had wanted to set the cloak with my insignia back around her shoulders, my own hands fastening it.

It was symbolic.

A claim.

I would be the only man to take care of her.

I even had the crystals replaced with real diamonds.

However, Renato had made a claim on her as I had stood there and watched. He was not a man who claimed much, and for whatever reason, he wanted her.

Salivated at the thought of having her.

He was prepared to spill blood over her.

So was I.

However, my situation was different. In the eyes of the family, he was free to make the claim, I was not since I was

formally engaged to Elettra Buratti.

There comes a time in every man's life when he must decide which road to go down. I had two ahead of me.

Challenge him first, which would begin with a different set of circumstances and lead to others.

Or he could challenge me first, which would lead to an entirely different set.

It all depended on the rules of the family and the man in charge of our justice system.

Zio Luca.

If he was powerful enough to rule this family, he was wise enough to open his ears to fate and listen as it whispered in it.

He would make the decision on how my fate and Renato's would go in the name of love and honor.

A low growl vibrated in my throat at the thought of how Renato had been looking at mine, thinking she was his.

If he had been surprised that I set my chest against his, our eyes meeting, challenging, he did not show it. But he showed how far he was willing to go for her.

So did I.

Rocco intervened, being that his position in the family is directly underneath his father's, and wanted to know if either of us was presenting a formal challenge.

If so, we had to speak on it.

If not, we had to walk away, and *Zio Luca's* order would be set in stone: Ava would leave with Renato in two days' time.

Fuck if that was going to happen.

Renato and I had each taken a step back. It meant that no formal challenge had been spoken aloud, but that did not mean it was over. It just meant that Renato was a formidable opponent who was not hot-headed. He would convene with his side, and so would I to form battle plans.

There were even instances where money and property were exchanged for whatever had been set on the field as prize, but never a woman. It was a strict rule in our family.

A woman's love had to be bled for with the value of our blood, not paid for with worldly goods.

Which was a way for a man to prove his unyielding love.

The men who were doing it out of pride, and nothing more, had a hard time forfeiting his life for it, which took the challenge out of the amphitheater and turned it cold.

Love was the one thing worth living and dying for.

Still, because we caused a scene at the opera with our display, we would have a price to pay individually, even if it was not war.

In this dispute, however, I would not have the support of my father, or whoever was above me. Even if I pledged fealty to my uncle, it would depend on how he felt about the situation as to the outcome of it. And he would only give his ruling after my loyalty was sealed on his side.

I could still lose Ava forever, even after I lost my faction of the family.

Because of my position as the first-born son, I had options my brothers did not, even if I bore the brunt of the decisions. If my father would have died, I would rule my faction. Unless he publicly acknowledged that he was giving it to one of my brothers, which he had not.

I turned my eyes some and caught the attention of one of the stewardesses. She straightened her cap and her uniform, hurrying over.

"Whiskey," I said, my voice low and full of broken glass.

She rushed off.

I could feel angel eyes on me, and I turned some, meeting Ava's stare.

"I have no clue what's going on right now, Nazzareno," she whispered. "I don't like it."

The stewardess was back, and she set the glass down in front of me. She waited, until I told her I needed nothing else and thanked her.

“The same could be said for you,” I said.

Her eyes searched mine. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I took a deep drink of fire and let it burn. The gems in the lion’s eyes of my signet ring caught the overhead light and sparked as I set the glass down. “You are different after your meeting with Rosaria.”

“Yeah.” She sat up some. “I am. She’s not very pleasant.”

“Tell me, what did she say?”

Her head went back some. “Are you mad at me?”

“Mad.” I made a deep sound in my throat. “No. I am not mad.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You should.”

“Please, enlighten me, *oh* great one.” She forced my arms from around her body and crossed hers.

“The Encyclopedia Fausti has finally run out of answers.” I sighed, taking another long drink, before I told her all I had been thinking about.

The rules of my family and what could possibly come of this. I wanted to kill the worry in her eyes, but I could not shield her from the truth.

She took the whiskey from me and knocked the rest of it back, barely wincing. “What can I do to...stop this?”

“*Niente.*”

“I know that one. *Nothing.*” She looked away from me for a second, before she met my eyes. “How is this even fair? I don’t even know Renato. We had a brief conversation. That’s it.”

“That is enough for some men.” I ran my knuckle down her face, and she closed her eyes. “It was for me.”

“I don’t know what you just said...that last thing, but I can feel your meaning. Me too, Nazzareno Fausti.” She looked out the window, the lights of the city below us dotted like stars. “How long do we have until we know what’s going to happen because of this?”

“Time moves differently in my family, not like it does in your line of work—we do not rush.”

She sighed, and I turned her face toward mine.

“Give me this worry, at least for tonight.”

She breathed out and then nodded. She tucked herself closer to me and fell asleep in my arms. An hour later, she woke up when I strapped her in for the landing.

Her eyes fully opened when we bounced. “That was not as smooth as yours,” she said, smoothing out her gown.

The highest compliment from an angel.

Her eyes were curious as we stepped off the plane and into an entirely different city. They narrowed when the staff who greeted us sounded different as well.

“German, maybe,” she said to herself.

I kept her hand in mine as we made it to a waiting SUV. The driver opened the door for us and tipped his head to me.

“*Capitano* Fausti.”

I nodded and set my hand on her back, helping her in, setting the hem of the gown inside before I slid in beside her.

“The accent seems familiar,” she said. “Are we in Germany?”

“Copenhagen.”

“Ah,” she breathed, looking out the window for a second. “What’s special in Denmark?”

“The second surprise is here. It is for pleasure.”

“Pleasure,” she repeated, trying to copy my accent.

The SUV came to a stop outside of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. An art museum. It was empty of patrons and

museumgoers, since it was closed at this time of night, but I had made plans for this.

The driver opened my door and I stepped out, giving Ava my hand. I held it as we walked up to the steps, and the museum curator smiled at me.

“Come in,” he said with a heavy Danish accent. “Come in.”

He stopped at the entrance, saying how excited he was to receive my call, and how pleased he was to do this for us. Then he motioned to the museum, which was quieter than the statues, and told us to enjoy our night.

The light taps of Ava’s heels made a symphony as we walked through the Pantheon-like room. She was quiet, and I was thankful for her silence—for her to give me the chance to gift her something that floated high above words.

She stopped at a few pieces that seemed to move her, but our steps continually moved forward, to where we were supposed to be.

In front of the statue, she stopped and blinked at it for a second before she turned her stunned gaze on me.

“This...” she barely got out.

I lifted her hand and kissed it. “*Si*.”

“This is how you sat me on the plinth. How you were in front of me...what you did to me.”

“*Adoration*,” I read the name from the plaque out loud. Stephan Sinding was the Norwegian-Danish sculptor who had created it. “How this man’s lips adore this woman’s skin. How his chest aches to go beyond flesh, to stain his lips with her blood, to touch his mouth to her bones, to slide into her heart and live there forever. This is love—worth standing for, worth bowing to; worth living for, worth dying for.”

She made a strangled noise in her throat, and her trembling hand squeezed mine, like a woman trying to staunch the rush of blood from her wounded lover.

“Ah.” She cleared her throat. “What’s the story between you and this statue?”

She was buying time, attempting to get her feelings in order so she could speak. Her voice was strangled and tight.

“A member of the Royal Danish family uses my airline from time to time. On a trip, he told me I should spend a few days here. He thought I would enjoy the art in this museum. I decided to visit. This piece spoke to me. *This is how love should be. This is how a man is supposed to love a woman.* The thoughts, in the voice of my grandfather, took root inside of my head. I vowed to set the woman I would adore on a plinth just as this one, and by recreating this scene, I would set our love in this mold forever. Me at her feet, because I am not good enough for her love, but I will still claim her heart, as though I am stealing her soul through a kiss.” I used my thumb to dry the tear slipping down her cheek.

“How are you even real?” she breathed out before she flung her arms around my neck and sobbed into it.

It reminded me of her cries when she found out the truth about her mamma. I held her so close, she was breathing me in instead of air. Her tears were soaking my shirt, and I absorbed them as if they were lifeblood. She pulled away from me some, and I held her face in my hands, kissing it.

“Wait. You need to know things about me. I’m not who you think I am.” She wasn’t taking a breath. “I couldn’t commit to a rent-controlled apartment, Nazzareno! I couldn’t even commit to a dog who is at the end of her life. All I had was a cat, because she’s a real bitch and would eat me for dinner if she could.

“I’m the girl who was always looking for her next mistake. I slept around just to make them. Just to feel like I was wanted for a night, and then I was gone before dawn. It made me claustrophobic to stay. It made me feel trapped! I couldn’t wait to get out of there, you know? It was like the longer I stayed, the tighter the shackles felt. The world is so big, and there are so many men.” She covered her face with her hands and groaned.

“I’m just like Janis! My sister never said it, but I know she thought it. I mean, I even slept with Tigran, my sister’s uncle-in-law, because he was there! A warm body. And when I went back for my phone, he was gone. His heart was gone.” She cried even harder.

I held her even harder, but it was not only to keep her together.

It was because of what she had just admitted to me.

Her cries faded into the background. I could not hear over the roaring of my heart. My self-control wrapped my temper in a chokehold so I would not leave her to kill someone. One of the men who knew how she felt from the inside.

I had killed them from her memory, but hearing it made me snap. I was not a man wired to share.

She grabbed the lapels of my suit and yanked on them. “It all changed when I met you, Nazzareno. For as long as I’ve been obsessed with your family, I’ve been obsessed with *you*. This is going to sound so fucking corny, but you’ve softened my rough edges, even though I never thought I needed them softened, so I don’t care how this comes out.

“I’ve always loved you. You were who I’ve been searching for. For the first time in my unsettled life, I want to be home. With you. Even if you pulled out shackles right now, I’d offer you my wrists *and* my feet. But I had to tell you what kind of person I am. Because you don’t deserve to go to war over someone you don’t know. You don’t deserve to go to war AT ALL over ME!”

I lifted her up, setting her over my arms, carrying her toward the door.

I did not remember the ride to the hotel.

All I remembered were the poisoned tips to her words.

THIRTY-FIVE

AVA

OF ALL THE places I'd ever dreamed of visiting, Denmark had never been on the list, but if skies existed there, Nazzareno had a passport.

Which meant...the world was his.

My world is his.

I sighed out a breath and went to the window in our suite. Even in the darkness, Copenhagen seemed to be a colorful place with a lot of water, and the hotel had a chic, cosmopolitan feel to it, with the bold lines of an industrial design.

The dress I wore felt out of place here.

I felt out of place, like my bones didn't fit inside of me anymore.

I was back to the jellyfish again.

Lifting my dress and taking a shuddering breath, I turned and stared into the darkness of our room. The only light came from outside, and it wasn't much. Nazzareno had left me in the room after he'd set me down and disappeared. I doubted he had left me alone, but it felt like it.

Maybe he was somewhere in the expansive suite—taking or making a call again.

Or maybe he was sitting alone in the darkness, keeping distance from me.

I'd told myself before that I wasn't going to be honest with him about the guys in my past, but I had to let him know who he was fighting for.

A woman who had been just as flaky as Janis.

All that changed when we'd found each other, but it felt right to get it off my chest. It was proof that I didn't deserve such honor from him. It should belong to a woman who had a good heart and tender soul.

He might have softened me up some, but I was still...me.

The spawn of Janis.

I also couldn't deny that Rosaria's warning, about me becoming a ghost, had made me feel like I wanted to run for the first time since I'd met Nazzareno. I hadn't, but my feet felt cold in that moment.

My mind kept trying to convince my heart that it was better to take myself out of this situation completely. If I could talk to Luca, maybe convince him this was all a big mistake...

Then again, what if I said the wrong things and made the situation worse? I wasn't sure how much worse it could get, but there was always that chance.

I wiped my eyes, knowing I probably looked like a hot mess when I pulled back fingers stained with black mascara. He'd even wasted his money on a beauty squad for me. It was like eating an expensive meal and then drinking too much, puking it up after.

Even my metaphors were nasty. But it was the truth.

Grabbing a few of my things, I washed up some. I redid my makeup because I wasn't sure if we were spending the night or not. All my bags had been delivered, but that didn't tell me much. He'd bring them here just to ship them somewhere else if this was only a stop to wherever we were going next.

I was getting a migraine, so I took my hair out of the French twist and ran my hands through it. If I brushed it, it would frizz. I twisted it up again because it just didn't sit right

down. This time, though, it was more relaxed and didn't pull at my scalp.

I slipped on another white dress, this one silk and somewhat loose with patterns of cream lace. I didn't have to worry about another pair of shoes then. I left the diamonds around my neck. They were too expensive to take off and just leave around. It was safer if they stayed with me until Nazzareno could deal with them. He'd told me they were on loan from a jeweler that had served his family for as long as it had been a family. Apparently, this jeweler had vaults for their most expensive pieces.

Once done with my appearance, I stood frozen in the middle of the spacious and empty bedroom, not sure where to go. I was being overly conscious of my steps. Fate was on my mind. One foot in the wrong direction, and I wasn't sure what would happen.

Leave, Ava. Just leave.

That always made things better, and maybe it would in this situation, but I knew Nazzareno wasn't going to let me go that easily, even if he was processing the truth I'd hit him with at the museum. I couldn't help it. Putting a woman on a pedestal will do that to a girl with a past—make her honest about her history.

Especially when she might cause a war.

A war.

One fucking conversation with one of those men, and this was where it led me.

All right, I couldn't just stand in the middle of this lonely room all night. I squared my shoulders and started to look through the rooms for Nazzareno. Maybe he had left me. Which meant...for the first time since the night I found out he was marrying someone else, I was alone. But that night, men had been watching Nazzareno's place in Rome. No men were lurking here.

If I left, it would make things easier, right? I could go to Luca, tell him this was all one big mistake, and I just wanted

to go back to New York and live my life. Scarlett even said a woman has all the power. What I took from that: I just had to know how to wield it, like these men wielded swords.

I was good at making plans on the fly. Once I could get out of Denmark, I would call Naomi. She'd given me her number in Rome. I'd find out where Luca's place was in Florence—she'd been there before—and request a meeting with him.

The problem was...I was hesitating. I never hesitated when it was time to go. But invisible cords were rooting me in place, and my heart felt like it was already straining.

What if you always ran because it was preparing you for this moment—a moment that might save his life if you take off?

I took a step, then another, testing the skies a bit.

Fucking windy.

And why am I tiptoeing?

I knew why. I didn't want him to hear me, because if I didn't have the spine to do this, he would never trust me again. He would think I was just like Janis. Waiting for a moment when he was gone so I could stick a knife in his back.

“*Shit!*” I screamed when my foot ran into a hard piece of a furniture placed against the door leading out of the suite, and an even harder man sitting in it.

He rose to his towering height, engulfing me with his body, and pushed me back with his steps. We stopped when we came to a wall. A single industrial lightbulb lit the space between us. Everything else was cloaked in darkness. His eyes were wild, his pupils dilated. His nostrils were flaring, like he was scenting the air.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

“Are you trying to fly away from me, my little birdie?”

“I...I was testing the skies, so to speak.”

“Ah,” he breathed, and it was whiskey-laced and full of alcoholic fire. “You wanted to see if you could do it—leave me.”

“What if I was just looking for you?”

“Do not lie to me, Ava.” He crowded me even more, and I felt like I was going to become flat with the wall. He set an arm next to my head, and another, caging me in. “Tell me now, what did she tell you.”

She. Rosaria.

“She had feelings for Tigran.”

His eyes seemed to shimmer with hate at his name. He slammed his fist against the wall and it cracked, like it was made of glass. “I do not give a fuck about her feelings about a dead man. Tell me what she told you.”

“What does that have to do with this?” My voice hid the panic in my heart. They were both on the rise.

He grinned, but it sent a shot of fear through my system, something no one had done since Janis. My sister used to say I needed it—a dose of it to keep me from getting myself killed.

I’d found myself in the most dangerous situation of all, and I was finally feeling it, like my body had saved it all up for this moment.

The situation was a man who only spoke the truth, when all I’d done my entire life was run from it.

He leaned in close, and I could smell the blood on his hand. He’d busted his knuckles. “She told you something that scared you. That has brought to life your old instincts. You did not tell me those things at the museum just to be honest with me. You are trying to push me away with knives. You knew it would make me go insane to think of you with other men.” His knuckle slid down my neck and hovered over my racing pulse. “You are not afraid of running any longer. *You* are terrified *I* will. You are testing *me* to see how far *you* can push me.”

I shoved against his chest, but he didn’t move. “Let me go, Nazzareno.”

“I will never. You are mine.”

Three words that sent a thrill and a shiver through me: *you are mine.*

I wanted to say, *don't I know it!* But all I said was, "I said let me go!"

"Did she tell you I would fall in love with my wife? I will start to regret you?"

I beat against his chest. "Fucking move!"

He grabbed my wrists and leaned in close. "Did she tell you I will stop coming home to you? That my wife will change my mind and the direction of my heart? She is the one I will make vows to. It is only natural."

"No," I seethed, even though he had not only punched a tender spot but stuck his finger in it and made it bigger. "I didn't tell you about my history because of Rosaria Caffi. I told you about my past because I wanted to kill you like you're killing me."

Okay, that was mean, and meant to hurt, and it just came out. And I realized...I had two reasons for telling him about my past, but that was the main one.

It was killing me that he was going to marry her! So, I used my past as dagger against him.

He was right, too, though. I recognized it after he'd said it. I wanted to see how far I could push him. How much of me he would take before he left. Before he realized how I was not worth his blood. And he'd have someone there for him when he realized it.

His wife.

I'd be left in fucking shambles again.

This time, though, I couldn't survive it. The Fausti family had always been my safety net. My sole focus. It didn't matter what else went on in the world, I could lose myself in them.

If Nazzareno decided I wasn't worth it, I *would* become his fucking ghost. I'd become one of those pining spirits clinging to him wherever he went, lamenting about how he took everything with him. I had no other love to take with me when I left this world, and I wouldn't be able to move on.

Rosaria had either known my fears and voiced them out loud, or she was just seeing it from her perspective, because she's the wife, and her truth and mine collided from different sides. But what she probably didn't know was how much this family meant to me.

They had been everything, and he was a part of them.

Nazzareno would not only toss me aside, but he would leave me empty, without a purpose—like his villa in Orvieto.

I had no fucking clue why Janis kept coming up in my head, but not only was I like her when it came to leaving, but the abandonment issue she created inside of me was like a ravaging river. The fear of getting lost in its eddy came close to swallowing me whole.

“I am killing you.” His voice was deathly quiet, but under the surface, I felt something brewing.

“Yes.” Something was brewing underneath mine too.

In a move so fast it made me flinch, he grabbed the chair he had been sitting on and flung it across the room. It hit glass and shattered it. He picked up the chair again and threw it against another. He stood there, hands on his hips, breathing heavy, staring at the floor.

“Tell me what you want me to do.” His voice was full of gravel. “Speak the words, Ava. This is all you must do. And I will fall at your feet.”

“I don't want that either!” I shouted. “I don't want you to fucking fall!”

“I am who I am. Perhaps you did not know the extent of what came with my name, but you knew enough.”

“Knowing and living it is two different experiences and you know it!”

“What will it be, Ava. Just say the words. Killing you is fucking killing me.”

I reached out a hand like I was falling. “Wait,” I breathed. Then I cleared my throat and dropped it. “Let me go, Nazzareno. Let me go so this will all go away.”

He leaned down and snatched a shard of sparkling glass from the floor. His blood ran down it. He took my hand and carefully placed the cold piece in it, then he held it to his chest. “Let you go?” he whispered, his voice hoarse. “It would be easier to carve my heart out for you to take with you.”

A sharp bite came against my skin, but I didn’t drop the glass. I bled on it, our lives combining on the edge of a sword.

In that moment, the truth I’d been trying to avoid hit me like the chair had hit the glass.

We had few choices in this love, and all of them led to losing him.

Losing us.

They say the best things in life are free. They must have meant an on-the-house gelato on a hot day or a cup of coffee in the winter.

Because love was not free.

There was always a price to pay.

I wasn’t sure if I had enough emotional stock in myself. I wasn’t fucking equipped for this. I didn’t know what to do.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

He didn’t turn his eyes toward the door.

Neither did I.

After a few erratic breaths, he said, “You cannot make the decision. I will do it for you.”

He walked away from me, and I dropped the glass, rushing behind him.

Beni was on the other side, along with Aristide, and a man I didn’t recognize. He was a clergy of some kind because he held a Bible to his breast. He blinked at us from behind thick eyeglasses, his eyes still sleepy. Probably wondering if he was dreaming as he took us in.

We were both stained with blood.

A chill stole over me. I looked at Beni. “What’s going on?” I whispered.

His eyes were twitchy as he looked between Nazzareno and me. He wasn’t fucking with that lion tonight. Blood was in the air, and he was salivating for the hunt.

Aristide touched the man on the back, and it seemed like we all moved further into the suite. Aristide spoke to the man in a hushed tone, in Italian, and he only nodded at whatever was being said.

I looked at Nazzareno. “What’s going on? I deserve to know!”

He smiled at me as he took my bloodied hand and set it against his own. “We are getting married.”

THIRTY-SIX

AVA

I LIFTED my free hand in surrender and tried to take a step back. “Let’s talk about this, Nazzareno,” I said, realizing how truly twisted in the head and heart he was in that moment.

I’d pushed him to a limit, and instead of just stepping over it, he was going to kill it first.

Seemed to be a theme tonight.

I’d been in the same headspace before, but his solution to all our issues sobered me. If he married me, not only would it cause more issues with Renato—I thought—but with the arrangement with the Burattis.

“I have decided,” he said, his tone final. “This is it.”

I wiggled my hand free, and the only reasons he let me was that I was bleeding, and he probably didn’t want to hurt me, and even if I tried to run, where was I going to go? He ruled my world.

“You don’t get to make this decision alone.” My voice was shaky, and I realized I had my hands up, taking slow steps back.

He was following me, step for step. “Sì. I do. You are mine.”

“Snap out of it, Nazzareno!” I snapped my finger at him. “Where did you go? Have you lost your fucking mind?”

He said something in Italian, and then said, “Worse. My heart.”

I stopped when we were in the middle of a dining room. He stopped.

“Okay, okay, okay. Listen. Just hear me out.” I went to pinch the bridge of my nose and stopped myself. “How is this going to help? Marrying me would be a huge mistake...for your health.”

“I do not care about my body.” He shrugged, and I could see how the shirt stretched with his hulking form. He touched his heart, staining the spot over it with blood. “This is all that matters. If I die, I will die a married man—to you. You will wear all black in honor of me while in mourning, and I will have the honor of dying for you.”

“No. No. No! Don’t say that.”

“We are already killing each other. I will lay down my weapon and so will you, and then we will surrender to each other. At least in this, I have made my choice and will stand my ground. At least in this, it will not be my love who tries to take my life, but a battle over it.”

“We can—we can do this another way. You can still marry what’s her name, and...what if I marry Renato? Just for show!” I fucking rushed the words out, because I knew they were the wrong thing to say once they were out.

If Nazzareno could have turned green, it would have been a warning, but the only thing I got was a shot of adrenaline.

He started to advance on me, but his steps were measured, controlled, and that made me want to take flight even more than when he was destroying things. It was such a calculated control...it sent a chill into the room.

I tried to copy his movements, but my feet were not as coordinated as his. Especially because my knees were knocking together. He caught me by the arm a few seconds before I fell, and he pressed me up against the wall, pinning me there. His hand came underneath my jaw, holding it in place, and I could feel his warm blood on my skin. I smelled it like I had sniffed a wet penny.

“Do you want him, my wife?”

My wife.

I whimpered—because if I didn't know it before, those two words sealed his fate. “No,” I breathed out. “I don't want anything to happen to you.”

“It is happening to me, by your refusal.”

“You're not thinking about this!”

He released me, going for my hand to bring me back into the room with his brother, cousin, and clergyman, but I moved too fast. I went to run, but he was only a breath behind me, his arm snaking around my waist and carrying me.

“Put me down!”

He said something to the men in Italian.

I looked at the clergyman. “Don't do this! I don't consent! Do you understand me? I DO NOT CONSENT TO THIS!” I waved toward me and Nazzareno.

The clergyman opened and closed his hands, like he didn't understand.

I doubted it, but I had a feeling the man was terrified for his life. Sweat poured down his face and he kept removing his glasses, wiping his eyes. His knuckles had turned white from squeezing the Bible in his hand.

“If I CONSENT TO THIS, NAZZARENO FAUSTI, YOU ARE MAKING ME CONSENT TO YOUR DEATH! I COULDN'T LIVE WITH THAT!”

He set me down and turned me to face him. “I cannot live *without* you.” His eyes softened, giving me a glimpse into his soul. It was open and vulnerable, showing me something he never showed the world, and I whimpered, my hand shaking as I reached out and went to touch his face.

My hand was like a whisper against his skin. “You're not. I'm here.”

He closed his eyes. “If I go through with the arrangement, I will lose you. It is too much to bear, for both of us. The longer we are together, the deeper I will love you, *uccellino*

selvatico. I cannot bear the loss. I would rather die.” When he opened his eyes, he was closed off and had locked me out. He snapped something at his brother, and his brother nudged the clergyman.

The man stood straighter, bringing his Bible away from his chest.

Nazzareno’s eyes searched the room. He nodded to a bouquet of white lilies in a display on the shelf above the fireplace. Beni plucked one from the group and handed it to him. Nazzareno handed it to me, and a droplet of his blood ran down its petal.

If it would have been a rose, the petals would have dropped off with how bad I was shaking.

The clergyman cleared his throat, and in extremely broken English, read traditional vows.

Aristide handed Nazzareno a ring when it was time, and Nazzareno slipped it on my finger.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I tried to repeat mine. I couldn’t. My mouth refused to open.

Nazzareno turned my face toward his, holding it in place, kissing it, and then whispered against my lips, “You are not dooming me, my beautiful bird, you are giving me life.”

My voice was hoarse as I repeated the same words he had.

Beni handed me a ring, and I slipped it on Nazzareno’s left finger.

The clergyman pronounced us as husband and wife.

As softly as before, Nazzareno’s lips came against mine, but in a kiss that was powerful enough to draw my soul out of hiding.

His too.

Our combined breaths tangled like cords, and when we pulled away, but not far, our breaths lingered between us as he gave a nod to the door.

The men all left at his silent order.

And we were alone.

If my heart was running before, it went into a deep drum beat between us in the silence. And at the look in my husband's eyes, it was about to fly clear out of my chest.

He was possessive before.

He was consuming then.

I wondered if he held out his hand, would he watch as my heart with wings landed, eating straight from his massive palm.

His forever.

Locked in a cage and flying free.

"Nazzareno," I whispered, because I couldn't take the intense look in his eyes for a second longer.

"No," he whispered, undoing my hair, slipping his hand through it. "Call me the name only you will call me."

My eyes searched his. "My husband."

His fingers tightened against my scalp, and he pulled me close, setting his head against mine. "And you are *my* wife." He growled low in his throat, and then claimed my mouth in a kiss that stole my breath.

Lifting me off my feet, he carried me into the dining room, and after setting me down on the table, he took a step back. His nostrils flared, he was breathing heavy, but I knew it wasn't from carrying me.

He was overcome by...emotions.

I could feel them swirling between us, creating a storm.

"You carry the Fausti name now," he said, his accent heavier. He punched his chest. "*My* name. No one will ever be able to take it from you. It is in your blood. It is the reason you

have followed the flow of it, straight to me. It led you to your shelter in this world.”

“Your heart,” I whispered.

“*Si*. It will be a shield for yours.”

I had so much to say to him. Mostly, I wanted to vow to be good at this wife thing. I didn't say that, though, because all I could promise was that I would love him forever, and the rest...I would do my best. My life was so different from his. I didn't come from a family, or even a place, where men acted and spoke like him and his family. But he was right. My passion led me to him, and I would spend the rest of my life learning how to tread next to him in this dangerous and amorous world that was his.

Dangerous.

All that we had to be worried about came rushing back to me, and I looked away from him, wondering how we were going to fix this.

He took my chin and forced me to look at him. “Eyes on me.”

“What happens after this, Nazzareno?”

He slid my ass toward him and I gasped, reaching out because it felt like I was falling. Instead of grabbing for the table, though, I reached for his shoulders. They were just as solid. So were his hands on me.

“After this? We fuck like tomorrow will not come—as the animals we are.” He kissed me wild and hard, and then released my mouth in a rush. I was still gasping for breath. “We make love like we have forever—as husband and wife.” This time, the kiss was slower, more sensual, and I melted into it.

The entire time he'd been slowly inching me back, and my hands roamed over his shoulders in a whispered breath, until I undid his button-down and slid my hands underneath. We both groaned at the skin-to-skin contact. I ran my fingertips along the length of his shoulders, inching his shirt off. I ran my fingertips down his sculpted chest, down to the deep V of his

hips, and when I came to the waistband of his pants, his stomach contracted.

“Your hands on me feel like forgiveness, my wife,” he said against my mouth.

“Your hands on me feel like the most delicious sin, *my* husband,” I said against his.

In all my life, I never thought I’d say those two words. *My husband*. And not only say them, but like that. I would have laughed it off and called someone fucking cuckoo.

Who was the loon bird now?

Our tongues reached out and swirled, and then he pushed his in deep and I moaned. He groaned when my hand slid down his pants and wrapped around his hot, swollen cock. Gently, I stroked him from base to tip, and he pushed into it like he was slowly fucking me.

My uterus contracted, and every part of me felt like it needed to be touched, licked, and sucked. I ached for it. Using my feet, I pushed his pants and boxers down, and after kicking off his shoes, he stepped out of them.

He rose to his full height, looking down on me like I was the meal on the table, and I started to squirm.

He said something in Italian, and then translated. “Still yourself.”

“I can’t,” I barely got out. “I want you so bad.”

“Want me?”

“*Need* you.”

He knocked everything off the table in one violent swoop, except for a fruit arrangement that had been left. He undid the belt around my waist, taking his time undressing me, like he hadn’t just knocked everything to the floor in a rush.

Once he had me naked, he took in my body, and then took in the arrangement. He grabbed for a silver jar in the middle of it, and after opening the top, put it to his nose. His eyes closed for a second, before he poured the sticky liquid over my

breasts and my stomach. He took berries and set them over my *cucchia*, lining them up to form the V shape.

The smell in the air...I was getting high off it. A mixture between him and the sweetness.

He took a berry from me and slid it in his mouth. He wrapped his arms underneath me and pulled me down the table some, then his body engulfed mine as his mouth came over mine. The berry swirled between our tongues, until he let me have it to eat. Before I was done, he kissed me again and groaned as the bittersweet flavor invaded his mouth.

He pulled on my lip with his teeth as he started to work his way lower and lower, until I was writhing with need and about to orgasm just from the way his tongue felt. When he closed his mouth over my nipple, sucking the cream clean, I convulsed and whimpered at the same time. His tongue made a path to the other side, and he did the same.

“Fuck,” I breathed out. “This feels so good.”

I could feel his teeth graze my skin as he moved even lower, licking the sweet stickiness from my stomach, from every dip and indentation of my curves, and when he came to my thighs, he took a berry and slid it over them.

I sighed at how chilled it felt against my overheated skin, and then I moaned when he rolled it around my center, sending beautiful tingles through me. My nipples were stiff peaks, and they ached to be touched again, to be licked, from what he was doing to be from below. I fisted my hands when he dipped the berry inside of me.

“Open your eyes, Ava.”

I could barely, but I did.

He slipped the berry in his mouth, closing his eyes, groaning. “The sweetest berry I have ever had in my mouth.” He lifted me up like he had before and started to devour me, just as he had with the cream lingering on my skin.

The orgasm he’d given me during the opera...couldn’t even compare to this. I hit a note so high, I thought the glass

sparkling on the floor was from a window I'd shattered with my voice.

He was making starving noises, like he was being fed for the first time in his life, and I was grinding against his face, pumping my hips, my hands on his head.

“Oh fuck!” The orgasm that ripped through me felt like it tore something, and nothing but pure warmth poured out of it and set every ache free at once.

All my energy seemed to drain out with it, but he wasn't through with me. He lifted me from the table and set me on my knees in front of the fireplace on a soft fur rug. He took my hair in his hand and pulled my head back as he slowly eased inside of me.

This time, the noise that slipped from my lips was a hiss, before a soft noise moaned out of me. I wasn't sure if I could take it for long. What he'd just done to me...I was still so fucking sensitive. The aftereffects of my orgasm lingered, keeping *me* open and vulnerable.

He slammed his hips against me from behind, pulling my hair, and I screamed out, a mixture of immense pleasure with a sharp bite of pain, as he hissed and said, “Fuck!” He growled low in his throat, his hand caressing my ass, before it settled on my hip. “You will take all of me, my wife.”

All of him?

I must have spoken the thought out loud, because he said, “You will. I will be so deep inside of you, you will never be able to fucking hide from me.”

He eased himself all the way in, before he pulled out some and rammed me again. It sent a jolt of pleasure through me before it receded, and then came back again.

I finally got the waves-to-the shore metaphor.

It was unlike anything I'd ever felt before, and I was just ready for the storm to ravage me, take me under, tear me open again. It felt so good, I started to meet him move for move, both of us making inhuman noises as we fucked like savage animals in front of the firelight.

Our bodies hit, sweat splashed between us, and his balls slapped me from behind.

He roared something in Italian, and I gripped the soft fur of the rug, trying to hold on, but it was no use. My body couldn't meet his again, because it had surrendered, and I shattered around his cock with a deep cry that burned in my chest. He came right after, squeezing my hip and ass cheek as he lost control with a wild growl.

The real world seemed to rush back in.

The heat from the fire, the crackle of it, the woodsmoke scent of it.

I slowly breathed it in, then released it just as slowly.

Nazzareno placed a soft kiss between my shoulder blades, then picked me up and set me on my side. He took his spot next to me, pulling me close, placing soft kisses all over my face.

I closed my eyes and just let him love all over me.

His lips.

His hands.

Even his legs.

We entwined them, rubbing our feet against each other's.

Then his kisses became deeper.

His touches more erotic.

And we became tangled.

Me on top of him, my lips, my hands giving his body love.

Then him on top of me, making me feel rooted, but giving me wings to explore.

He spoke to me in soft Italian, telling me things my mind couldn't understand, but my heart seemed to. Words of romance and honor and love.

Vows he was making to me as his lips spoke directly to all that existed beneath my surface.

He told me he loved me, and I told him I loved him too.

He slid inside of me and we both stilled, holding eye contact, lost to each other.

And when morning broke through the windows, shedding light on all that happened the night before—evidence of blood, sweat, and tears all around us—he was still holding me close, still inside of me.

He always would be.

This...this was *Adoration*, no matter what position we were in.

THIRTY-SEVEN

AVA

MY HUSBAND'S eyes snapped to mine when I hissed out a breath. All I did was turn over on my side, and my entire body protested.

That was what days of sex with Nazzareno Fausti did.

It stretched every muscle and exhausted every bone, even if a deeper part of me felt satiated. Satiated but still hungry. I loved that feeling. It was the same one I used to get when I'd go after a Fausti lead. It was the first thing in my life that I didn't get sick of or have a fear of commitment to.

Nazzareno looked at me long and hard as he fixed his tie. I knew what he wanted to know.

"I'm just sore," I said.

He nodded and left the room. He was dressed in a suit and about to make a few phone calls. He had to take care of airline business for a few hours. He'd convinced me not to worry about family business, but it seemed our bubble was thinning, and a strike of lightning was going to pop it soon.

I could feel the dark cloud hovering, not far off in the distance.

I sat up some, letting the covers fall. When he came back in a minute or two later, he stopped before he came close to the bed, his eyes heating again. Then he shook his head and handed me a glass of cold cranberry juice. He'd been giving me three glasses a day. Usually, he held the glass to my mouth and had me drink that way, but he'd always watch my mouth and...one thing would lead to another. Especially when it

would spill down my skin and he said he had to clean it up with his tongue.

I finished drinking and he took the glass from me, setting it down on the side table. I scooted back under the covers because the suite held a chill. He set his hand on my hip, leaned down, and kissed my temple. His lips lingered before he stood and left me alone in the room.

It was the first time in days—since we'd been married—that he'd left me alone. And the room seemed too big without him in it.

So did my thoughts.

A few days away from the real world will do that to a person.

Being with Nazzareno was a dream, especially because I'd been having him all to myself. But in the silence, I started processing the last couple of days.

Or one day in particular.

My wedding day, or night, to be more specific.

I lifted my hand and checked out the scab that had formed where the glass shard had cut me. It was a reminder that this was real—I was Nazzareno Fausti's wife—and I wasn't dreaming.

Because...I'd dreamed of becoming one of them for a long time.

I never dreamed I'd marry one of them, because I wasn't the type of girl who wanted to get married, but there I was, what I used to call a shackle on my third finger, left hand.

A wedding band that looked like no ring I'd ever seen before. There were a ton of diamonds set in white platinum, but that wasn't what made it so beautiful. It was the design of it. It reminded me of two wings closing over something, protecting it, and each platinum line that created the shape was full of diamonds, like feathers. It was a piece of art to be interpreted.

For me, it was a symbol of his love and vows to me: he'd always protect and keep me safe. The wings were guarding my Vena Amoris, the vein that supposedly ran from my finger to my heart.

I'd read that it was only an ancient belief, but it was still a romantic idea, and the Faustis were known for them.

I lifted my finger, and the diamonds shimmered in the soft light.

Nazzareno would be my shelter when I needed it, but he would always fly with me too. I had the reminder wrapped around my finger.

The ring I'd given Nazzareno was a plain platinum band. I'd spun it around his finger one night after we'd made love. I could have been biased, but it looked good on him.

Excellent, in fact.

Because it was my claim on him.

I sat up like someone had stuck me with a scalding hot poker in my side.

I'm married to Nazzareno Fausti!

In my eyes, the most beautiful Fausti of all.

"Shit," I breathed, then plopped back down.

A small smile came to my lips and I closed my eyes, stretching my arms all the way over my head and pointing my toes. It felt like I could shoot lightning out of them. Instead, I groaned and flipped to my other side. The fireplace was lit, and it helped stave off the chill. I relaxed underneath the thick blankets and cuddled up to Nazzareno's pillow. It smelled so good, and I breathed in while I tried not to think.

There was nothing I could do—then—about the situation we were in.

I wasn't even sure if anyone knew about our marriage, but I suspected they did, because it had been longer than two days, and Renato hadn't come to get me.

My eyes concentrated on the wavering flames, and before I realized it, I fell back asleep.

I wasn't sure how long I was asleep for, but it didn't seem like long before Nazzareno was kissing me awake. I rubbed my legs against the sheets and breathed in deep.

"This bed is so nice," I muttered.

He laughed, and it was soft and raspy. "Even without your husband in it?"

"I didn't say amazing, or even great. I said nice. Though, I never thought I'd say this, but my *cucchia* is thankful for the break."

He threw back his head and roared with laughter. He leaned in and kissed me all over my face, speaking in Italian as he did. I had no idea what he was saying, but I liked it.

He was so fucking sexy.

And...*deep breath*...all mine.

"You have an hour to get ready."

"Why?" My voice was warm and still half asleep. "Where are we going?"

"We are leaving."

I grinned. "You're going to fly me out of here, *Capitano Fausti*?"

He grinned, probably at how no one else in the world could fuck up the word *capitano* but me. He tipped his pretend hat at me. "At your service, *Signora Fausti*."

"Shouldn't it still be Girardi? I thought Italian women keep their last names."

"You will have my name."

"Okay." I shrugged. "I just didn't want to seem like I was showing off or anything by taking it."

"Showing off?" His forehead tightened.

"It's just that...I've loved your family for a long time. Some would say I was obsessed with them. I always preferred

the word passionate, but tomatoes, tomato, right? Anyway... because of that, I just thought it would seem like I was showing off the name.”

“You are a Fausti,” he said. “You are my blood.”

I nodded and breathed out. “Right.”

He took my chin in his hand, leaned in, and kissed me softly. “Get dressed now, my beautiful bird. You are about to fly the skies with your husband.”

“If I ever accidentally flew into hell, you’d be the only one I trusted to fly me out.”

Our eyes met, and his became serious. He nodded just as seriously. “It is my honor.”

I cleared my throat. “Where are we going?”

“Get dressed, Ava *Fausti*.”

Four or so hours later, we landed in Cairo, Egypt, and spent an entire week there on our honeymoon. Nazzareno had sent all my clothes back to Rome and had culture-appropriate clothes waiting for me at the resort. We hit up all the historical places, the museums, and we even went on a desert safari riding camels. I never thought a man could look majestic on such an animal before, especially since it kept making raspberries with its mouth, but Nazzareno pulled it off.

He’d handed me a cellphone before we began and said, “A proper camera will come later, but one step is a step.”

Meaning me taking pictures.

I took hundreds of them and sent them to Lucila constantly, always telling her to be sure to show Lilo and Minnie—and she always told me to stop reminding her, because she always showed them.

After one set of photos I shared with her, she texted me back, *Why do I get the feeling this is going to be your life from now on? I’m going to be getting pictures from you from all over the world. And why do I feel okay about it? Why am I so excited for you? Maybe because I know that now, you’ll come home to me after you’re done.*

One night, after we'd eaten dinner and were walking around the city, my phone buzzed. It took me a second to realize it had. I'd been without a phone for so long, I'd forgotten about having one. It had been my lifeline in New York, and after Nazzareno, if it wasn't for my sister, I would have continued to stay disconnected.

I stopped in my tracks and stared down at the photo.

Beni or Aristide must have been taking pictures while Nazzareno and I were exchanging vows. I didn't think I would have this, and seeing it captured made my eyes burn.

I looked up at Nazzareno and he nodded.

"Even with the mess of life, we are beautiful together, ah?"

"We are." I smiled.

I saved my favorite, of our first kiss, and set it as my screen saver. Nazzareno's contact photo was him on his camel, the desert spread out behind him. I knew I was going to change them out a lot. He was so photogenic, and I was dying to get one of him in his pilot's uniform.

After beautifying my phone with my hubby porn, I forwarded a few pictures of us from the wedding to Luci.

See, I typed. I was being for real. I really did get married in Copenhagen, Denmark.

After I'd told her I'd gotten married, she called me a liar and told me *pictures or it didn't happen*. Because she knew how anti-marriage I'd been my entire life.

She called me after, laughing and crying. Then gave me an update on Sonny and told me he'd asked about me. I grew quiet, and she started telling me more about the baby.

I was going to deal with the Sonny, *now dad*, situation soon, but I couldn't bring myself to do it then. Not because my feelings for him were the same, but because they had changed so drastically. Emotionally, I had to prepare for the day I saw him again.

I was also trying to prepare myself for what was to come with Nazzareno's family too.

We were having the time of our lives, just being together and traveling, but that dark cloud felt like it was inching closer and closer, and I wasn't sure why. Maybe because I knew how serious the rules in his family were, and they weren't just going to disappear because we were in love and had committed to each other.

If anything, the situation was going to grow more intense.

I asked Nazzareno about it on our last day, but he told me I was a newly married woman with a husband who wanted to give her pleasure.

He had a way of making all my troubles fade, and that time was no exception.

As he and Beni flew us home, and I looked through all the pictures in my phone, it was hard to concentrate on them. Old fears were coming back, and I had to blink to make sure none of the pictures had darkened. That our smiles were still in place, and that we both had rings on our fingers.

I had an anxiety attack over it, and my eyes started to play tricks on me. I even stopped the stewardess and asked her to look at the pictures, then asked her to identify things in them.

“Are we smiling here?”

“*Sì, Signora Fausti.*” She smiled politely at me, but I knew she was thinking I wasn't all there. It was a voice full of pity. “You are beautiful, and so is *Capitano Fausti.*”

Boy, did Janis really fuck me up, but I was learning that my sister was right. It was time for me to start taking responsibility for the choices I made and moving on with my life. But it was hard sometimes to leave all the old baggage behind. And the strife in Nazzareno's family was playing havoc on my nerves too.

We were almost to Naples, and I wasn't sure what to expect once we landed, except for a smooth touch down. My husband was good like that.

I sighed and set my phone down. I picked it up. I downloaded the Instagram app, which Minnie loved, and

created an account. I put my username as AF, which is my initials, but also the initials of Nazzareno's airline.

Air Fausti.

There was something there to read into, and I did for a second, but then I decided to concentrate on what I was doing instead. Just...burning time so I wouldn't keep thinking about what was ahead.

I looked through my camera roll and uploaded a picture of me Nazzareno had taken and set it as my profile picture. My side was to the camera, and I was pointing toward one of the pyramids, and from the angle, I looked like I was touching it. My other hand was on my sunhat so the wind wouldn't steal it.

My bio: *A bird who has wings and roots. Come fly with me through many skies.*

I uploaded a picture from Cairo, another of the pyramids, and wrote a caption that spoke to the woman I was not even an entire year ago. I spoke of the deteriorating human condition, of how diseased our souls were, and how it was important to balance darkness with light.

This was my story. It had taken a turn when I'd found Tigran murdered on the floor, and it felt good to express parts of it in the caption of this photo, even if it was addressed to the public. I was speaking to those who understood where I'd been and hopefully where I was going.

I also added a little bit of travel info to the bottom and then posted it.

The stewardess let me know it was time to buckle up for the landing.

As expected, I barely felt it, and once we were off the plane, we took Nazzareno's bike back to Rome, since Lucila, Lilo, and Minnie had gone back to the states.

I held Nazzareno tighter as we made a turn not far from his place. I was starting to recognize the roads. Beni had arrived before us and was walking down the street. He'd parked his car and was heading for the other side of the penthouse.

He stopped to wait for us, and Nazzareno took off.

I made a shocked sound in my throat when my eyes landed on a man who looked familiar inside of a strange car. I slapped Nazzareno on the side, pointing at ON, trying to tell my husband that was him—the guy who had drugged me.

It was too late.

ON revved the car and came straight at us.

Nazzareno turned the bike, trying to avoid him, but instead of getting plowed over from the front, we were hit from the side.

Everything happened so fast, but the moment that stood out to me the most was when my body hit the ground.

It felt like I had run into a steel wall going over a hundred miles per hour, and before I blacked out, all I could think in a panic was...

I can't feel my legs.

THIRTY-EIGHT

NAZZARENO

THE PHYSICAL ACHE in my side did not even hold a candle to the chaos going on inside of me.

My wife was in a hospital bed, hooked up to monitors, going in and out of consciousness.

I held her hand in mine, the heartbeat of a bird in a lion's mouth, and set my head on her arm.

I was a man possessed by two opposing sides.

The angel in front of me.

And the devil inside of me.

I could not leave her side. I could not sit and hold her hand and do nothing about the dead man who tried to take her away from me.

Olivier Nemours.

My cousin had claimed him, but I would go to war with him, too, for a chance to slice his throat open and watch him bleed at my wife's feet.

Beni set his hand on my shoulder. "You should rest, *cugino*."

I said nothing, turning my eyes to her face, setting her hand against my mouth.

Time moved, but it did not make a difference to me. I existed in the stillness with her. It could have been early morning or late night. My mind refused to register the color of the days, since my heart was on strike.

A knock came at the door, but I did not move to answer it.

Aristide came to stand beside me. He set his hand on my shoulder. “Your wife has a visitor,” he said in Italian.

He waited for me to respond, but I did not.

If she was quiet, I was quiet.

“Her father,” he said.

He left and came back a minute later. A man stood by the door, hesitating.

Aristide cleared his throat. “Brother,” he said in Italian. “You should let him have a minute with her. He is her father.”

The man walked in, stood on the other side of her, and took a seat. I studied his face. My wife did not resemble him, but I could see Lucila in his features. Other than that, he reminded me of a man who had lost all his air and was a shrunken version of the man he used to be.

He turned toward me. “It’s true,” he whispered. “She married you.”

I nodded.

“You had to force her?”

A small grin came to my face. No one could force Ava to do anything. She was a wild bird. That was why it was important to give her freedom. However, we were getting married that night, and nothing she could have said or done would have stopped it.

Sonny gave a subtle nod and turned toward her. He touched her hand, a tap that lingered, and then stood. He looked down at me. “Don’t tell her I was here. She would hate it. I’m staying at the hotel down the street.” He gave me the name of it. “Sonny Girardi is my name. I’d appreciate it if you keep me informed.” And he left.

I rested my head against her arm and breathed her in.

A nurse came in and tried to give me pain medication. I ignored her.

Let it fucking burn. Let it split me open. Let the fires of hell escape my skin and remind me of what needs to be done as soon as my wife keeps her eyes open for more than a few seconds.

Aristide was back. I was not sure how long it had been from the last time he had been standing next to me. He set his hand on my shoulder.

“You are burning up with fever.” He left and came back with a nurse.

I heard something about infection, me refusing the medicine, bla, bla, bla, but I tuned them out.

My mamma came in and tried to coax me into my own room. She tried telling me my wife was going to be all right, but if I did not get help beyond what they did for me when I first arrived, I was not going to be.

She sighed when she realized I had inherited my father’s headstrong nature. She took a seat on the other side of Ava, staring at me, but I refused to look at her.

She was gone when my eyes blinked open again.

Rocco stood over me, looking down. “We must talk.” He nodded to the door. “Family business.”

“I am here, brother,” Aristide said, sitting in the opposite seat. “I will keep watch.”

“It is either you and I talk, *cugino*,” Rocco said, realizing I was not moving, “or we will have the meeting here with Renato in a different room.”

“Fuck Renato.” My voice was hoarse.

“Ah,” Rocco said. “There is the lion inside, but the man must choose now.”

I went to stand, but the room spun. My knees brought me down next to her, as if they knew where we belonged.

“Stand,” Rocco ordered, “like a man.”

I met his eyes and rose to the challenge. The contents of my stomach, probably acid and blood, seemed to swish as I

forced my feet to move toward the door. Outside of it, I leaned against the doorframe for support.

Rocco's eyes searched my face. "Renato has challenged you. You have the right to decline, since Ava agreed to the marriage, but the choice is up to you."

I nodded. I knew he would, especially after I married Ava. I'd made my stand, even with my family, and the pieces were going to fall as they may. However, once we returned from Cairo, I had planned to challenge *him* since it was my honor as her husband to do so. Olivier Nemours crushed my plans before I could, like he'd tried to crush us.

Rocco squeezed my arm. It felt like he was keeping me standing, but I knew it was by sheer will alone. I needed to get back to my wife. "When?" My voice grated.

"In time." He sighed. "My father is allowing time for you to heal before you will be properly summoned. This is personal for us as well. Olivier Nemours will pay with his life."

"Not good enough." I took a deep breath and sighed it out. "He deserves to die more than one death. Each time, he is subjected to hell before he returns."

"If only, *cugino*." Rocco released my arm, and I felt as if all support was pulled from beneath my feet.

I hit the wall some, bouncing, and Rocco set his hand on my shoulder, and everything stilled again.

He squeezed. "No matter how this story ends, I am glad you found love."

"I request to challenge Renato in return. It is my right as her husband to do so." I hit my chest. "I will honor her with this battle in her name, and if I fall, I will honor her with my life."

It might seem dangerously foolish to continue this challenge, even with an easy out, but I had my reasons for it. My wife was lacking confidence when it came to her place in my life, and how long I was going to stay. This challenge would kill any lingering doubts she had. It would prove to her

who she was to me and how much I loved her. It was *my* right to give her that.

Rocco looked down for a second and nodded. “Love will be yours forever.”

We both looked toward the door when it opened. Aristide’s eyes were wide. I stood straight, my entire body going numb, except for my focus. It was razor sharp on him. Both dread and relief swirled with the acid and blood in my gut.

“She is fully awake, brother,” he said in Italian, “and asking for you.”

My wife is awake.

I can let go.

The room faded, and someone caught me before I crashed to the floor.

THIRTY-NINE

AVA

EVERY TIME my feet touched the floor, and I felt them, I breathed out.

It was the second thing I asked the doctor when I woke up—*will I ever walk again?* She asked me if I could move my legs, and once my mind connected to my body and I wiggled my toes, she nodded my answer. I must have just hit the cement so hard, my entire body had the wind knocked out of it.

The wind got knocked out of me again when Beni told me what was going on with Nazzareno.

I'd asked for him first, asked what was going on, what had happened to him. The doctor told me he was not in good condition, and she put a hand to my shoulder when I'd tried to stand. Beni had come in and told me Nazzareno had hit his ribs on the curb. Hard enough to break every one of them. He also had stitches along the taut skin over them. When he'd hit, it also tore him open.

We were lucky, the doctors had said. Maybe if Nazzareno wouldn't have thought so quickly, we'd both be dead.

It felt like I was when I looked at him, though. I forced Beni to bring me to him.

Beni nodded. "After his initial treatment, he refused anything else. He held a vigil at your bedside. Once your eyes opened for more than a few seconds and you asked for him, he collapsed in the hallway."

If I hadn't been sitting down, I would've had to.

I refused to leave his side.

I could see how irritated everyone around us was. They wanted to help, but it seemed like out of the entire world, we could only truly help each other. And I understood why he'd held out for me.

I was holding tight to him.

I'd even called Lucila and asked her to sing softly to him over the phone. She wanted to tell me how ridiculous that sounded, but when the tears fell from my eyes, she seemed to sense it. And when I told her how much her voice used to help heal me when I was little, and it could help heal him too, she cleared her throat.

“Okay. What do you want me to sing?”

I gave her the name of the song, and in the background, I heard the piano. Lilo.

Nazzareno and I didn't get a first dance, but when we were in Cairo, I had played the song for him in our room, and he'd danced with me to it. The song was about the woman in me needing the man in him. It was vulnerable, and I wasn't usually that. But with him...I had always been split open.

It felt like my weary soul had sighed when he'd come to get me at the palazzo in Venice, and nuzzling up next to him, had closed its eyes and rested its head on his rock-hard shoulder.

I rested my head on his arm, his skin hot, and let my cool tears fall.

People came and went. Even his mamma. But I said nothing to any of them.

“Your father has gone back home?” a nurse quietly asked me one night.

I lifted my eyes and blinked at her. I shook my head because I had no idea what she was talking about.

“I saw him before I came in. He stood by the door with a bag.” She shrugged. “I thought maybe he was leaving.”

She left, and my head came down to Nazzareno's arm, my fingers entwining with his, and I cried harder, silent tears.

Once they slowed, they continued to slide down my cheeks, even when I'd fallen asleep.

"Tell me who did this."

I sat up straight, my head spinning some, and met his eyes. He wasn't fully awake, but he was concentrating on me, talking to me.

I flung myself on him, and he groaned, but he kissed the top of my head.

"It is good to see you too, my beautiful bird," he hoarsely whispered against my hair.

I smiled and lifted some, too choked up to say anything.

He set his hand against my cheek. "Who did this?"

I set my hand over his and closed my eyes. "Who did what?"

"Made these fall out of sadness."

"You."

"I must kill me then."

Our eyes met, and we both started to laugh. It was awkward how we were trying to kiss and hug, but neither of us cared.

Together, we had survived a battle in this war and lived to talk about it.

FORTY

AVA

TWO MONTHS LATER, we were settling into life in Rome. We were closer than ever, but there was something standing in our way.

Whatever was going to happen with Renato.

Nazzareno had become more focused. Once he was healed and could use his arm, he started a grueling exercise regimen. He'd always worked out before, but nothing this severe.

It gave me a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

He was hiding something from me.

Beni was tight-lipped, too, and so was Aristide. No surprise there, though. They were going with him to the "gym," almost like his spotting buddies or something.

Nazzareno had an in-house gym, so there was no reason to leave, but whenever I brought it up, he said the other gym had more equipment suited for what he needed.

Okayyy. It sounded harmless, but underneath it all, I felt something ominous.

I also felt he wasn't truly leaving the building but going over to Beni's side. Whatever "equipment" he needed was there, because even before ON, Olivier fucking Nemours, he was protective over me. After the crash...he watched me like I might fade from his life.

I watched him like he might fade from mine, too, so we were two passengers on the same cuckoo plane. I figured it was normal, though, because of all that we'd been through.

It was strange for me, though, to react this way. Before, in New York, I had near death brushes quite a bit, and by the next day...over. Maybe because this had to do with Nazzareno too.

Tapping the keys on my keyboard, I stared at the screen a little longer, then sighed. I took off my black-rimmed reading glasses and wiped my eyes before I set them back on. A shadow passed behind me and I turned my head a fraction, but I didn't catch the man who had caused it. Rarely did I.

Men, or soldiers, as Nazzareno and Beni referred to them, swarmed this place.

I was sitting in the library nook with a cup of coffee. I was thinking of writing something for another travel picture on my Instagram. I had enjoyed doing it while on the plane home from Cairo, but I couldn't think of anything worthwhile to say, or even which picture I should share. Anxiety was dampening my creative juices.

I even considered sending an email to Edna and Neil. I didn't, though, and I couldn't pinpoint why.

Standing and stretching, I decided to do a little snooping. On the way downstairs, a mirror on the wall caught my reflection.

My blonde hair was longer than usual, falling past my breasts, my eyes were bright blue, and it seemed like I'd spent the summer on a yacht in the Mediterranean. The sun seemed to be hiding beneath my skin and made me glow. It was only early spring, though, maybe even still technically winter.

I set a hand on my cheek and breathed out.

Damn.

It was crazy how a person could look the same, but not be the same person at all. I didn't need anyone to tell me how much I'd changed on a deeper level, because I could see it, and most importantly, feel it.

I was the thinnest I'd ever been physically, but I felt plump emotionally.

Some things would always stay the same, though. I could be a fucking snoop. I was careful on the spiral steps as I took them one by one. I was determined to get to the other side of the penthouse without being caught. Or maybe Nazzareno hadn't given the men orders to keep me from the other side, just outside. He didn't feel comfortable handing me over to the city alone yet.

I agreed.

Besides, it was more time I could spend with him. We were still deep in the honeymoon phase of our relationship, and I never wanted it to end.

We'd made so many plans. All the places we wanted to visit. All the things we wanted to do. And for the first time since that moment in Edna's office when I gazed upon Marzio Fausti's face...the same intense passion (obsession) sprung up in me, except it was for seeing the world with my husband.

I walked right out of the door to the courtyard that connected the two places but kept them separate. No one stopped me. I walked right into Beni's place and stopped.

It was so quiet.

Where were they?

It was a huge place, like Nazzareno's, and it was empty. Or so it seemed. For all I knew, those shadows could be creeping on this side too. And if Nazzareno, Beni, and Aristide weren't on this side, *I'd* seem like a creeper.

I really didn't give a shit. It was Beni, and I loved him like a brother. Aristide too, even if he was still a little hesitant with me. I thought it had more to do with family politics with him, but we never touched on it.

It was those family politics that made the hackles stand up on my neck. Something was coming, and knowing Nazzareno, he didn't want me to worry. But I knew it was only a matter of time before things moved in a direction that I didn't think anyone but the members of this family could be prepared for.

I wasn't even sure *what* we were preparing for.

Would Nazzareno and Renato have to draw pistols or something?

My heart started to beat faster at the thought, and my stomach felt like it had fallen into a pit.

It might have sounded a bit...archaic, but that sort of violence fit with this family.

I moved further in, peeking in every room, until I came to a spiral staircase. I wondered if it would take me to another library. My heels lightly tapped on the cherry wood, and I stopped on the top step. A long hallway stretched to the end of the building.

Quietly, I took it, noticing a few empty rooms.

Then I heard it.

Grunts.

Clangs of metal.

My feet stopped before my mind had caught up to what I was seeing.

At the end of the hall, there was a long room filled with exercise equipment and even a boxing ring. It had exposed brick walls, and it was hot like an attic that wasn't insulated properly. The windows were tinted, and it gave it an old gym feel.

That wasn't what had stopped me, though.

On the other side of the room, a bunch of old looking swords hung on the wall, and two men circled each other with them raised.

Nazzareno and Rocco.

Beni, Aristide, Brando, Dario, and Romeo stood around with their arms crossed, watching as they challenged each other with weapons I'd only heard about and seen in history books.

What.

The.

Actual.

Fuck.

All they needed were armor and a bunch of steeds and they could ride off into the sunset as medieval knights heading into battle.

My breath caught when I'd realized how simple I'd been when I thought of pistols. There's no honor in that—or this family would think so. Luca had cut off his brother's legs with a sword in Venice for challenging him.

Was this how Nazzareno and Renato were going to battle? With actual swords?

I wanted to interrupt, to accuse Nazzareno of lying to me, but he hadn't been lying at all. He'd been dodging by telling me the other gym had equipment better suited to what he needed.

Swords.

Footsteps pounded on the wood, and I slipped into another room, this one dark because there were no windows, and hid behind the door, my back plastered to the wall.

These men never walked with cement in their boots. This guy was doing it on purpose. Maybe not to catch one of the guys swinging a sword off guard and get his head sliced off.

A vision of a severed head on the floor in Venice came back to me and I took a deep breath and slowly released it.

The clanging continued, until one of the men—Dario, maybe—said something in Italian. The clanging stopped, and the man who was pounding on the wood with his footsteps said something else.

Shit! I couldn't understand a word of it.

Nazzareno responded, and I understood one word: *moglie*. It meant *wife*. He must have been wanting to know where I was. If he caught me, he caught me, and we would do this here, but I wanted to wait until we were alone.

He couldn't do this. Risk his life for something he already had.

Me.

A few seconds later, my gut told me the guy who had pounded on the steps had gone, and it was just the men who'd been in the room left. I couldn't hear what they were saying. Their voices were deep and low. Besides, they were probably speaking Italian. Sometimes Nazzareno would switch to Sicilian. I'd asked him about it before. He was fluent in both since he had family there too.

I could wait them out, but then Nazzareno would know I was over on Beni's side if he made it to our side first. Then again, I might rush out and run right into them.

I decided to make a run for it. I slipped off my heels and peeked outside of the room.

All clear.

I rushed downstairs and made it to the kitchen, about to run for the door, but I jumped clear off the ground when Nazzareno suddenly appeared from behind me. There must have been another staircase on the other side. I thought the door was for a pantry.

I set my hand against my heart, hoping to keep it inside of my chest. "You scared the shit out of me!"

He stood with his shoulder against the wall, a towel around his neck, sweat dripping down his bare chest. He said nothing, just staring at me with those olive-colored eyes that sometimes made him look wicked.

"This is where you've been coming?" I asked. "Just to Beni's side?"

He nodded. "The distance between his side and ours is enough distance between us."

We stared at each other.

I wanted to ask him why he didn't mention that, but I knew why. *Swords*. So, I only nodded back. I opened Beni's cabinet and grabbed a bottle of Chianti. Beni had gone out on a date

with a winemaker's daughter, and he had gifted Beni a bottle he thought Beni would enjoy. Beni offered it to go with dinner earlier.

I looked down at my watch and then wiggled the bottle, thinking of how alike the inside liquid was to my own. Fate was swishing me around and changing everything. "Almost time for dinner."

Nazzareno nodded and placed a hand on my back, escorting me to the other side. The men were already there, and they were sitting around the dining table in suits, having a conversation in Italian.

A man I recognized as one of the soldiers came toward us and nodded at Nazzareno. He nodded back. He went into our room after, and in record breaking time, took a shower and changed into a suit. He'd added his signet ring to his finger. The lion's eyes glowed under the lights.

Brando, Rocco, Dario, Romeo, Aristide, and Beni followed behind him to the door. They crowded around him, two on each side, the rest at his back.

I couldn't see him, but I stood behind him, too, listening.

It sounded like more than one man on the other side, and after Nazzareno said yes in Italian, I had a feeling what was going on.

This was some sort of formal challenge.

Nazzareno had accepted.

The men around him squeezed his shoulder before they moved to the side, and he was staring directly at me.

It seemed like everyone just disappeared after that, leaving just the two of us.

"What's going on, Nazzareno?" I whispered.

"A formal summons," he said.

"You accepted Renato's challenge."

"*Si*," he said, standing taller, like a soldier. He placed a hand over his heart and said something in Italian. Then he

translated for me. “In your honor. He also accepted mine.”

It seemed like all the blood drained from my face when I realized...there might have been a chance for this to be avoided, but he wanted this.

The son of a bitch wanted this!

“You want this,” I said, repeating what the voice in my head had whispered, but the voice coming from my throat sounded incredulous.

“*Si*. No man challenges me for an honor that is all mine.” He hit his chest. “The honor of being your husband. I will erase you from his memory as though he has never laid eyes on you before. Because those fucking eyes want. They put a claim on what belongs to me.”

I crossed my arms and looked away from him. “If something happens to you?” I could barely get out.

“I will have died for you.”

My eyes snapped to his. “Oh, fine, great! I’ll get to live with a love that’ll never be used, because I’ll have no one to give it to!” My voice went up a few hundred octaves. “You’re the only man I’ve ever loved. The only man I’ll *ever* love. And instead of making a way out of this, you go for it straight on, not caring one fucking bit if you leave me behind or not, Nazzareno Fausti. It’s selfish. Instead of dying for me, why don’t you try living for me?” I turned to go, but he grabbed me by the arm.

I could feel his touch all the way down to my bones.

He put this inside of me...a love I’d never thought could be mine, and he was gambling with fate for it.

It wasn’t romantic.

It was a waste.

And I told him so.

His eyes widened for a second before he took me by the other arm and set me against the wall. He looked down on me, his nostrils flaring, his eyes possessed by a dangerous

obsession that ran through his family—teasing the line between romantic and ruthless, seeing how close one could coexist with the other before one got snuffed out completely.

All because of, what...one conversation I had with one of his cousins? I knew this about them, of course I did, how romantic they could be in the name of love, but being in the middle of it, it made no fucking sense.

“I am your man,” he whispered hotly. “I am your husband. You will not deny me this.”

“What are you denying me?” I breathed out. “If something happens to you, you will be denying me an entire life with you.”

“You are only thinking about you, not me.”

“Same with you!” I hissed.

His hold became harder, and I almost wanted to wiggle out of it, but I was pissed off too. I stuck my chin up and kept my eyes on his, though what I really wanted to do was run.

“You do not understand.”

“No, I don’t, and if it means I might lose you, I never will.”

“I will die like a man for a love worth defending, or I will not stand at all.”

He released me, and I wasn’t expecting it. I almost slid down the wall but forced myself to dig my feet in.

“What if I talk to Luca?” I said to his back.

He stopped, and I could tell he was taking deep breaths. “You will do no such thing,” he snapped.

“What if it doesn’t need to come to this? I can explain everything. I can tell him that it was only one conversation, and I never had any interest in...what’s his name.” *Renato*. “Please. I can’t...I can’t even think about what might happen.” *You ending up like your father, or worse, if the wind blows the wrong way and you get distracted.* “I don’t want you to do this.”

He left me alone in the hallway, going to join his family in the dining room. I stood there for a second, a plan forming in my head. I took off for the bedroom, and after undressing from earlier, decided on a form-hugging, light-pink dress with a matching cardigan, both falling to my ankles. I dressed it up with some jewelry, spritzed a little perfume on, and then went into the kitchen.

Nazzareno hired a woman, Carlotta, to cook for us after we'd left the hospital. Nazzareno put me in charge of giving her an idea of the things we liked, since I wasn't big into cooking. I should have taken it as a sign when he wanted more protein added to a diet already packed with it.

Carlotta was in the kitchen already preparing steaks with rosemary. It filled the air with a mouthwatering scent, but my stomach felt too tight to eat.

I started helping Carlotta plate everything up, and she gave me a look, like *what the hell are you doing?* I just shrugged and said, "trying to learn." She shrugged, but I wondered if she was really worried about job security. She didn't have to worry about that with me. I could burn boiled eggs, and had.

I heard voices from the hall. Nazzareno, Brando, and Rocco. Brando wasn't staying for dinner.

Good. I really liked his wife and didn't want to insult her with what I was about to do. But I had a feeling even if I did, she would understand. I'm sure she would have gone to the same lengths to save her husband too.

In her own way, I knew Scarlett was trying to guide me through this life as much as she possibly could. The last time we'd gone out to dinner, she told me a story of how her and a few of the wives had escaped their husband's clutches to go out in New York one night. They had gone to The Club, a nightclub rumored to be owned by Vittorio Scarpone, who was a ghost, if the rumors of his dad killing him were true.

Where and who they ran to was really beside the point, though. She was giving me direction. And so was Naomi when she'd given me a medicine bottle filled with big animal tranquilizers the night I'd found out Nazzareno was engaged to

Elettra Buratti. After the other woman had gone, including the one who had accidentally told me, Naomi had dug in her small clutch and set them in my hand, not letting go until I acknowledged what she'd done.

Given me freedom if I wanted it.

She knew how these men could be.

Control, even the freedom to fly, was an illusion with them, because they knew how powerful their love was. It never felt like a cage, because our bars were made from their arms, and our world from a perspective we loved to see from their laps.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, though. And I was so fucking desperate to save *us* from this.

A small note folded inside the bottle said: *I pill can fell a lion. That should work on your lion.*

I was too anxious to give him that much, so I took one out and grounded it up with parmesan cheese when Carlotta wasn't looking. Then I sprinkled it over the steaks and every man devoured it.

An hour later, their eyes started to droop, and one by one, each fell asleep at his place at the table.

I grabbed my already packed bag and set it by the door. I told the guard standing outside that I thought something had happened, because every man had fallen asleep at the same time. This was the same thing Scarlett and friends did for their night out, but it had involved a taser gun. The soldier rushed inside and, snatching my bag, I hustled toward Nazzareno's garage.

Once inside, my fingerprint popped the lock to all the keys, and I snatched a random set from the hanger. I hit the button and the lights flashed as the horn beeped.

Fuck me.

The car was pearl white with black trim, and looked fast enough to fly, but at least it was automatic. Maybe because it was a Ferrari SUV.

Automatic or not, though, I was a New Yorker. I didn't drive.

I'd learn fast, though.

I just hoped this car was fast enough to outfly a furious lion after he woke up from a nap and realized his wild bird was gone.

FORTY-ONE

AVA

ONCE I GOT the hang of this driving thing, and I wasn't hitting the gas and then the brakes constantly, I found a steady speed and stuck to it, even if my eyes were constantly checking all the mirrors. I felt like I was being hunted. My breath came fast, my heart pounded, and I kept strangling the steering wheel.

Maybe the men would be knocked out for four hours—if I was lucky, eight.

An extra four hours wouldn't go amiss. I needed it.

I called Scarlett, since she'd been in touch with me since not long after Nazzareno had given me the phone. I sighed when she picked up and told me she and Brando were staying at Luca's place in Florence. Luca was there.

His place was about three or so hours from Rome from the directions she'd given me, and I knew Brando was going to be there by the time I arrived. He'd left not too long before me, but I was sure he was going to get there much faster.

All the Fausti men seemed to know how to handle a fast car. Luca had even been a racer in his younger days.

Women. Fast cars. Swords. Horses. Even fucking camels.

Life in general.

They handled it with a powerful smoothness that made it seem easy, when the rest of the world knew damn well life felt impossible at times.

I slowed when the GPS on my phone told me I'd arrived.

Guards stepped out of two security check points as my car approached the towering gates. I gave them my name, they took a picture of me, and what seemed like hours later but only had been minutes, they allowed me through.

Some kind of off-road vehicle was waiting for me. I was instructed to follow it. As soon as I did, and a little bit of space had been put between me and the off-road vehicle, another one pulled behind me. They were sandwiching me in.

My eyes narrowed against the glare, taking in the vast land sprawling around me.

“Shit,” I muttered to myself, squeezing the wheel even tighter.

When Scarlett had called this a “place,” I assumed it was beyond nice, but I had never expected a city inside of a city. Luca’s...kingdom had streets and rows of villas, and the deeper I drove in, the more space started to come between them.

More privacy.

I assumed this was because those areas were reserved for higher ranking members of the family, like Brando, the first-born son of Luca Fausti, and the first-born grandson of Marzio.

That had to come with some major perks.

The off-roader stopped at a villa straight from a storybook, and I stopped behind it. The car behind me stopped too.

Scarlett and Brando were standing outside. He had on the same suit he was wearing earlier, and she was as picture perfect as the surroundings. Her hair was a dark auburn, and her green eyes reminded me of those globes with the swirling color inside of them. She was wearing a dress like mine, but lavender. She was pregnant again, and her hand rested on her swollen belly. Her husband’s hand rested on her neck.

I had a sudden yearning ache for the loss of my husband’s warmth on my own neck. That protective stance that said to the world, *she is mine*, and, *if you dare to come too close... fuck around and find out what will happen.*

I might have hated aspects of this family, but...I loved them too.

Especially the man who loved me back.

Guilt ate at my insides as I got out of the car and walked toward Scarlett and Brando. But I had to keep pushing it down, reminding myself of why I was doing this.

Scarlett's eyes narrowed some before she opened her arms for me. I all but fell in them, and she whispered in my ear, "I understand."

I wondered if she ever had to leave her husband for his own good, but he was still standing behind her, and I didn't want to ask in front of him.

He was fucking intense.

So was my husband, but he was *my* intense, if that made sense.

Scarlett grasped my hand. "I talked to my father-in-law. He agreed to see you."

I took a shuddering breath, and we started walking away from their villa. A quiet settled between us that was somewhat awkward. I couldn't help but assume through Brando's hand on his wife's shoulder, they were having a silent conversation. Her eyes kept flicking up to his every so often, and his eyes would glance at her at the same time.

I sighed. "Okay, let me just get this out there, because I'm sure I'm going to get...stoned or something for what I've done."

All three of us stopped walking.

"I gave them, *probably*, lion tranquilizers." I shut my eyes tight, because I didn't want to see the look on Brando's face when I admitted what I'd done to his male family members. "They should be waking up soon," I finished with lamely.

Scarlett squeezed my hand. "No, not stoned." There was humor in her voice. "You'll probably get roses thrown at your feet. You'll see."

I slowly opened my eyes and then blinked. Brando was staring far off into the distance, a dreamy grin on his face. It almost seemed like he wanted to...laugh. When I met Scarlett's eyes, she did.

"Come on," she said, nodding ahead. "I'm sure you want to get this over with."

Roses thrown at my feet? I wasn't sure what the fuck was going on, but I was thankful Brando wasn't sending me packing back to my husband right then. Or maybe making a case that I needed to be sent back to Malum.

We walked longer than I expected, and by the time we arrived at his *castello*, I was worried about my appearance.

"You look more than presentable." Scarlett reassured me. "You look beautiful."

I ran a hand down my dress and acted like I was straightening up again, but the truth was, I was taking this all in.

This scene, maybe without Brando and Scarlett, was what I had always dreamed my time with the family would be. I'd be invited inside of their gates to get an exclusive, because I had been dedicated to them for almost my entire life, and I'd write a true and just piece on them.

I never dreamed I'd be walking up to Luca's impressive *castello* to fight for my marriage.

Our lives.

More than that, this place was stunning, like something seen in a design magazine at the doctor's office. One of those places a woman like me only imagined seeing in photos, because I never thought I'd ever be able to see it in person.

The door opened, and Margherita Granchio stood in it.

I felt a sudden connection with her.

She'd been the other woman, and somehow, here she stood.

She was impossibly beautiful, and if my math was correct, didn't look nearly close to her age. She was built like an hourglass and had truly one of the most beautiful faces I'd ever seen. Her hair was close in color to Scarlett's, but she had spellbinding hazel eyes that were closer to light brown. And even though I could tell the two women were close, they seemed to be opposites. Scarlett was put together, not a hair out of place, but there was something about Margherita that was wild—a free spirit.

She welcomed us inside, keeping Scarlett at her side as Scarlett formally introduced us. I was instructed to call her Maggie with an almost girlish laugh.

“I remember you.” She roared like I had and then gave me a wink. “It's always good to make a strong impression on these men, and you certainly did.”

“That's not the half of it.” Scarlett grinned at me. “Let's just say...she escaped a pack of wild lions by putting them to sleep for a while.”

After Scarlett told her what I'd done, the two women laughed, and Maggie said she was proud of me.

“It's not every day they get bested, but it's so much sweeter when it's a woman who does the besting.”

“For us as well, my wildflower.”

The three of us sort of clumped together while Maggie went into Luca's open arms. He held her close, and she wrapped her arms around him. Their eyes fell on us.

“It is always sweet when a woman can do what no man can, ah?” Luca grinned. “Our women are strong and clever, two of my favorite attributes.”

Maggie told him what I'd done, essentially, to get a meeting with him, and his grin moved slow, the same look coming into his eyes as Brando's, but then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

I looked at Scarlett in astonishment. She had a huge grin on her face, and Brando an even bigger one—almost a smile.

“Ah,” Luca sighed. “A little sleep never hurt a lion. He will take his rest and wake up even more vicious than before.”

That was why I was probably the only one not laughing. My poor berry was going to have hell to pay for this.

Maggie offered me something to eat and drink, but I declined. Nothing was getting past the lump in my throat. Luca backed up her offer, but again, I politely declined as I followed him outside.

He stopped on the lawn, and the colossal statue behind him caught my attention. The giant made of rock towered over a pond with floating swans, but the odd thing was...the rock giant seemed small in Luca’s presence.

“You are not a woman to cower,” he said to me seriously. “However, I get the feeling you are uneasy around me.”

I sighed. “I’m new here, and there’s a lot at stake.”

He thought about this for a second.

And I thought about how open his eyes were for being so dark. It was almost like he wanted me to get lost in them, because maybe they were a test to see if I could find my way out.

“Tell me, Ava, are you really new here?” He offered me his arm, and I took it.

We walked toward a bench set in front of the pond together. The sun was just starting to set, and everything glowed a reddish pink, including Luca Fausti. Even though darkness cloaked him, the light loved him too.

“I’ve found there’s a difference between what we read in books and reality,” I said. “No amount of research could have prepared me for being here.”

“*Sì*. I tend to agree, although I believe it depends on the author and how well he or she executes the story.”

“Maybe in fiction,” I said. “But your family is real, and I don’t believe anyone has come close to capturing the truth.”

“This is what you planned to do. Capture our truth.”

I couldn't tell if this was a question or not. Rarely did it seem like the men in this family asked them, but even looking back on my time with Nazzareno, they got answers regardless.

"I'm sure you've gotten an extensive history on me. You know I've been obsessed, or as I prefer to call it, *passionate*, about the Fausti family for years. You might even know about the posters on my wall and the cards I made."

His brow scrunched up, and I had to stifle the urge to laugh.

"Posters, I understand this. Cards..."

"Like the ones they make for baseball?" Why was I making it sound like a question.

His face relaxed. "*Sì*. I know what this is." He grinned. "Do these cards include stats?"

"Some of them do, but mostly it was a way to keep track of the different branches."

He nodded. "I would like to see these. You are a creative soul, Ava. A passionate soul."

We walked a few more steps, and it was like he was leading me in a dance.

"Tell me about yourself. Even if I can form a picture from your behavior on paper, the canvas walking with me is open to interpretation."

He was fucking good. He'd turned my point around on me.

I've found there's a difference between what we read in books and reality.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, and...my mouth opened and flowed with information. I told him everything—about Sonny, about Janis, about my entire fucking life.

Why did I do it?

Probably because, like Nazzareno, these men were men to depend on, and although I should have been terrified (and in a way, I was), I mostly felt safe with him. Like he'd bloody his knuckles for me, or even take a bullet for me.

The same as my husband.

And something Edna had told me long ago came rushing back to me. “Marzio was as warm as the sun, and I was the innocent flower opening to him, trusting he wouldn’t burn me. They are like that, you know? It’s easy to open up to them.”

I’d asked her point blank if it had been sexual. She shook her and said, “I wish, but he wasn’t interested in me in that way, even if I had been old enough.”

One day, I’d tell her how right she was. Except this man was making me feel like honey oozing out of the comb.

I finished my sad rhapsody with, “Nazzareno is my family now, and I can’t lose him. We have...” I took a deep breath “...a bond I can’t even explain in words, but his death would kill *me*.”

We reached the bench, and he stood until I sat. He took a seat next to me.

“Do you not have faith that your man can stand against his challenger?”

Great, a question that was impossible to answer without making my husband look weak. “No. I mean. That’s not why I’m doing this.”

“I know why you are doing this. You are afraid.”

“Terrified,” I said.

“It was an honest question about your husband. Is my nephew too weak to stand against the challenged?”

I knew it! *The challenged*. Nazzareno had challenged Renato somehow. I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t. I still had to answer this man with an even voice.

“I know, and the answer is *no*, but...as his wife, it scares me to think that one small second can go wrong, and I’ll have all this love to give but no one to give it to. Nazzareno is it for me. The end of my story.”

“You are poetic. My father would have enjoyed your company. You are stunning as well.”

“Stunning?”

His warm gaze fell on my face. “I know when a woman is fishing for more compliments. You are not. You should know this—you are a stunning woman. It was not only your cloak that sent my nephew in your direction.” He tapped his temple. “You are interesting as well. A power more women should recognize and turn into confidence. It only enhances your beauty. This is what my father would say made you irresistible to men like us.”

“What about you?” I smiled. “Are you enjoying my company?”

He returned the smile. “I always enjoy the company of people who have more to talk about than the weather, ah?”

“That I do.” I turned my face forward and stared at the giant.

The two swans seemed to float on top of the water, their reflections shimmering back at them. They were so graceful. It was hard not to think of Scarlett when I looked at them.

“Do you enjoy stories, *Signor* Fausti?” I turned to look at him, and he was studying the profile of my face.

It wasn’t awkward. It felt tepid on my skin. And it wasn’t sexual either, just a man interested in what a woman had to say. I respected him for that, because not many men in his position would have. But this family respected their women, cherished them, and Nazzareno was proof of that too. But they were also possessive over them and had wild tempers when it came to honor and what it meant to them.

“Luca will do.” He patted my hand. “I do.”

I felt I owed this to Edna after all she’d done for me, and I honestly wanted to stay away from the conversation about Nazzareno until I figured out what else to say. I had a feeling Luca was leading me in a direction I didn’t want to go in. By asking me if I thought Nazzareno was too weak to stand against Renato gave me a bit of foreshadowing.

No woman wanted to admit her husband was weak, especially if he wasn’t, but no woman in love wanted to take a

foolish chance with his life, either. I wasn't all that great with the wife thing yet, but the concern I had for my husband came naturally, and I was going with it.

I switched gears when I told him about Edna. I told him how she had been in love with his father for years after that first meeting, and that candle was still burning hot. I thought maybe if Luca would talk to her, or something, maybe he could break the spell some. Maybe she could find herself again and leave the building. She was always there.

He turned toward the water after I was done. He had his thinking face on.

“Edna Giannini.” He nodded. “I remember her. I also remember the day my father went to see her in New York. I was with him. Her newspaper had written an article on the *Sanguisughe*. They call themselves our rivals, but they are nothing but leeches on our skin. We pluck them off easily.” He waved a hand. “However, they are cruel to weaker men, even women. At the time Cataldo was the head of the *famiglia*. He sent men to New York, to the newspaper. Someone would pay for the mistake of painting the picture that they were inferior to us. Edna was the woman who had written the article.”

He quieted for a second, thinking back.

“We arrived at the same time. My father was there to thank her. The *Sanguisughe* were there to kill her. We stopped death at her door. She would not come out from beneath the desk after. My father was the only one who could coax her out. He could get wild cats to eat from his palm. Ettore, my brother, had been with us. We left the room and gave them privacy. My father had protected her after, in exchange for the truth she had written about us. He had appreciated it.”

He sighed. “I do not think she felt safe enough to leave after. Her walls became her shield, and her pen her sword. Occasionally my father would visit with her, and it was the only time she would leave. He would take her out to dinner and dancing. He knew how she felt about him, but after my mamma died, he only took pleasure in a woman's flesh,

nothing more. The love that has the power to save us also has the power to destroy us. As it should be.”

I looked down at my hands. Luca’s story in response to mine made sense.

My heart ached for Edna, just as her heart ached for the security she felt only Marzio could provide. He hadn’t even touched her in a way that a lover does, but he had touched something inside of her that was afraid, and maybe even lonely.

She’d told me she was tomboy-ish, always running after dangerous leads the way men usually did, and always full of ink from the words she wrote about them. Then she told me Marzio Fausti was the only man who had ever made her feel beautiful—on the inside and on the outside.

“Thank you,” I whispered, “for telling me that. Edna means a lot to me.”

“She mentored you.”

“Yes.”

“You were her eyes, her hands, even her feet on the world outside of her building.”

I thought about that for a second. “Yes, when you put it that way...yes. And she instilled in me a passion for writing, for not being afraid of ideas that were not the norm, for being fearless when I wrote them for the public to read.”

We became quiet, and after a few minutes, it felt like my time with him was coming to an end—I didn’t really want it to. For some reason, he felt like a father figure, and it was nice to just sit with him and watch the swans float by. But I had a reason for this meeting.

I cleared my throat. “I’m not as eloquent with my words or my finesse as Scarlett, so, when I say this, it’ll probably come out blunt in comparison.”

He laughed some. “You are telling me you are not skilled in manipulating me in a way only a woman who holds my attention can.”

“I’m definitely not skilled in that.” I laughed some too. “Not even close to *Signora* Maggie.”

“She is stunning, is she not?”

“A true wildflower.”

He grinned at me. “You are not as blunt as you would like me to believe.” He winked.

“I’m about to be.” I pushed my glasses up on my nose. I had totally forgot to take them off before I left Rome, and just realized it. “What can I do to stop the...war between my husband and his cousin?”

“This is no war,” he said. “This is a challenge for love. *Romantico*, ah?”

“Maybe before I would have thought so, but now...it seems the opposite.”

“Ruthless.”

“Yes.”

“This is because your man’s flesh is on the line.”

“Yes.”

“He feels this is a great honor to do this for you—for your love. He will show our entire family how much your love means to him. Also, you will never be able to question it.”

Even though I never doubted Nazzareno outwardly, he knew I had doubts. There was always a fear beneath the surface that he would walk away like my mom had.

He had been right.

When I’d spilled my guts to him the night at the museum in Copenhagen, it was for a few reasons, but the one that stuck in my heart the worst was the fear of not being good enough and having someone who felt too good leave me behind again.

I knew he was stepping up to the challenge because Renato had made that scene at the opera, but like me and my reasons, Nazzareno had more than one.

He was doing this so I could never question his love for me or worry that he'd leave me.

Not after he was putting his life on the line for our love.

And if he lost?

I would be his last love.

I whimpered at the thought of a last...anything with my husband.

One life would never be good enough. We still had so much of this one left to live together.

Luca patted my hand. "Your husband was trained by my father, his grandfather. He is a formidable opponent, and if his feelings are true, he has more to lose than his *cugino*, ah? This will give him the strength he needs to win."

I nodded in a respectful way, ran my palms against my dress, turned the wedding band on my finger. "Can I put a stop to this challenge?"

He looked off in the distance. "If you are not here, it takes the honor out of it. Even if Nazzareno requests to continue, Renato will not be required to. They will both have lost." He stood and held out his hand to me.

It took me a second to take it. Once we were up, he offered me his arm, and being a gentleman, made it seem like I took it, when he was the one who positioned me that way.

I was too stunned to react; too weak to speak.

"I will get word back to your husband that you are staying the night here as my guest. You will decide tomorrow. Stay and give your husband the honor he deserves, or tap into your power and leave, calling a forfeit."

"If I ever come back?"

"We pick up where we left off, as though no time has passed."

Forever, then.

I had to stay out of his life until our lives were over, and then we'd be reunited as ghosts together.

Either way, we were both dead.

I'd heard it time and time again, the men in this family revered women, rarely hurt them unless the charge was severe, but all those rumors were untrue.

Nazzareno had reached deep inside of my chest and tore my heart out. I was leaving Italy without one, a blood trail leading straight to his door.

FORTY-TWO

NAZZARENO

BLOOD DRIPPED DOWN MY FACE, mixed with the juices of the steak that had been on my plate. I plucked a piece of rosemary from my forehead and looked around the table. Some of the men were swaying, their eyes blinking, trying to wake up. Aristide was sitting as still as a statue but drooling. Beni's forehead was still on his plate.

My eyes met Rocco's from across the table.

Perhaps he was not swaying, but the inside of my skull was. It was hard to tell.

I went to stand, but my body pulled in the opposite direction, and I had to set my palms against the table to stabilize my feet.

Carlotta waved a napkin at my face, speaking in hurried, panicked Italian. She was going on and on about not knowing what had happened. *It was not my food that put you all to sleep!* She made the sign of the cross, then kept fanning me.

I pushed past the weights and walked to the other side of the table, grabbing Beni by the hair and lifting his face. Juices dripped down his cheek too, and he had parmesan stuck to his mouth.

"Ha, ha, *ha*, too cold, too cold," he sang drunkenly. He ran his tongue over his lips, then puckered them, making a suction motion, like he was a baby searching for more milk.

"Hah," Dario said, shaking his head.

“Fuck.” Rocco shook his head hard and loosened his tie. “I cannot escape the clutches of whatever this is.”

One of my men came rushing into the room, Carlotta on his heels, and held up a bottle. I blinked at the small print, before I moved his hand back.

“Lion tranquilizers.” I had to go slow on the *quilizer* part of the word. I was fucking slurring.

“I did not do this!” Carlotta waved her hands. “These were in the kitchen but are not mine!”

She was excited but being fucking careful not to accuse the most important person in this house—in my world.

No, the cook had not done this, but she knew who did.

We all did.

My wife.

Ava Fausti.

I ordered Carlotta to go home. She ran out.

Romeo laughed, raspy and low, and wiped sweat from his forehead. “I do believe we were had by a woman, *fratelli* and *cugini*.” He looked at me, then reached for his glass of wine. He knocked it over and picked up a knife instead. He raised it to me. “Your wife is cleVERRRR, *cugino*. I like it.” A lazy grin came to his face. “I would spank my wife for this.”

Rocco knocked the knife out of his hand before he tried to put it to his lips and drink it. Romeo looked at his hand and then at the table, then blinked.

Aristide’s eyes moved slowly to Rocco when Rocco’s phone went off. Rocco pulled it from his pocket and answered it. I could hear laughter on the other side. It sounded like Brando.

Romeo closed his eyes and laughed quietly, his shoulders shaking, like he was sitting next to his brother, and they were having a good laugh about all of this.

None of us took offense to it. We all fucked with each other when one of the wives did something that bested us. It

showed how clever the woman was, even if her husband did not appreciate it.

His wife, his issue.

My wife, my fucking issue.

Perhaps it was payback, but there was nothing about this that made me want to laugh.

It was the opposite.

My blood was suddenly made of lava, and I breathed fire out of my nose. My fingers gripped the back of the chair with a force that cracked the wood.

I did not even have to ask my men where my wife was.

I already knew.

She had flown away from me. She could not handle what I was about to do in her honor.

Behind me, Beni sang drunkenly, something about the glory of love. Romeo hummed with him. Aristide joined in, finally coming alive. Their shoulders bumped as they swayed into each other.

Rocco hung up. He looked at the table, then at Dario. Dario slapped Rocco on the back of his head, making his hair stand up. Everyone quieted. Romeo gave a howl right as Rocco went to talk again, and Dario went to shove him, but Romeo moved out of the way, laughing again when Dario's hand caught air.

Rocco looked me in the eye once it was quiet again. "Your wife is staying at my father's place in *Firenze*. She will decide your fate in this challenge by tomorrow morning."

A growl vibrated in my throat, and I picked up the chair and flung it against the wall. It splintered, and whatever else it hit had broken. I had thrown it so hard, I spun from the drugs still lingering in my system and had to catch the table before I went down.

My unsteadiness sent another rush of lava through my veins. A reminder of what she had done.

“*Cugino.*”

My eyes snapped to Rocco’s.

“She truly loves you,” he said in Italian. “This is why she does this. I respect her for it. She just does not understand what this means for you.”

What this means for you—so many fucking things. My wife, *my wife*, had meddled in my challenge, and stole my chance at proving my love by proving hers.

She crushed what this meant to *me*.

Tomorrow morning would not come for us.

She had already decided.

She was going to fly even further, try to hide from me in skies I ruled.

There were three men she depended on.

Me, but she was flying in the opposite direction.

Two would not hide her, not after he knew why she had left me. Her sister’s husband. Brio understood our rules, and even if he did not agree with them, he respected them.

There was only one man left that she would run to.

His name was carved inside of my head.

Kirill Balabanov.

I checked the time on my watch.

It would not be long.

His name would be scratched out, even if it would never disappear from my memory.

FORTY-THREE

AVA

I HAD NO DOUBT—MY husband was going to try to track me down. Maybe he would, but he would have to kill me to bring me back. No matter how many times I tried to talk myself into going back to Rome and giving him what he wanted, I just couldn't do it.

How does a wife, from *this* century, not fight against her husband doing something that was foolish enough to get him killed?

On my way to the airport that morning, when I'd brought up the swords, Scarlett had nodded. "It's an honor thing for them. Having an amazing aim is a good thing to have, but guns are mostly point and shoot, most of the time. But lifting a sword and being good with it...it's not something most men do anymore.

"A sword, to the Fausti family, is both romantic and ruthless, especially in this context. It still represents honor to them. This is why my father-in-law has Lusitano horses. They're known as war horses. It all connects to their medieval roots. Their behavior goes even further back when he picks you up and flings you over his shoulder when you refuse to move, like a caveman." She turned her face toward Brando's.

He grunted. "Fucking right."

I thanked them when we arrived at the airport, having slight anxiety attacks every time I looked over my shoulder, just waiting for a hand to reach out and pull me back.

I hated the thought of it *and* would be thankful if it actually happened.

I'd melt in his arms and be there long enough to die in them.

I was missing him hard enough that my chest ached with the distance between us.

“Thank you, Ms. Hickey,” the attendant at the kiosk said with a heavy Italian accent, handing me my ticket.

Years ago, when I couldn't go under the alias Pepper Nash, I would sometimes use my mom's ID. She'd left one behind, and I had a friend of a friend switch our pictures out. Though, when she was younger, we bore a striking resemblance to each other, even down to the freckles. I even had her birth certificate.

A sad sigh left my mouth when my flight was called.

I was anxious the entire time. I hated that another captain was in control of this plane.

Numerous flights and hours later, I finally touched down in Kentucky.

It was the last place Luci told me they had tracked Janis. I'd bought a burner phone and asked Scarlett to mail the one Nazzareno had given me to New York. That way, if he was tracking me, he would be led to the wrong place, *and* I wouldn't lose all my pictures. I couldn't stand it if I did.

I also asked Luci not to tell Lilo anything. I knew Lilo would always be there for me, but he was a man, and I didn't want to put him in a position to lie to Nazzareno. She understood and said she would keep it to herself.

The small car I rented had GPS, and I plugged the address in. It was a bar—go figure—and not a nice one. It was almost dilapidated, and the lights strung outside of it by a wire seemed to be the only electrical light on in the place. I noticed a small shack behind it, and I wondered if she lived there. Or had.

Our house in New York was nothing to brag about, but it was a mansion compared to that.

The reality of it made me feel even shittier.

She thought living with us was worse than living in a wooden shanty.

With the air conditioner pumping, I held on to the wheel, watching as people came and went, mostly bikers. I was trying to decide whether I could even do this—face her again and get off my chest what was weighing it down.

I wanted to confront her. Tell her even if she didn't care, my sister turned out to be an amazing woman, and *she* was the one who lost out when she walked out on Sonny. Before her man-whore ran him over, he worked his ass off to keep us all warm, fed, and clothed.

After Lucila told me what had happened, I realized how much Sonny loved her in the beginning, and how she had destroyed not only our family, but him in a way he had never recovered from. Guilt seemed to still be eating him alive. He lived with a woman who was drugging his kids and didn't realize it until we had already started having issues from it. That couldn't have been easy to live with.

Then he had a kid with the neighborhood hooker, and she drops Minnie on her head and causes brain damage.

It seemed like he truly gave up after that.

Which was why I needed to do this.

In Sonny's honor.

In my sister's honor.

Maybe even a little for me.

Then I was going to follow her around for a while, like a ghost, and haunt her.

It had been two hours, and I'd only seen male bikers come out. I yawned, jet lag starting to get the best of me, and was about to pull out to find a place to sleep for the night when a

woman who fit her age walked out the bar. Or maybe she was older. A man was with her.

She stopped and turned to him, giving me the profile of her face.

Her hair was long and blonde, but it seemed bleached and dry. She was built, but her hands resembled claws, showing her true age. Her face had so many lines, I could see them from my car.

She leaned against the railing, smiling at him, using her hand in a flirtatious way to touch him, and he was leering at her.

She seemed desperate for him, like she would do anything to get him back to her shanty. Then, after a while, she would move on, desperate for someone else.

Without thought, I turned the car off and stepped out.

She hadn't noticed me, but he had. His eyes widened and he moved to the side of her some. She turned then and narrowed her blue eyes at me. Her nose was freckled from the sun.

"Damn, girl." The man whistled. "You come around here looking like Carrie Underwood with those legs, you might leave with a husband."

I lifted my left hand. "Already have one of those."

"Where's your man then?"

"No place like this."

Janis crossed her arms and was looking at herself through Nazzareno's Aviator glasses. I'd taken them with me. Then she looked me up and down, her eyes stalling back on my face. I could have been wrong, but it seemed like she was trying to place me.

Ha. She didn't even recognize her own daughter.

How sad was that?

Even sadder, a feeling in the pit of my stomach automatically knew it was her. I was looking at her through a

small child's eyes, but years into the future. It was so odd, I crossed my arms, hiding my shaking hands.

I forced one word out, "Janis." As it did in New York when I would face all those mobsters, my voice didn't waver, even if my entire body trembled.

Her eyes narrowed and she pulled her arms even tighter against herself.

The guy looked between us.

"You must be mistaken, Carrie Under. This is Nicole."

"*Oh*," I said, feigning surprise. "You're going by your middle name now? I guess that's convenient, especially when you ran from your husband and kids and didn't want them to ever find you. Newsflash, though. No one ever came looking until recently."

"You got a husband?" He stood taller, eyeing her. "Kids?"

"I don't have a husband," she snapped. "And my kids aren't kids anymore."

"I can understand that, Nic." He looked between us again. "Ya'll look a lot alike, except you're a younger version, and you dress better, like you have money or something." He nodded toward me. "You're fucking classy, lady."

I'd worn my usual black blazer with a white T-shirt underneath, blue jeans, and white sneakers, but the jewelry on my wrist was flashy, and so was my wedding band. And I'd never been called classy in New York—ever. My husband and his family had rubbed off on me.

"She is." Janis stood taller. "That's my daughter. Ava."

"*What a fuckin' honor!*" I slapped a hand to my heart, sarcasm oozing out of me as I did my best Marisa Tomei impression from *My Cousin Vinny*. "You remembered my name! It's been, what? Oh, most of my life that you've been gone. And guess what? We were so much better off without you."

She didn't fucking deserve the truth, knowing how much we all had suffered because of the things she'd done, but that

was going to be okay. We were moving forward, healing, and once I got back to New York, I was going to patch up my relationship with Sonny and we were going to be a happy family—for fucking once, despite what this bitch had done!

She rolled her eyes. “You don’t seem like you need money, so what do you need? A kidney or something? I bet it’s your sister who needs it. She was always the weak one. Sorry, kid, that organ is staying where it is. They say you can live with one, but it’ll be my luck, I’ll need the spare.”

Whatever came over me controlled my hand, because I slapped her across the face.

“*Whoa*,” the guy said. “That was fucking uncalled for. You okay, Nic?”

She sniffed, playing on his sympathies. She didn’t care about him, or anyone. She only cared about herself.

I turned my attention to him. “This is none of your business. Get the fuck out of here.”

He went to take a step toward me, but I reached behind my back and pulled a *pistola* on him. Nazzareno kept one in all his cars, and I took it with me, even if I had to transport it below the plane.

He held his hands up, retreating inside the bar, probably going to grab all his buddies. I wasn’t going to stay that long.

She was already standing straight when I turned back to her.

“My sister doesn’t need anything from you, and even if she did, she wouldn’t be getting it from you. I came here without anyone knowing. I wanted to see where you’d gone. What you’d done with your life.” I laughed, sarcastic. “Seems like you traded in a good life for a beater. Have a nice rest of it. Hopefully no one drugs you when you’re old and have no one by your side to take care of your fading ass.”

I went to walk off, and she grabbed my arm. I flung it out of her hold.

“You got money?” she asked.

“You got happiness?” I asked.

That was what this was about, right? *Her* freedom. *Her* happiness.

She didn’t say anything, and I said, “Thought so.” I got in my car and pulled off, leaving her in the dust. She wasn’t even worth my ghost. I’d create a new plan and go in an entirely separate direction.

Because despite all my bravado, that fucking hurt. It killed a small part of me that still wanted and needed a mother. The one person who was supposed to protect Lucila and me at all costs.

After leaving my heart behind in Italy, I felt so empty.

Maybe I shouldn’t have confronted her then.

Maybe I should have waited until I was in a better state of mind.

It hit me on the ride to wherever these winding roads were taking me that I’d never be in a better state of mind again.

I turned on the radio, trying to concentrate on something else, but “Glory of Love” was playing, and it brought back memories of *The Karate Kid*. The movie and the song smashed into me, and tears rolled down my cheek as fast the tires moved beneath me.

My phone rang. Only Lucila had my number. I dried my tears on my shirt and tried to make my voice sound normal as I answered.

“What’s wrong?” she rushed out.

“Nothing.” I sighed, then I backtracked. I was tired of hiding my pain from a sister who loved me and would always be there for me. “*Not* nothing. I’m...” I took a deep breath and cried it out.

“What are you doing, Ava?”

“Driving.”

“Pull over.”

I did at the next gas station because I didn't want my sister to worry. I'd given her plenty to worry about over the years, and I didn't want to be that person anymore. I didn't want to be just like Janis Nicole Hickey, the woman I left behind in the dust.

"Okay." Her voice was soothing after I'd told her I was in park. "Are your doors locked?"

I made sure they were, smiling a bit at her mom-in-charge attitude.

"Okay," she repeated. "Talk to me, Ava."

"I'm dying without him, Luci. How am I going to survive this?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "But you will."

"Did I do the right thing by leaving?"

"Did you do the right thing in an impossible situation?" she asked back. "Because that's what this is, Ava. An impossible situation either way."

I set my head on the steering wheel and just...cried. I cried like I did when I'd told Nazzareno what Janis had done, but this was worse somehow. Because he loved me, cared for me, more than she ever had.

My sister sat quietly on the line with me until I pulled myself together.

"Ava?"

"Yeah?" I sniffed.

"Please come to Florida." And I realized my sister was crying too.

"Maybe later." I dug in the console looking for napkins. "Why did you call?"

She sniffed. "You're pulled over, right?"

"Luci—please don't tell me something's happened to Sonny." I had never said those words before, but usually when she called, or I called, something had happened to Sonny.

“No. No. Nothing like that, okay? But something has happened to someone. Kirill.”

I froze my searching.

“Are you still there?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I barely breathed out. “What happened to him, Luci?”

“He was killed. And, uh, the thing is, Joe the Detective wants you back in New York.”

“Why?”

“You’re a person of interest.”

“I haven’t even been in New York.”

“I know, but you’ve been linked to his death.”

“I don’t understand, Luci.”

“I’m just going to say it. Kirill’s missing his heart, and it its place...your picture was left.”

FORTY-FOUR

AVA

THERE WAS no reason to return to New York for Joe the Detective. I hadn't murdered Kirill, and he knew it. I hadn't been in New York for months, but I also couldn't admit that I'd been in Italy with the Fausti family either. The picture left behind would have confirmed who'd done it in my honor.

Luca was the epitome of puppet master because he knew. Once I'd fallen in love with Nazzareno, and my loyalty was secured to the family because of it, he was certain I would never rat on them. All the secrets I'd heard and been a witness to were safe with me.

Or he would have never let me leave Italy.

And...if I did prove myself not worthy of his nephew's love, it might be me fighting for my life in battle.

The man loved stories. He would want a good one to play out.

I wasn't sure if the story I was currently in was bad or horrid. I had to return to New York. Not for Joe the Detective, but because my husband wasn't going to stop. He was sending me a clear message.

Keep fucking around with my heart and find out how cruel I can be.

Kirill didn't deserve to die, and I had a feeling he was the first in a string of murders to come if I didn't return to my husband. Nazzareno was crossing any man off my list that I might trust to help me hide from him.

He could have just tracked me down. He had the means and the time, even his own airline, but that wasn't his style.

I'd left him.

He wasn't going to run behind me.

He'd get me exactly where he wanted me—where my love of all things Fausti had begun.

I'd go to him to stop this madness.

After Kirill, though, the list of men I trusted slimmed to almost nothing.

Lilo.

Neil and Andrea.

I could never forgive myself if something happened to any of them. I was having a hard enough time with Kirill.

I would have called Aren, Tigran's brother, to give me a ride from the airport in his cab, but one, I didn't want to involve him, and two, he'd gone to Florida to be with Lucila and Lilo.

I flagged a cab from the airport and had him bring me straight to the rent-controlled apartment Neil and Andrea had wanted me to take. It was late, and I didn't want to find a hotel at this time of the night. Neil had showed me where the hideaway key was when we'd visited once. Neil and Andrea were taking care of his aunt's plants while she'd been out of town. She had a habit of losing them and kept one underneath the welcome rug.

The only problem was whether Neil and Andrea had let the apartment go to someone else. I didn't think they would have, though. Andrea had fond memories there, even if it wasn't their style. I was willing to bet they were going to keep it, maybe still hoping I'd take it when I got back.

I knocked on the door and waited.

No one answered.

I knocked a little louder.

Nothing.

The door peeked open from across the hall. It was a little old elderly lady in a robe and curlers, holding Sweets, the small little dog who needed her anal glands expressed from time to time.

“No one is home,” she croaked at me.

“I was just making sure. Neil and Andrea are letting me crash here tonight.” I was hoping if Neil and Andrea had decided to let it go, she would give me a hint.

She looked me up and down. “It’s been quiet without Lucia. I miss the shit out of her, but at least Neil and Andrea are holding out for someone good. A girl who went to Italy for a while. They think she’ll want it when she gets back.”

I pointed. “Neil and Andrea gave you Sweets to keep you company?”

She seemed to relax when I’d said the dog’s name. “She’s quiet, the old girl, but she’ll do as company, even if she forgot how to yap. Happens to the best of us, I guess.”

I reached out and petted Sweet’s head. “How you doing, Sweets? Besides the forgetting how to yap issue.”

The woman bounced her a bit and said in a kiddie voice, “Fine, now that I had my anal glands squeezed. How about you, Missy?” She waved her paw at me.

“Fine,” I lied. “Now that I have a place to sleep.” I lifted the key. “Goodnight.”

The place was the same as when I’d last visited it, which was kind of creepy since all the lights were out and Andrea’s aunt had died in her bed. I made my bed on the sofa, still covered in plastic, and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, but it wasn’t a restful sleep. I kept having bad dreams, but the weird part was, I kept dreaming of emptiness. It swallowed me whole, and like solid, impenetrable darkness, I couldn’t find my way out of it.

A smell brought me out of it. It was so fucking unpleasant, like raw fish and old blood, but it had been strong enough to

bring me out of the dream, and I reached out for whatever it was.

“First the apartment,” a familiar voice said. “Now Sweets!”

My eyes popped open.

Neil was sitting on the edge of the sofa, forcing my feet to the side, and Sweets was on my chest, licking my face. I was hugging her to me.

“I love you, Sweets,” I croaked, “but please...save the licks for Cousin Neil. Damn, Neil. Why is her breath so bad?”

Neil took Sweets and set her on a little blanket that was on the recliner. She turned three or four times, scratched the blankets the way she wanted them, and then took her spot.

He covered her ears. “Because she’s old, Peps.” He looked at me and fixed his designer glasses. “You’ve always been sort of a squatter, so you being here doesn’t exactly surprise me, but the call from Phoebe across the hallway did. I didn’t expect it. I thought you would have called me first.”

I shrugged. “I’ve had a lot going on.”

His steel blue eyes looked me over. He grabbed my hand and I tried to yank it away.

“If you tell me you’re married, I might still hold out hope that Kirill Balabanov will tell me all the Russian’s secrets.”

“He’s dead, Neil.”

“I know.”

Our eyes held and my throat felt tight.

“I am,” I whispered. “I’m married to Nazzareno Fausti.”

The refrigerator started to run in the kitchen. It seemed to buzz between us.

“Are you happy, Peps?”

“Yeah, or I was.”

“What happened?”

I looked away from Neil. “I can’t tell you.”

He reached out and took my hand, squeezing. “I understand the rules, Peps. It’s okay.”

I nodded and looked at him. “I hoped you would.”

He looked down at the couch. “Not as much as I hoped you’d get rid of this damn plastic.”

We grinned at each other and started laughing quietly.

“Why haven’t you done it?” I wiped my eyes.

“Andrea. He’s attached to everything in here. He said if you decided to take it, though, it was yours to decorate as you’d like. We both figured you could pack everything up.” He shrugged. “Truth is, we both loved his aunt, and it’s hard saying goodbye. She feels like an integral part of this place.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “I understand that.”

He fixed me with a knowing stare. “I can tell you do—now. You’ve changed, Peps.”

“I have.”

He leaned forward some. “Are you heading to Vice today?”

“I’ll drop by, but I have to visit Joe the Detective first.”

“As much as he’s been around Vice since Balabanov lost his heart, you’d do better meeting him there.”

We grew quiet at what he’d said. I knew the truth had dawned on him. Neil was so intelligent and intuitive, one of the best journalist’s I’d ever worked with, and I knew in that moment he had connected the pieces.

“Damn, Peps, this is some heavy shit.”

“I know.” I squeezed his hand. “Which is why you need to get going with Sweets. It’s better, you know?”

He leaned in and kissed my head. “I’m not easily scared off.”

“I know,” I said, “but I love you too much. And Andrea would kill me if anything happened to you because of me.”

He scooped Sweets up and started heading for the door.

“Neil?” I stopped him.

He turned and faced me.

“Do you think Andrea’s sister can see me today? And if so, can you do me a favor and book the appointment?”

“I’ll see what I can do for my Peps.” He winked at me and left.

I hurriedly took a shower, dressed in an all-black midi dress that was form fitting, jazzing it up with some jewelry, and then I slipped into a pair of sky-high heels and grabbed my bag.

A taxicab ride later, I walked into the salon Andrea’s sister, Gabriella, worked at and sat in her chair.

“Ava?”

I lifted my hand. “Hi, it’s me...” I practically sang.

She squeezed my shoulders and laughed. “I haven’t seen you in a while, but I’d know that kick-ass personality anywhere.” She grinned at me. “What are we doing with all this silk?” She lifted a few strands of my hair.

“Cut it off,” I said, “and let’s try a different shade.”

“Relax,” she said, waving her magic cape over my clothes and fastening it in the back. “I got you.”

While she mixed colors in a bowl, I called Joe the Detective. He had no idea who was calling, but he answered. I told him to meet me at Vice in three hours. I looked at Gabriella and she nodded. That was enough time. He went to say something else, but I hung up.

As Gabriella started, she said, “Let’s see if brunettes have more fun, shall we?”

By the time she was finished, my hair was inches shorter, cut into a chic bob with face-framing bangs, as she called it. My hair landed just above my collarbone and was a rich brunette. It also had a ton of body on top, which made it look so much healthier.

Gabriella stood back and admired her work. “Your eyes pop with this color, girl.” She studied me a bit harder. “You know who you remind me of? That chick from that show. What was the name of it?”

A coworker passed and checked me out. “*Saved by the Bell.*”

She snapped her fingers. “Before my time, but the girl...”

“Tiffani Thiessen,” the coworker supplied. She tilted her head, studying my features. “I can see it, kind of...”

“I see it! That’s who you remind me of!”

As long as she didn’t say I was Janis’s twin, we were all good.

Even though I couldn’t erase her from my features entirely, I breathed easier when I looked at Ava in the mirror. Gabriella’s coworkers clapped at me and whistled as I left—she refused to let me pay, but I was going to give the money to Andrea and have him slip it in her purse when she wasn’t looking. It was easier than arguing when I only had a limited amount of time.

Outside of the salon, dark clouds hovered over the city, ready to drop rain. I hesitated when I flagged another cab. The last time I was here, and I took a ride in this kind of weather with ON the Psychopath, I wasn’t prepared.

This time I had Nazzareno’s *pistola* tucked into my bag, but still...the memory of him invaded my space. He was a stage-five clinger in dreams and thoughts, and he showed no signs of slowing.

When the cabbie pulled to the curb, I leaned close to his window and narrowed my eyes. He had no hair, and unless he was packing a bunch of toilet paper in his track suit, he wasn’t of the same build.

I tucked my hand in my bag, keeping it on the gun, and told him where to go. “Vice City Press.”

He called me Catwoman, a reference to Batman’s love interest, since everyone referred to Vice City as Gotham, and

hit the gas. He turned his wipers on when fat raindrops started to splash against the windshield.

He dropped me off a few minutes later and slipped right back into traffic, going for another fair.

I breathed easier but started to feel a tightness in my chest when I looked up at the building. For so long, this place had been my home, my safe place, and the last time I'd been here, I'd run from it.

Even though butterflies erupted in my stomach at the thought of going inside, it wasn't because of the memories. It was because I realized how my road to Nazzareno had started here.

Walking up the steps, attempting to avoid tourists taking their pictures, some with umbrellas, some not, I touched the keycard to the device, and it allowed me right in.

The hustle and bustle. The sense of purpose. The smell of lingering ink.

It all greeted me at once.

All but Parker Bowles. He was staring at me with a scowl on his face.

I lifted my eyebrows at him and opened my arms. "What? No love for your long-lost co-worker, Bowles?"

He sneered at me. "Long-lost? I'd say you haven't been gone long enough."

"How long are we talking? Eternity?"

"Not long enough."

"I see you're still an asshole."

"You're still a bitch, but with a nicer haircut and clothes."

"Well...they say clothes don't make the man, and you should listen. Not even nice clothes could hide the ugly heart underneath."

He walked toward me and got close to my face. "You're not getting this place, Nash," he whispered. "I'll make sure of

it.”

I waved a hand in front of my face. “You eat a shit sandwich for lunch, Bowels?”

“This isn’t over, Nash.” He motioned between the two of us.

“I’m sure,” I said. “You’ll let Nemours back in to do your dirty work.”

“I didn’t say that.” He lifted his hands as he walked backwards. “You did. His name didn’t come out of my mouth.” He saluted me and went in the direction of his office.

I checked my watch. Joe was late. No surprise. Death didn’t wait.

In the meantime, Edna deserved an explanation from me, and maybe something better than a hug. A recap of my time with the Fausti family—rules aside.

I stood taller, squared my shoulders, and knocked on her office door.

She didn’t answer.

I knocked again and still no answer.

A few seconds later, I rapped on her door with my knuckle as I opened it.

She was sitting at her desk, her chin resting on her stacked hands, gazing at the charming man sitting across from her as Glenn Miller crooned softly in the background.

When it felt like the entire world was changing from my new point of view, Edna looked the same to me. If she spent the rest of her life at her desk, she always would.

The man sitting across from her—he was as familiar to me as my bones, too, but the look in his olive-green eyes had changed.

It was...hotter than it had ever been, and lacking trust. His depth, leading to his vulnerability, was closed, officially locking me out.

He smiled at me, teeth and all, and I took a step back.

He fixed his custom-made suit and stood, a towering form eerily like the one in the picture on the wall, and finally, Edna saw me.

She blinked as the man smoothly moved toward me. He wrapped his arm around me, pulling me close with a yank only he and I had felt. His palm was a scalding brand as he whispered in my ear, "*My* wife, you flew away from me, and now your lion has come to collect his wayward bird in a fucking cage."

He kissed my cheek with a finality that made a single teardrop fall from my eye.

FORTY-FIVE

AVA

NAZZARENO TOOK my trembling hand in his, and the picture he'd just painted came to life: a bird in the mouth of a lion.

He moved us toward Edna, and she stood abruptly, our eyes meeting.

“Peps,” she breathed.

I nodded, and she came around the desk, hugging me to her and then moving me away to get a better look at me.

“Are you crying, Peps?” She sounded incredulous.

“No.” I used my free hand to dry my face. “It’s coming down hard out there. I had to walk through it to get inside.”

“I was about to say.” She squeezed my arm and looked at Nazzareno. Then she looked at me. “The resemblance is uncanny, isn’t it?”

My eyes hungrily devoured his face. It had only been a short time since I’d seen him last, but it felt like forever had ticked by like slow-moving blood. Maybe because of the way I was looking at him, his features softened, though the heat in his eyes intensified, and he ran a knuckle down my face.

I held his eyes, even though the natural reaction was to close them. “Yeah,” I whispered. “It is. He’s the spitting image of his Nonno.”

“You look different, my wife,” he whispered.

“I felt the need for change, before I met you here.”

Even though we were having, well, not marital issues, because that would mean we had an issue with each other, which we kind of did, but it was more so to do with this challenge. It was coming between us, and I guess...we were both allowing it to.

Still.

I didn't want to air our dirty laundry out for the public to see. It was personal, and I refused to let the bitter world in on it, except for the few people who were inside the secret Fausti circle. That was why I'd said, *before I met you here*. It sounded like we planned this. And besides, it was technically true. He was always going to find me, but I had to at least try to save him from what was coming because of me.

It was also about standing my ground and setting boundaries. I had a say in this love too.

So yeah, maybe we were having marital issues. I just hated to call them that, since it felt like that was what my parents had.

"Do you like it?" I went to touch the edges of my hair, but he stopped me, wrapping his hand around my wrist.

"You are mine," he said, as though he was taking an oath. "It does not matter how you to style your hair, or the clothes you wear, you are the most beautiful woman to me. *Per sempre*."

I nodded, hoping he could see the acceptance of his compliment in my eyes. It was actually more than that, and I couldn't speak around the tight lump in my throat. He honestly said the most heartbreaking things to me, and in such an intense way, there was no room for doubt.

Resting my hand on his stomach, I turned toward Edna. "Nazzareno is here. You're here. I'm assuming you two met."

"Nazzareno told me he came here to surprise you."

"Oh, I'm sure he did."

"Imagine my surprise when Marzio showed up at my door again, Peps." She sighed, and it was a wistful sound.

I could only nod. She motioned to the two seats in front of her desk. Nazzareno set his hand on the back of my chair and waited for me to sit before he took his own. He reached over, grabbed the arm of the chair, and dragged me next to him.

We were so close, our arms touched.

“I am Nazzareno,” he said, his forehead tight. “Marzio was my grandfather.”

“I know,” Edna breathed. “It’s just that you look so much like him. Especially the eyes. Same color and everything. Your haircut too!”

He gave one curt nod, and I squeezed his hand, trying to communicate silently with him. Edna was still obsessed with his grandfather, and probably always would be, especially since she associated him with safety. I should have seen it before, but I didn’t realize it until after. Edna had agoraphobia. I wondered if Luca had told Nazzareno the story about Edna and Marzio too.

“So.” Edna clasped her hands together and set her chin on them, gazing at us. “Tell me all about how you two met.”

I looked at Nazzareno and he nodded. I didn’t have a problem sharing that with Edna, but she was the owner of one of the most notable newspapers out there. I didn’t want to break what little trust was left between me and my husband.

I cleared my throat. “In Venice, at the event.”

She seemed to know how much to ask after that to keep the conversation flowing but not cross any lines when it came to the Fausti family. It seemed like she was truly interested in us—in my happiness. When the conversation stalled, a beat passed between Edna and I before she and I opened our mouths at the same time—

“Why didn’t you come to me, Peps?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you left Vice City to me?”

Our voices and questions collided, then we both took a breath and said, “Neil.”

He'd informed us both about things we hadn't spoken to each other about.

A knock came at the door. We all turned toward it.

"I heard my name," Neil said to the door. "Let me in."

"It's never locked," Edna said.

Neil cracked the door open. "Is it safe for me to enter?" He met Nazzareno's eyes. "I meant that sarcastically, but now I'm not so sure."

Andrea's head appeared next to Neil's. "Love your hair, Peps."

I smiled. "Gabiella outdid herself."

Nazzareno stood and fixed his suit. Neil and Andrea came into the room, but not fully. I introduced them, and after Neil held out his hand, Nazzareno took it. He shook Andrea's next.

My husband was quiet, watching the three of us interact, but I didn't feel any hostility from him. After a few minutes, Neil and Andrea said they were going to lunch.

That left the three of us again.

Edna sighed. "I didn't want anyone to know because I didn't want my kid brother's son to find out."

"Parker," I said.

"That's not his real name, but yes. Parker."

"I can't be sure, Ed, but I think he let a man named Olivier Nemours into Vice City the night before I left. I didn't feel safe. I didn't know who I could trust."

I could tell by her pinched lips she didn't like that I hadn't trusted her, but she accepted it. She hadn't trusted me with her information, either, and I accepted that too.

"My dad had Parker's dad, Joe, late in life, after my mom died. Joe and I never really got along, especially after dad left Vice City to me. Joe died a few years back and I respected my father's wishes that family would always have a job here."

"Is there anyone else you can leave it to?"

“Why?” she rushed out. “Are you not coming back?”

“I’m not.” I sighed. I knew this was going to break both of our hearts. “I’d love to travel the world, Ed. There’s so much out there. So much more than this.” I waved a hand around, meaning work. “I was just afraid. Afraid to fly away from it, because I had no idea where I was going to land.”

Her eyes bored into mine, trying to figure out if I knew about her phobia. Then she offered us each a drink, but we both declined. She poured herself a full glass and turned toward Marzio. She spoke to us, but it was almost like she was speaking to him.

“I don’t know what to do,” she whispered. “Who I can trust, besides you.”

I could tell it bothered Nazzareno to a certain degree. His forehead pinched. I squeezed his hand and nodded toward the door. I mouthed, *Neil*.

Nazzareno studied me for a second before he fixed his suit and cleared his throat. “Neil,” he said.

Edna blinked at the picture of Marzio. “You really think Neil can handle this place when I’m gone?”

Nazzareno looked at me again. I could feel the weight of this decision, and I was putting my husband in the middle of it. My husband who never broke his word. But I knew...Neil and Andrea loved this place. They loved what they did. They would respect Edna’s wishes even after she was gone. And I’d heard a while back that Andrea was a distant relative of the Giannini’s. Maybe that was why he was so passionate about this place too.

“*Sì*.”

“I don’t...” Edna’s breaths seemed to be coming faster, and I’d never seen her that way before. Panicky.

“Edna.” Nazzareno’s voice was calm, collected, but in charge.

Edna blinked and whispered, “Yes?”

“*La mia parola e buona come il mio sangue.* You have my word. I will take care of you and this place even after you are gone. You took care of mine, and I will never forget it.”

She wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand and took a sip of her drink.

A thought occurred to me. “Ed?”

“Yes.”

“You kept what you’d done a secret, right? About leaving me this place?”

“Until you left. I confided in Neil, Andrea, and Milo because I felt I had no choice. Out of all my people, I felt I could trust them the most. You left and...I felt all alone, not sure who to turn to. I turned to the three people you trusted the most here.”

“Whoever had been in touch with Olivier Nemours, the guy who had called me about the Fausti properties and who had gotten in that night...this was before.”

She waved her drink around. “No one knew before you left,” she repeated.

“Where did the meeting take place? About your will?”

She pointed down at her desk, meaning in her office.

“Shit,” I breathed. I put a finger to my mouth and started searching around.

Nazzareno put a hand on my arm.

“*A bug,*” I mouthed.

Edna joined in the search, but after searching every nook and cranny, we found nothing. I stared up at Marzio, hands on my hips, thinking.

Maybe I was wrong, but I didn’t think I was.

How else would Parker, because I was ninety nine percent positive it was him, find out confidential information like that?

Edna gasped when Nazzareno lifted the framed poster of his grandfather from its sides and set it down, turning it over.

There it fucking was.

A bug was stuck to the back of Marzio's picture. It was an older model, not something current. Whoever had done it knew Edna never touched the poster. It was like having a safety net in the room with her.

Edna started pacing when I went to take it off. She whimpered when the backing tore a little.

"Put it back up," she kept muttering. "Please."

Nazzareno rehung it and made sure it was straight, just as Edna had hung it years ago. I went over to her record player and restarted it, turning up the volume and leaving the listening device on top of it.

"Up until the...*Sanguisughe* came after you, you always left the building, right?" I asked.

She took her seat, closing her eyes tight. "Yes."

Nazzareno and I hovered closer to her so she could hear us, and we could hear her better.

"Who helped you hang Marzio's picture?" I asked. "Or did you do it yourself?"

She smiled, but it was so sad, it broke my heart. "My brother, but weeks before what happened to me."

Nazzareno and I looked at each other. The piece Edna wrote on the *Sanguisughe* brought them to her door, but I wondered if her brother had a hand in letting them in. The same with Parker and Olivier Nemours.

"Back then, Marzio was just a symbol on my wall. He stood for what I loved to write about. A powerful family in Italy who were as secretive as the grave with their dark ways, but still walked among us in the light. Marzio Fausti was the equivalent of my favorite quote on the wall that inspired me to put words down on the page. That sort of thing. And he's so pleasant to look at. A face you could stare at for hours.

"But...after the *Sanguisughe* tried to kill me, he became much more than that. When the fear consumed my lungs, he became the air I breathed. He saved me. Since he died..." she

covered her face “...his picture has been the only reason I’m still here. I can still feel him, and he gives me strength to go on, even if I don’t truly live.”

A hard knock came at the door at the same time lightning flared and shocked the dim room. Nazzareno took the bug off the record player, turned it down, and pointed a finger, ordering me to stay next to Edna. He opened the door and stepped to the left of it.

No one was there.

Nazzareno nodded to the door handle. He wanted me to lock it. After he left, I paced, not sure what to do. This was my world, and I felt I needed to help.

The storm had grown worse. The drops beat against the window., and lightning kept flashing and thunder kept rolling.

Edna’s phone rang and we both jumped. She picked it up with a trembling hand and met my eyes. She slowly lowered it and hung up.

“Joseph—the detective—is on his way back.”

Very few people had entrance rights, but Joe was one of them. It was a deal Edna’s family had with the police department. Only a few of them were let inside. Edna trusted Joe, and he’d made the cut. The front desk always let her know when one of the police on the list had been allowed inside, though.

A minute or two later, a hard knock came at the door.

“He must have stopped by my office, and I wasn’t there,” I said. I debated on whether to answer it, but Joe wasn’t going to leave until he talked to me. He’d go around asking questions about where I was, or where Edna had gone to, and it was better to just get rid of him.

I had no fucking clue where Nazzareno had gone, but I knew he was going after Parker.

I opened the door, and instead of Joe on the other side, I was bum rushed by Parker. He knocked me off my feet, but instead of going down alone, I grabbed for him. We both hit

the floor, and he was trying to scramble away from me to reach the door.

He wasn't getting me alone.

He was cursing, calling us bitches, and going on about what he was owed—Vice City Press and all that was inside of it.

I grabbed his feet before he could get to it, and he tried to backhand me.

A second later, the door closed, Parker was being drug to the other side of it by his collar, then lifted to his feet, and slammed against the wall.

Nazzareno was in his face, his eyes possessed, and he was speaking to him in low Italian. It was fucking menacing. Parker tried to scream, but Nazzareno was blocking his air supply. He was trying to claw Nazzareno's hands, his feet kicking wildly, but it was no use.

I was pretty sure Nazzareno crushed his windpipe. He started to make this awful wheezing noise. I wasn't even sure how long after, but Parker stopped moving, a steady flow of urine dripping down to the floor.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Shit!” I looked at Edna and she was staring at the door with wide eyes. “It's Joe,” I whispered to her. “Edna!” When I snapped her name, her eyes blinked, and she got to her feet.

Nazzareno dropped Parker like he weighed nothing, and I could tell he wasn't out of the mindset of a hunting lion yet. His eyes were...wild, but so controlled. He turned and stared at the door, like he was waiting for another challenger.

Maybe if he stood in front of Parker, Edna in front of him, or vice versa...Joe wouldn't notice if I only cracked the door some and told him I'd meet him in my office.

I couldn't talk Nazzareno into moving Parker because Nazzareno didn't consider our laws his. The Fausti family had their own set. Especially when it came to men who dishonored or threatened their women.

Sighing, I fixed my dress and then cracked the door. Joe stood on the other side of it, and when he realized I'd opened it, he said, "Ed around? I was hoping she knew where Pepper Nash was. I'm here to talk to her." He showed me his badge.

I stepped out, shutting the door behind me. "It's me, Joe."

"Shit." He looked me over from head to toe. "Ava?"

"Yeah."

"You look...you don't fucking look the same, that's all I know. Is that why you left? You had plastic surgery or some shit?"

Even though I could tell by his eyes that this "new" me was a pleasant surprise, it kind of ate at me for a second. I didn't really think Joe was commenting on my physical appearance as much as what had changed with me internally. He just didn't know it.

In that moment, I felt it. It was like all the nasty stuff I'd been carrying around before I left for Italy had been purged. There must have been a lot of it.

"No," I said. "I just decided to take some *me* time."

The door opened from behind me, and Joe's eyes widened when Nazzareno set his hand on my shoulder. Then Joe's eyes went behind both of us and my knees felt weak.

Joe gave a chin nod. "Ed."

I turned some and saw Edna sitting on her desk, her legs covering the opening at the bottom. She was breathing heavy.

She'd probably drug Parker over to her desk and hid him underneath it while Nazzareno walked to the door. He was probably so focused on me, he didn't even notice her do it. Or he didn't fucking care. Not his rules in this place.

"Evening, Joseph," Edna said, her voice even.

Joe's eyes narrowed against Nazzareno's as the two men stared at each other. It would be an insult not to introduce my husband to this man, but I didn't want to say his last name, or

Joe would know who had killed Kirill Balabanov. I had to say something, though.

“Nazzareno,” I whispered. “This is Detective Joe. Detective Joe, this is my husband.” I took a deep breath. “Nazzareno.”

I thought Detective Joe was going to pass out. I had to restrain myself from reaching out to steady him. His face turned ghostly white, and his eyes were wide and full of earnest shock.

“You’re married.” His voice reflected his eyes.

I nodded and lifted my left hand. “Recently. I got married in Copenhagen, though we met in Italy.”

He shook his head, like he was trying to shake off the surprise, like a dog does water. I was actually thankful he wasn’t firing on all cylinders. It gave me an advantage. Joe was a good cop and an even better detective.

“Well, I would congratulate you, but I think all the congratulations goes to this guy.” He chucked his chin at Nazzareno. “He’s done the impossible.”

“Tamed me.” I rolled my eyes.

“No.” Joe grinned. “Made you happy.”

It was a subtle shift, but one I still felt underneath my feet before it settled. Nazzareno relaxed some.

“You mind if we talk?” Joe’s nose scrunched up. “What’s that smell?”

I was pretty sure it was everything Parker had lost when he died.

“Edna,” I leaned closer and whispered. “She had some bad takeout.”

“Yeah, let’s definitely take this to your office,” Joe said.

Nazzareno closed the door behind us, and we took the lead while Joe trailed behind us to the office. He took a seat in front of my desk, I took the one behind it, and Nazzareno took a seat directly behind him on the sofa I used to crash on.

Even though Nazzareno had relaxed some at Joe's comment, his eyes were hard on the back of Joe's head, and it sent an uneasy feeling through me. Joe could be blunt, sometimes a little flirty, and I didn't want Nazzareno to have any issue with him. I liked Joe. He was a good guy. Hopefully he'd cut the flirtatious out since I was married. I knew Joe respected that. And from the look in his eyes, he had mad respect for Nazzareno, who had done what no man thought he could ever do.

Set me in a cage with the door open.

"I'm not going to take much of your time," Joe said. "This city has been on a spree lately. Crime is up exponentially, and there aren't enough of us to keep up. Luci told you why I'm here?"

"Yeah. Kirill Balabanov was found dead without a heart. In its place, a picture of mine was left." *Don't look at Nazzareno. Don't look at Nazzareno.* I could feel his eyes urging me to, but if I did, Joe would know the truth.

Joe nodded. "Where were you—?" He thought for a second and gave me the date and time.

"Easy. I was either in Italy, or traveling to Kentucky, in America."

Joe grinned. "I know where it's at, smart—"

"Just being sure!" I shouted before he could call me a smart ass. Nazzareno would find it disrespectful.

Joe turned his head some and gave me a blank look.

"Part of my *me* time was curbing the cursing. It's sort of like drinking, right? Once you quit, you leave it completely alone."

"Sure." Joe shrugged. "Whatever you're comfortable with. You're sure your dates and time match up?"

"Completely certain."

"Why Kentucky?"

I sighed, knowing he was going to ask but dreading it. “I went to see Janis Hickey.”

“Who’s that? A friend? Can she collaborate your story?”

“No. She’s not a friend. She’s no one really. But if you must know specifics, all she did was rent out an ovary to me and then a uterus. She’s listed on my birth certificate as my mother.”

This time I met Nazzareno’s eyes, and I could see concern in them, but also fire. I’d gone without him.

“I’m not touching that.” Joe lifted his hands. “But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

He sighed. “Do you know anything about what happened to Kirill Balabanov? I know you didn’t do it, even without the time stamps. It doesn’t fit a woman’s crime. It also doesn’t fit you. There’s no motive. If anything, the family was sending a message not to fuck with you. You and Balabanov were close.”

“I haven’t seen Kirill in months.”

“All right.” He stood and held his hand out to me.

We shook, and I knew. He wouldn’t be sending me flowers. We’d be strangers in a year or two.

“Thank you for your time, Ava,” he whispered. “You were always in the right place at the right time, according to you.”

I met Nazzareno’s eyes. “*Still* according to me.”

Joe turned and nodded at Nazzareno. Nazzareno returned it.

“You know,” Joe said, looking between us, “I get it. Why you fell for this guy. He looks like a Fausti. Like the man in the picture on Edna’s wall. Marzio.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “He does.”

Nazzareno set his hand on my neck, and we walked Joe to the door. He didn’t look back as he mixed in with the hustle

and bustle of Vice, but then he stopped, and the crowd broke around him.

He stood there for a second.

A second later, he spun around and looked at us.

Nazzareno nodded at him before he shut the door, locking it. He was confirming what Joe had just figured out.

I had married a Fausti, and in the opposite world that Joe existed in, my husband had sent a clear and final message: I was his, completely.

FORTY-SIX

NAZZARENO

MY WIFE SET her hand against the door and then her forehead. She closed her eyes, and it seemed as if she was taking calming breaths.

She would need them.

I took a seat at the edge of her desk, my feet solid on the floor, my eyes solid on her. In the hours she had been absent from my life, she had changed.

It was more than the new way she styled her hair.

There was something more womanly about her, as if she had settled into her skin, and she radiated a sharp confidence, even if she was keeping her back to me.

If I could only kill time, I would steal its heart, and rewind its blood flow to the moments we had missed.

“You cannot fly away each time we do not agree, my beautiful bird.”

“It’s not *just* a disagreement, Nazzareno. I’m fighting for your life. And if keeping you safe means we’d spend our life apart, I’m willing to do that. I’m willing to throw low blows—drugging you—to keep you in the same world as me. You would do the same for me!”

She gasped when I grabbed her by the arms and spun her around. Her arms were bent toward her body, pressed against her breasts, almost in a defensive position, but her eyes were a defiant cold fire.

“I fight for us to be together.”

“This is different, and you know it! If you lose, we lose it all.”

She tried to fight out of my grip and I released her some, but not much. Her bones were trembling.

“Do you see me as weak, wife?”

“I only understood *wife* out of those words.”

I translated.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I swear, I’m not trying to insult you by implying you’re not a man. Damn it! I know you’re a man, and one who can do the impossible—that’s why Joe was so shocked. You are the only man in this world that could get me to say *yes* or to stay longer than one —” She looked me in the eyes and shook her head. “The point is, I said *yes* to you, and for as long as I live, Nazzareno Fausti, I will never say *yes* to anyone else ever again. How can you live with that if something happens? What if Luca decides to marry me off to someone else in the family?”

I released her arms and took a step back. So did she. I fixed my suit and stood taller.

“Tell me, *my* wife, who would my uncle arrange your marriage to.”

“I didn’t mean anything by that last thing I said,” she snapped. “It was hypothetical.”

“I do not play that game.”

“But you’ll play a dangerous game with your life!”

I advanced on her. She came at me. We collided in the middle of the room. She grabbed my jacket, trying to yank at it, and I set my hand against the bottom part of her throat and chest. Her heart beat against my hand, trying to fly into my palm.

“I know who the fuck I am.” I uncurled her fist and set it against my heart. “I do not need the world to tell me or to recognize it. You are separate from the rest. You are *me*. You do not have to tell me I am a man, either, but you will see me as a man, or you do not see me at all.”

“I feel you, *all* of you, too fucking much!” She pushed against my chest with her free hand.

A moment passed between us.

I nodded. “Final answer.”

“What?” she breathed.

This was my only tell with her. I never forgot which language I spoke, but with her, she made me forget the world outside of our doors existed.

“This is your final answer, ah? ‘No’ from the woman who has always said yes to me only.”

“I didn’t say that.”

I set my hand over hers and pushed against my chest how she had. “You did.”

She looked away from me for a second before she shook her head and met my eyes. “I’m saying no to this challenge.”

“Then you do not see me for who I am.”

“Not much of a choice then.” She gently touched my neck and stared at my lips. “I’m sticking with it—my answer.”

Her eyes roamed over my face, then she met my eyes, and the entire world stilled. Not even when I picked her up, carried her to the wall, and set her down on her feet did it move. I ran my hand up her leg, and when I reached her *culo*, she hiked her leg up around my waist. She gasped into my mouth when I claimed hers. Our tongues touched, and swirled, and when I surged in deep, I could feel her soul surrender to the coaxing of mine. Her body followed, and even before I buried myself deep inside of her, we were already one.

My hands ventured over every dangerous curve, my mouth obsessed with every inch of her skin. When she clawed me as I sucked over her pulse, a growl vibrated deep in my throat. I wanted her heart to feel it, how claimed she was, and her veins to dance to it, rushing through her body to the sound of it.

“You will feel how I did when you left me,” I whispered. “You will feel it deep inside.”

She whimpered, and when I stood back and removed every item of her clothing, her entire body trembled. She rarely wore all black, but she had been sending me a message.

She was already grieving for me.

Fuck that.

I was standing in front of her, a man with a pounding heart and an aching cock—ready to fill my woman, *my* wife, and make her lose control. To touch her in places I could only.

My jacket came off and I rolled my sleeves up to my elbows.

Her eyes snapped to my forearms. Each side had a matching tattoo. A prowling lioness with wings. It matched the wings on my back. Underneath each side carried one of her names: Ava Fausti.

Mine.

Her breathing picked up when I pulled out my cock and stroked it. She reached out for me, to undress me, but I shook my head.

Before she could fight me, I set my hand underneath her hair and kissed her. With one arm, I situated her and entered her in a hard thrust.

The feel of being inside of her was like nothing I had ever felt before. Warm, slick, and tight but giving. She had come to me with a dangerous obsession, and she had inflicted one on me—her.

I could not control my heart, my breaths, my pulse when I was buried deep inside of her. My body took over, and she had all power over me, her body demanding pleasure from mine, as my hips drove into her—harder and harder, faster and faster, until her body gave me the order.

“Come to me now,” I ordered in Italian, and it proved that no matter what language was spoken out loud, love has its own between two souls.

She started to tighten around me, panting and shivering.

All the blood rushed to my cock, and together, we met in a secret place.

She rested her head on my neck after, her soft breath fanning over my skin, and she kissed over my pulse. She sniffed, though she was not crying. “I missed the feel of your skin.”

She was talking about that moment.

Seconds or centuries, it all felt the same to me without her.

“I missed breathing,” I whispered, my voice strangled.

She set her head back and looked me in the eyes. I leaned down and kissed her, until she could no longer breathe. She wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me hard enough that I felt her touch below my bones. I set her down, made sure she was steady on her feet, then I took a step back. I fixed my suit, rolling my sleeves down, and grabbed my jacket. I slipped it on, flexed my shoulders, and turned to leave.

“Nazzareno!”

I stopped but did not face her.

“I...” The one letter was as strangled as mine.

I nodded and headed for the door.

Lightning flashed. Thunder rolled. Rain sounded like pebbles falling against glass as it came down harder outside the windows.

It seemed like a cool wind rushed my back before she jumped on it, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and her legs around my stomach.

She kissed my neck as if she could not stop. “How long do we have?” She barely got out. “Until the challenge?”

“Late summer.” I kissed her hands.

Her face replaced her lips and she started to cry into my neck.

I pulled her around so she was facing me. “Look at me,” I ordered.

She did.

“We will not live like we are dying, my empyrean bird. We will live as though we have already been set free, or we will not live at all.”

She took a shuddering breath and wrapped her arms around me.

A minute or so later, she nodded into my neck.

After I dressed her, we left.

FORTY-SEVEN

AVA

TIME.

We all think we have it, until a sudden storm brutal enough to steal it looms in the distance. It pushes the sun out of our days and clouds our moon over at night. It steals all sense of control and eats away at our happiness, until we feel like we're a bird trapped in a cage by the love that lured us in there.

Love is the bars that create our prison and the doors to freedom. Both are made of the same materials.

Or as a wiseman once told me, *The love that is strong enough to save us is also the love that can destroy us. As it should be.*

I wrote all this down in an email and emailed it back to myself. I refused to forget it. Sooner or later, when I felt like I could finally breathe easy, after this challenge was over, I was going to post it on my Instagram account with a picture to go with it.

Maybe I would even say something about the chaos in the snow globe when it's turned upside down, but how it always settles.

Nazzareno had given my phone back with all my pictures, and I scrolled through them while he was in the shower.

We were still in New York. I wanted this time with him. Time away from Italy and all that waited for us there.

I'd made a vow to myself that while we were here, I wouldn't obsess over what would happen there. It was going

to be hard to do, but even if I still didn't agree with the challenge, I wanted to give Nazzareno what he wanted from me.

The honor to do this.

I sighed, long and hard, as he slipped in beside me, his body hot and smelling like a fresh shower. Neil and Andrea had offered us the rent-controlled apartment, and because it felt like a full circle moment, we decided to stay for one night.

Nazzareno took my reading glasses off and set them on the coffee table. The mattress in the bedroom was the same one that had belonged to Aunt Lucia, and I refused to sleep on it. Nazzareno had agreed with a nod.

He slipped his hand underneath my cami and gave me a kiss that made me thankful for the sofa underneath me. It was the kind of kiss that had to take a breath after the lips separate—we made a noise as we parted.

I ran my fingertips up and down his arm, and his skin puckered. “I really don't want to talk about it after this, but I have something to say.”

His eyes became serious. He nodded.

“I'll stay under one condition.” I took a deep breath. “This is my condition. If you don't agree—”

“Tell me.”

“I want to be there. At the challenge.”

He kissed my lips again, this time with a passion I felt burning in his soul. As messed up as it was, it turned him on to know I was going to support him in this.

What else could I do?

We really started going at it, and when we did, the plastic underneath us started to squeak. Nazzareno stopped and his eyebrows furrowed.

“What the fuck is that?” He slowly looked down, like it had come from my body or something.

I lifted the blanket back and told him it was plastic. Then I exploded with laughter at the look on his face. He didn't understand, and I explained to him why some people did it, to protect their furniture. He rested his head against mine and started laughing too. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and we started kissing again. We didn't even stop after we fell to the floor.

It felt like the kind of sex that released so much but brought us even closer. The only meaning behind it was to strengthen our connection.

Our entire time in New York seemed to follow this theme.

We did the touristy thing, even though I'd seen some of the places hundreds of times. I'd passed them without even truly recognizing their worth. We caught a baseball game, and Nazzareno sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" with me. We went to Coney Island. Lilo used to take Lucila there, and in a way, I was doing it for them. I tried not to think of Kirill while we were there. It was where our...not relationship, but something-*ship* had begun.

We were going out for a fancy dinner, and Nazzareno and I got dressed up, him in a black suit and me in a hot pink bandage dress. On the way, I told him all about Mamma's Pizzeria, how much I loved it. We went there instead, and he approved, which said a lot, since...Naples. Nuff said. We took an early morning stroll to Valentino's and stood in line for baked goods. We went to Central Park and ate them while we people-watched.

We did dinner with Neil and Andrea at Aunt Lucia's. The three of us stopped and smiled when Nazzareno walked in with Edna on his arm. We all clapped quietly while Glenn Miller serenaded us in the background, and in her fancy gown, she bowed. A few minutes later, a knock came at the door, and Nazzareno went to answer it. An older Italian man with a fedora walked in with him, and Nazzareno introduced him as his great uncle, Francesco.

Edna squeezed my arm.

Francesco looked more like Marzio than Nazzareno did.

Great Uncle Francesco took a seat next to her, and the entire time, they talked. They seemed fascinated with each other.

Neil and Andrea both looked at the dinner I cooked and then at me.

I held my hands up. “I picked up a few pointers in Italy!”

“Who brought the antacids?” Neil joked.

I wasn’t sure if Nazzareno got the joke when after the first bites, Neil, Andrea, and Edna acted like they all had died by letting their heads hit their plates. Nazzareno seemed to think they were acting like they had passed out. He didn’t seem to find it funny, then it dawned on me.

“You think they’re...poking fun at what happened to you after the...lion tranquilizer?”

The entire table quieted, and Nazzareno took a drink of his whiskey, nodding. The only one with a grin on his face was Great Uncle Francesco, who must have heard about what I’d done. News traveled fast in the Fausti family, apparently.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I can’t cook—or couldn’t. The last time I tried, everyone got sick.”

“She was trying to get a job at this mob-owned restaurant —” Neil started, but then picked up his glass and downed some of his wine.

After that, though, the night was a lot of fun, and Edna even allowed Francesco to escort her back to Vice City.

Nazzareno and I had breakfast with Molly the next morning, who stood by and watched as Hoffa fell in love with Nazzareno—after she saw that, Molly gave her approval of him. We made plans to take Hoffa back to Italy with us.

We took the ferry to Ellis Island, and then I stopped in front of a church and decided to go in. I thought maybe it was a sign when a woman sat outside of it, selling headscarves, or what Nazzareno called a *mantello*, from Italy—or she claimed. Even though she was only charging twenty bucks, Nazzareno

gave her a hundred. She stared at him wide-eyed as we entered the church.

I wasn't sure what to do, or if I was going to erupt into flames because of all the mistakes I'd made in my life, but a sudden peace washed over me. I sat quietly and just... breathed. Before we left, I lit a candle, burning it for my husband. I may not ever be a traditional wife, but he had held a vigil for me when I was in the hospital.

This was the one thing I decided to be the strongest at for him—protecting his soul.

It also took some of the worry away.

I'd never felt that before.

Then, suddenly, I was standing in front of the mirror, staring at my plain white T-shirt that twisted in the front and my light pink midi skirt with tiny white flowers. My feet were in sandals, and my hair was somehow wrangled into pigtails, the shorter pieces framing my face. My light perfume drifted in the air around me.

Nazzareno set his hand on my back, led me out of the hotel suite's bathroom, and handed me my crossbody purse. I dug in it and found some light lipstick and applied it.

I straightened my skirt for probably the hundredth time. I wasn't sure if sweaty palms were good for wrinkles, but if they were, I should have a stiff skirt by the time we left.

Nazzareno kissed my forehead, stilling my hands, and told me the most beautiful thing he could in that moment. "You look ready, Ava."

I nodded, believing him, even though my heart thundered in my chest and my stomach was full of butterflies.

"Talk to me," I said as he started the car.

Nazzareno didn't like depending on other people for transportation, and like magic, a Range Rover, which I had a feeling was armored, must have been delivered the day he arrived in New York. He was paranoid about my safety after Olivier Nemours had tried to crush us.

He handed me his aviators, and I slid them on. He took my hand and then pulled into traffic like he'd lived in New York his entire life.

Instead of just useless chatter, he took the drive to teach me how to speak basic Italian. He would say a word, give me the meaning, and then have me repeat it. He tried to hide it, but sometimes when I repeated the words, I could see his shoulders stiffen like I had hit him.

“Okay.” I breathed a little easier, glad to have the distraction. I both needed and feared our ending destination. “Let’s hear you do a New York accent.”

He smoothly pressed on the brake. We were stuck in a little traffic.

He shrugged and said without a hint of an Italian accent, “How you doin’?” He looked at me and smiled.

“Fuck,” I said. “That backfired on me.”

He roared with laughter, and bringing my hand to his mouth, kissed it like he did my face—big, fat kisses.

“That’s because you’ve been here before,” I accused, but I was laughing too.

“Does not feel like it.”

“What do you mean? You told me you’ve been here plenty of times.”

“*Si*.”

“I’m so confused.”

“With you, the world feels entirely new. I have been here many times, but this time it feels I am here for the first time. Same with Cairo. Same with my home, where I was born and where I will die. Italia. I have traveled all over the world, some places so remote, no one else existed with me. This time when I go to those places again, I will see them for the first time—just as you do.”

I brought our linked hands to my cheek and rested against them. “Come to think of it, even though I was born and raised

here...it felt new to me too.”

“That is love, ah?”

“That is love.” I smiled.

Then I felt like I was going to puke when the car came to a stop and Nazzareno got out and came to open my door. When he did, it felt like the warm air engulfed me in flames, and it was making the nausea worse. My clothes were sticking to me.

“Ava,” Nazzareno called.

I held a hand up. “I need a sec.” I was trying to settle the nervousness that had rose past my stomach and made it to my throat.

He took my chin in his hand and made me look at him. “I was not there for your healing, but I will be there for your break.”

My break? I was about to ask, but he kept my hand firmly in his, shut my door, locked the car, and led me into the building.

We ran into Bonny, the neighbor who had visited Sonny in the hospital. She was carrying a tray of what seemed like lasagna. A little jealousy rolled through me for some reason. I had to bite down the urge to call her out for the burnt top of the dish.

She eyed us with suspicion. “Are you looking for someone?”

“I’m here to visit my dad,” I said. “Sonny.”

She narrowed her eyes, like she could see me better if she did, and scanned my face. Something in her expression told me she’d connected the dots on deeper inspection. Probably the ones on my nose.

“Ava?”

I lifted my hand and said in a sing-songy voice, “Hi. It’s me. I’m the...”

Nazzareno took my hand down and cleared his throat, probably to stop me from breaking out in song.

“I’m sorry!” She laughed. “I didn’t recognize you!”

“Yeah. I barely recognize me these days either.”

“You look really good.” She smiled. “Sonny will be happy to see it.”

Happy to see it... that was a stretch. My dad didn’t seem to have the facial capacity to find such a range, and given the history of our relationship... Then again, the nurse had told me about his visit in Italy, and I would have never thought he cared that much.

I shook out of my inner dialogue and smiled back at her. “Are you going to see him?”

“I was, but maybe you can take this to him?” She offered me the tray.

“How about we all go in together?”

She seemed reluctant, but when I insisted, she nodded and agreed.

To my surprise, she didn’t even knock, just opened the door with her key and went in. The place was dark, even though it was sunny outside, but the television lit up in short but frequent bursts. It blared from the back room.

Suddenly, I was a kid again, watching the back of his head. I was still waiting for him to take me in his arms, and even when I fought, refuse to let me go.

Maybe because then, I would have known.

I was worth fighting for.

I was worth staying for.

I’d always been jealous of the kids at school who had parents who wouldn’t allow them to do the things I was able to do, like roam the city late at night. They would complain, and I’d complain with them, but deep down, I knew. Their parents cared.

Okay, so maybe Sonny didn’t fight for us, or know how to put his foot down after we’d been robbed of a good mother,

but he had stayed, even though he was going through some pretty rough stuff too.

Then I understood what Nazzareno had told me in the car.

“I was not there for your healing, but I will be there for your break.”

Even if it felt like a break to confront Janis, it really was a healing experience, even if a small part of me would never heal. Someday, after she was gone, I’d think back and regret *what could have been*, for me and my sister’s sakes, even if she had made the decision.

But this.

This fucking broke me.

I realized how alone Sunny was in this small place, all his measly things surrounding him. He’d brought his television from our house, and it seemed big, which was something because it was old and just big enough to fit on a small table.

I was thankful that Lilo and Lucila had convinced him to move, though. He would have felt even more alone in our house, surrounded by haunting memories, but no live bodies to chase the ghosts away sometimes.

He didn’t even turn around when we walked in.

Bonny set the tray down on the kitchen counter and started moving around it like she’d been here many times before. The jealousy I felt melted away, and suddenly, I wanted to take her hand and squeeze it.

“Hi,” she said to Nazzareno. “I don’t think I caught your name, but I’ve heard you’re Ava’s husband from Sonny.”

He gave her his name and held out his hand. She shook it and smiled, asking if he could help her set up lunch. He nodded, then looked at me. I nodded. Even though he started to do whatever she asked of him, I could feel his eyes on me.

With a deep breath that I slowly exhaled, I took small steps toward my dad, stopping when I got to the edge of the room. He must have sensed someone, and he turned, maybe expecting Bonny. His face was almost expectant. Then it

hardened, even though...looking at it with what felt like different eyes, it was more guarded.

“Hi.” I waved.

“Ava?”

“It’s me.”

He nodded.

We stared at each other.

Another shuddering breath, and I pointed in the room, asking permission to enter. His eyes narrowed and he gave a slow nod.

Why did I feel like such a kid again? Except in a big way, I didn’t.

As a kid, I would have charged into this room once I understood the complexity of adult emotions, jumped into his arms, cried into his neck, and asked him to make it all better.

As an adult, though, I took guarded steps toward him, containing the careless vulnerability that comes with childhood.

I stopped next to his chair, watching the screen play an old black and white show. “Still watching *The Honeyymooners*, huh?” The tremble in my voice couldn’t be hidden.

He grabbed his beer and took a sip of it. “Yeah.” His voice was full of gravel, and he actually gave a *yeah* instead of a *yep*.

I laughed at Jackie Gleason as Ralph Kramden gave his famous line, “To the moon, Alice, to the moon!”

It was nervous laughter to release some of the tension. I was doing my best to stay on my feet. I felt weak, like I hadn’t eaten, but Nazzareno had packed me full of protein before we’d left.

Dad’s face turned slowly to mine, like he’d never heard me laugh before. It had probably been a good minute. I never gave him the time of day before I left, and if I did, I was so mean.

“I’m nervous, okay,” I admitted. “It feels like I haven’t talked to you since...well, you remember.”

He nodded.

“The nurse at the hospital said you came to see me,” I blurted. “Why?” I knew the answer, but I felt like I had to get him talking or I would never get through this.

“You’re my daughter.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I had to clear it. “I’m sorry...dad.”

He sat up straighter and his shoulders stiffened. Maybe he thought I was about to tell him I was dying. No. This was about living, which, for some of us, is harder to do, because it’s so much of a risk.

“I know,” I rushed out. “About what Janis did. Luci knows too. She told me.”

He slumped back in his seat, wiped his face, and guzzled down the rest of his beer. “Who told?”

“Luci found the papers. They were packed in some boxes she thought were hers.” *Oh God.* I stood as still as...whatever couldn’t move, because if it did, it would crack. I barely got out, “That’s why you were at the house the night those men attacked you. You were looking for those papers. You didn’t want us to find them.” It was records from our school, documenting everything they suspected Janis was doing to us.

“I don’t remember.”

He was lying to me, but I didn’t care. “You didn’t know,” I whispered. “You didn’t know what she was doing—”

He held up a hand. “I was to blame. End of story.”

“No!” I sounded like a kid, but I didn’t care. “She’s to blame. Janis Nicole Hickey. She’s the one who drugged us. She’s the one who tore us all apart. *She* broke our snow globes!” I wiped my eyes. “But we can fix this. We just have to do it together.”

“You went to see her?”

I hesitated, because the question was quiet, but it was laced with something I couldn't understand. "Yeah."

He stood, took the bottle, and flung it at the wall. Glass pieces littered the floor, and the entire room smelled like flat hops. He set his hands on his hips, and he was breathing heavy.

Nazzareno went to move toward the room, but I held my hand up. Bonny stayed in the kitchen, acting like she was busying herself, but I could tell she was invested.

"Did she want money?" he demanded, looking at me. When I didn't answer, he pressed, "Did she?"

"Ah." I cleared my throat. "She was fishing...kind of."

"That's about fucking right," he spit out.

"She wanted money from you after she left. She told me." Okay, it was a lie, but I had a sinking suspicion that she might have tried to blackmail him or something from where this conversation was heading. "She told me you paid her."

"Yeah, well, it was the only way to get rid of her."

"You..." I took a deep breath. "You paid her to stay away from us."

"Why else?" He looked at me then.

All the times he came up short for bills...then he'd try to gamble to get it back. Because she demanded money from him. She knew he didn't have the money for court and how lenient they might be because she was our mother, even if the school had their suspicions.

He must have given her whatever he had to keep her away, and it was good enough, because she really didn't want us.

He'd continued to gamble even after we were grown, but we all had our vices, and maybe like us, he just couldn't quit some of them.

A fresh new slice cut me deep, but I tried to hide the bleeding. I turned my hands, squeezing them. "You never know with her," I said. "She's conniving."

He plopped down in his seat, like all the air had been drained out of him. He stared at the television, like a default setting, but I saw it then. His eyes. They were glossed over.

I took small steps to get to him, then without asking, I sat on the arm of the chair. I set my shoulder against him at first, leaning a little, and then I took his hand. “Will you just tell me one thing?” I breathed out. “Why didn’t you tell us? I can understand when we were kids, but when we got older.”

He looked up at me, and our eyes met. And I had my answer then. If we would have seen the look in his eyes that he hid from us while watching television, we would have known.

He was saving us from knowing the truth.

He was the one dying while he tried to save us.

Something only a real parent would do.

It felt so good to have one.

He answered me anyway. “You and your sisters will always be my babies,” he barely got out. “Couldn’t kill any of you with the truth. Moms are special. I didn’t want you girls to feel like you weren’t because you didn’t have one who cared.”

A strangled noise quietly came from my mouth, and I slid into his lap and cried into his chest. He held me like he used to when I was just a little girl.

When I could catch my breath, I said, “I’m not crying over what she did. I’m crying because I love you, and this is healing me more than she ever hurt me.”

He made a gruff noise and pulled me closer, kissing my head.

I wasn’t sure how long we sat like that, but Bonny knocked on the wall, Nazzareno standing behind her. “Dinner’s ready if you’re both hungry,” she whispered.

We both stood, and the distance between us was gone, even if I felt emotionally drained.

Bonny went to bring my dad’s plate in, but I shook my head. “How about we have dinner at the table instead?”

He looked uncertain, but he agreed.

We all sat down, and I introduced Nazzareno to my dad—properly, since I could this time.

While my dad still had his hand, he looked at me and said, “You wanted this?”

“Yeah.” I laughed some. “I want this—for the rest of my life.”

He nodded and we all started eating. Even if dad didn’t say much, the conversation flowed, and it seemed so right to see him sitting at the head of the table, like he was overseeing his family. He had nothing left to hide.

Nazzareno and I told him about the properties in Candela. We told him Lilo and Lucila bought a place, and ours was one villa down from theirs. Minnie would have a place close to ours when she was old enough. I didn’t tell him Lilo and Lucila had bought him one too, and that Nazzareno and I were going to do the remodel for him.

He would have never accepted it.

Maybe once we got him there, though...

The plan was to get him to Naples, Florida to see Luci and spend some time with her. She deserved this moment too. So did Minnie. We’d all meet in Candela for the holidays.

Dad walked us to the door after dinner, and after I hugged him, I whispered in his ear, “Bonny is welcome too.”

He didn’t say either way, but I had a feeling he was going to welcome her company. She had been with him in Italy when he came to check on me at the hospital.

They walked us out to the street, and as we were getting to the car, I looked back. My dad was standing beside her some, but mostly behind. She was waving goodbye. I noticed my dad’s hand lifting some, and at first, I thought he was waving too, but then I realized...he was hesitating to put his hand on her shoulder.

I nodded at him and gave him an encouraging smile. After he made his move, her smile grew even bigger, and she set her

hand over his. I took out my phone and snapped the picture, the sun shining down on them right before it set.

FORTY-EIGHT

AVA

THE HOTTER the weather grew in Rome, the more irritable I got. My nerves seemed to be on the surface of my skin, and it felt like every touch had me snapping my teeth. I was mostly okay with Nazzareno's family, because they stayed mostly to themselves, and didn't bother me. They were men, and men knew what a woman wanted.

In my case, not to really see them.

The more they were around, the more of a reminder it was.

My husband was about to battle it out in a sword fight with his cousin.

Nazzareno used the hidden "gym" room over at Beni's for practice sessions. Mostly, though, we stayed at his grandfather's farmhouse on the outskirts of Orvieto so he could have a more archaic regimen.

He was an excellent swordsman.

Rocco even told me that. Marzio had trained him and had always praised him for being a natural.

Again, though, the reality of what was *about* to happen, and when *the moment* happened, felt centuries apart.

At night, I'd imagine the scene. I was there, watching, and then it was over, and *we* were going home.

Home.

That was all I cared about—going home with him, both of us whole and moving on.

The night before we left for Florence, where the “challenge” would take place, I couldn’t sleep. I grabbed for my glasses and my phone. I was thinking about writing another Instagram post, to myself but addressed to everyone else (probably my one lone follower; I hadn’t checked my stats since I’d created it) but fear was clouding my thoughts.

Nazzareno sighed, as relaxed as can be. He took my hand and held it to his bare chest. “I want this, to fight for your love in front of my entire family, but I do not want you to feel this much fear. I do understand it, and respect it, but if I do not do this, Renato will never back down. He will plague us until one of us breathes our last breath. The night of the event in Venice, you set a challenge in front of him, and he feels as if I have twisted fate’s attention.”

“I—”

He held a hand up. “For you, I would have done the same.”

“Challenge him first?”

“Sì. I am meeting him in the middle of the battlefield for the same reason, except somewhat different. He is attempting to claim who fate has already deemed as mine. My wife. After this, no one has the right to question it. Not even you.”

He was truly pissed that he didn’t have the right, at first, to start this first.

I sighed. “Your family?”

He hadn’t brought them up since we’d returned.

“My father has appointed Leandro head of our faction.”

“He demoted you.”

“He cut me out.”

“Does that mean...are you going to pledge fealty to Luca?”

“I will see.”

“After the...challenge is over, you mean?”

He nodded. “This is what *Zio* Luca wants.”

“Is that normal?”

“*Si*. He will see what fate has in store before he makes a move.”

We both grew quiet. I took my glasses off and set them to the side with my phone. I curled up next to him, and he set his arm over me.

“Will Luca be judging this challenge?”

“*Si*. He will be there.”

That sounded...not fully forthcoming. These men were bound by honor not to lie, but that didn't mean they didn't maneuver the conversation in a direction they wanted when it suited them not to speak on something.

“*Ludi publici*.”

I looked up at him. “What's that?”

“What will take place tomorrow. It is a term that means public games.”

My heart shot into my throat and I lifted some, though he wasn't letting me get far. “Public games. You make it sound like those old gladiator battles.”

He met my eyes.

I could barely take a breath. “That's what this is, isn't it?”

He pulled me down and started to stroke my arm with his fingertips. “We use similar ways to settle disputes among family members. My grandfather reduced it some at my grandmother's request, but not for a serious accusation such as Renato made. Not for me. It is over romance, and romance calls for a battle.”

“Archaic and barbaric, that's what those games were.”

He didn't say anything, and I knew he wasn't going to deny it. To deny it would mean he lied to me.

“Tell me more.”

He told me how the accuser had to have a good reason for calling another man out, and the *ludi* had to be approved by

the head of the family, which was why we didn't get the ruling until days after. Luca was taking his sweet time with his puppet strings.

If Luca approved the *ludi publici*, which he had, the man who was called out, Nazzareno, had to face his accuser, Renato, or face a sentence by the head of the family. In this case, though, Luca had decided that since it was the night of his transfer of power, and I was not on board with being with Renato, he was going to wave the sentence by the head of the power bit and let the two men work it out.

Nazzareno had married me, which twisted fate even more. A twist which I thought Luca found delicious.

My part in all of this: I had to leave to stop the *ludi*.

We all knew how that went, and there we were.

Luca also had power over the actual battle. He'd selected swords, which wasn't such a surprise since it was his weapon of choice.

"My grandfather felt it was romantic. Especially when the *ludi* was held over the love of a woman."

"Do the women feel this way, or just the men?"

He grinned. "Depends on the woman."

"Rosaria Caffi?"

"She would adore it."

"Scarlett Fausti?"

He looked down at me and then quickly back up.

I went to get up, but he wouldn't let me. "Was Brando involved in a *ludi* in Scarlett's honor?" How strange was it to speak that way? Using words like honor and romance—words that almost felt extinct in this day.

"She does not know, but yes."

I didn't know what was worse—knowing or not; being there or not.

"Anything else I should know?"

He grew quiet, and then cleared his throat. “It is something you must see—words will not do it justice. However, you must remember this. The *ludi* is, at its core, a play by fate, and we are the actors there to entertain the crowd. *Zio* Luca is the rule holder, the director, but as the play goes on, we act according to the twists of our footsteps, not scripts.”

“So...what you’re telling me is that a plot twist happens, and from that plot twist, the entire game can change.”

“*Sì.*”

It felt like this entire ordeal was going to be a trial by fire for me.

I cleared my throat. “Can you do something for me?”

He didn’t say anything, and I knew it was because he was waiting to see what that something was. He couldn’t automatically promise me, because if he did and I snuck in *don’t do this*, he would be breaking his word to me. I could tell he was struggling, though, not to automatically agree. His hands were balled into fists.

“*On my signal,*” I whispered even lower, “*unleash hell for me.*” It was a movie quote twisted with my own plea.

We both grew quiet after, then he kissed my temple and turned out the light, but we didn’t sleep.

FORTY-NINE

AVA

BEFORE THE ETERNAL light dawned over Rome, we left for Florence.

I recognized the roads, even though it was dark out. Aristide drove, Beni in the passenger seat, Nazzareno and I in the back.

Each mile burned made it harder and harder to breathe, like internal emotional smoke was strangling my throat and lungs.

Nazzareno was quiet, his thoughts inward, but he constantly touched me.

It seemed like all the air in the universe had been sucked out, including in my lungs, when we pulled up to the gate leading into Luca's walled city.

Two soldiers came to the window and allowed us through the golden gate. Aristide barely seemed to tap the gas, and just like before, an off-road vehicle pulled in front of us. I turned my head and caught the second one tailing us.

Instead of going into the village, though, the off-road vehicles took a crude route, bouncing over dirt and rocks, trees on each side of us. I almost stopped blood flow in Nazzareno's hand when the land opened and, in the middle, sat a... colosseum. It was a smaller version of the one in Rome.

If I wouldn't have been all with it mentally, I would have questioned my sanity.

We'd entered another century. A much, *much* older one.

Men walked around in what resembled old Roman togas—some white and some red—and what looked like iron masks in the shape of a lion’s face. It seemed like there was a distinction between the soldiers and just men of the family, though.

I thought it might have something to do with the togas versus the capes with the decorations on the shoulders.

The men wearing the capes had chests that were covered in shields that resembled muscular chests but looked like they had been molded in an iron casting, even down to the lines under pectoral muscles. Over their hearts, a lion was embossed. They even wore those helmets with red plumes. I thought they were called galea. I’d read about them once.

One common thing that connected them all: every man wore a signet ring on his finger, and I spotted the Fausti tattoo peeking above the togas on chests, on arms and legs too.

A small stone place was next to the colosseum and had a line. Red wine was being poured out of a window—just a hand reaching out from a little arched opening. I thought those were called wine windows.

What I assumed was ancient-style Roman music played in the background of this scene.

The entire setup almost reminded me of one of those renaissance festivals, but even older and Roman-esq.

I looked down at my white dress—if it wasn’t for the modern make of it, I would have thought I’d gone mad, that was how authentic the old-world vibe was.

Outside of the window, I made sure the vehicle we were riding in had wheels. A few chariots were pulling up. The horses wore blinders and regalia with red plumes that matched the soldier’s helmets.

“Ava.”

I turned towards my husband’s voice. He was watching me. His eyes were wide, full of excitement, like the thrill of the challenge thundered through his veins. “Indescribable, ah?”

“Understatement of the freakin’ year.”

His smile came slow, and the car seemed to mimic it as we came to a stop. Two guards in masks and capes approached. Aristide and Beni stepped out to meet them.

Nazzareno turned to me. “Kiss me now,” he said.

“Why? What happens now?” Suddenly, I wanted to close my eyes and teleport back to modern day, where this was nothing but a reenactment for fun.

“Calm,” he said in a soothing voice. He took my face in his hands and kissed me. When he pulled away, my breath went with him.

If his stopped, I was sure mine would too.

“Now you will be led to a room where you will dress.”

“What about you?” My voice was as shaky as my hands, and I was so scared, my bowels were griping at me.

“I will be taken below where I will dress as well.”

“Then what?”

“The challenge begins.” His eyes seemed to narrow and light up at the same time.

“I’ll be there?” I wanted to be sure.

He nodded.

I refused to cry because I refused to foreshadow our story.

It almost felt like I was in shock, though, like I couldn’t believe this was happening in real life.

I held on to his shoulders. “Why are you not making a bigger deal out of this? How can you—”

“Ava,” he said firmly. “This is not the end. This is our beginning.”

The soldier came to his door and opened it.

“Be brave, my beautiful bird. I will see you in a little while.”

Beni and Aristide walked with him to...wherever, two guards flanking them on either side.

Just like that...he left me.

I held on to the seat and forced my panic down. When a sweet voice came at me in the middle of all this madness, I almost broke down.

Naomi.

“Ava.” She held out her hand for me. “Nazzareno thought you would want me here.”

All I could do was snatch her hand like a lifeline and nod. Her warm hazel eyes were full of sympathy and knowledge as she tucked my hand under her arm and coaxed me from the car. She grabbed my bag from the seat, but I took it from her.

Two masked soldiers escorted us as she led the way.

“You’ve been here before?” I whispered to try to hide the tremble in my voice.

She glanced at the soldiers and then nodded. “A few times.”

It seemed like she didn’t want to talk in front of them, so we walked in silence until we seemed to enter the underbelly of the colosseum. She knew her way around. She took a route that led us to what seemed like a lady’s room, or maybe it would have been called a chamber. I could hear the roars from the crowd outside, and it sounded like they were maybe having chariot races. It seemed like half the amphitheater was rooting for different teams or something.

The two guards waited outside as she shut the door behind us.

“We’ll talk as we work. You have a grace period, because you’re a woman, and they expect you to make an entrance.”

I choked on my own air. “This entire place is going to watch me walk out?”

She grabbed for a dress on a hanger. It resembled the men’s togas, but prettier. I wasn’t sure what it was called.

Naomi started to undress and change into the dress. Three slashes ran down her back. They looked like old claw marks. The scars were pinker than her skin. I wondered if a lion had done it, but didn't want to pry—for once. Then she showed me mine—it was different from hers.

She gave me a lesson on old Roman attire as she showed it to me.

“Our dresses are called stolas.” She ran her hand down the long dress-like garment. It had short sleeves and was made of silk. She touched the clasps that held it together. “These are called fibulae, which are really just brooches.” She lifted the bottom to show me, and it had a gorgeous flounce. It came with a girdle that Noemi told me would land high above the waist. “It was a privilege to wear this garment back then. It was a sign of a respectable married woman. The women who committed adultery were forbidden to wear one.” She grinned at me.

I gave her a grin back—even though I wouldn't ever commit adultery, it was the first time I'd ever been called respectable.

“Luca chose this stola for you. It'll be yours to keep.”

She helped me into the stola, then pinned my hair back with about hundred small pins because of all the layers, though she gave me a side part. I realized why after. She covered my head in a palla, as she called it, and some of my hair was visible from underneath it, which fit the vibe better. She fastened the cloth over my head with gemstone brooches.

She turned me toward the mirror, and I stood there, just staring at myself. Candlelight lit the dark and dank chamber, and it looked like I'd been teleported back in time. “I feel like I'm going to a fu—flippin' party with a bunch of time travelers.” Though the outfit was quite beautiful.

She squeezed my arm. “Whatever you do, do not say that aloud. If any of these men hear you, it might end up in another challenge for Nazzareno. It would be considered an insult. Here. Let's get you into the sandals.”

As she helped me into them, I asked her how many times she'd done this.

“Twice, but I only showed the woman and her confidant where to go, not helped her prepare.”

“Thank you,” I said as firmly as I could. I needed her to know how much of a light she was in this darkness I was fumbling around in.

She took me by the arms and looked me in the eyes. “I know this is going to sound easier said than done, but...you must keep it together. You must walk out of here with your head held high and your shoulders stiff. You must give the impression that you have no fear, because your man is strong enough to claim your love so no other man in this arena will be able to challenge him again. This is about romance, love, and most of all, a good show put on by fate. Not only will your man have to fight for your hand, but he will also have to sway the crowd to be on his side if there's a tie...so to speak. Sometimes these battles are fight to the death, but Luca wanted a show. Death can end things too soon.”

“You mean this crowd will start cheering for one man or the other?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“This is insanity!”

“The Fausti men love us with an insanity that turns into an obsession, but for them to do this, they must have insanity already buried down deep.”

“Why does—Luca?—choose you to do this?”

She sighed and looked toward the mirror, running her hand down her dress. In the candlelight, the gold in her hazel eyes seemed to glimmer. They were so cat-like, I was thankful for not being a mouse. Her dark hair fell down her shoulders, past her breasts, as smooth as silk, and her light-brown skin seemed to match the dark gold glimmer around her pupils. She wore a gilded flower headband and a cornicello (Italian horn) around her neck.

“My lions. I made a deal with him to use them for these battles when he requested them. Sometimes he wanted them to deal with problems. The support he offered was too much to pass up. It saved our protected lands in Africa.”

I touched her arm. “He set the lions free on these problems.”

She nodded. “Until Scarlett put a stop to it.”

“She did?”

“Scarlett is...touched. She had an experience with Oba, my lion, and she’s been an advocate for them ever since. Her support has brought in more than what Luca donated.”

“Your lion? You mean Valerio?”

She smiled, and it blazed like the fires around us. “You are truly one of us, Ava from New York.”

“Because I made the connection between our lions and actual lions?”

“These men wear these symbols as if they are them, but they have yet to make the connection between them. You carry a torch with you subconsciously, and consciously, you become the flame. Same with the spirit of a lion.”

“Has Valerio ever done this for you?”

“They call me the beast tamer in this family.” Her grin came slow, and it made me think back on when she gave me the tranquilizers. “I am all Valerio’s. I have never wanted to tame him, though. I love him wild, but he has this fear of... losing me to the same beast inside of him.”

“Your lion—Oba?”

“Valerio was going to challenge him, but I told him...it will not be Oba he meets in the middle of this colosseum; it will be the lioness. Me.” She touched her chest.

“I love you,” I said and smiled. She was a fierce woman, and I always loved fierce women. I was finding this family had plenty of them. Women who would make history books, if only in the ones the Fausti family wrote.

She looked away from me for a second, then met my eyes. “I wasn’t sure if I should tell you this or not, and Valerio told me not to, but I would want to know. When Marzio ruled this family, he only held these games as a way for the men to bond, to touch the roots of their ancestors across centuries. Before Grazie died, she asked that of him.

“She found this tradition exceptionally brutal—maybe she was thinking of the women who had to endure this. I’m not sure if Marzio had ever done this for her, but...she asked it of him regardless. If a man needed to challenge another man, it became a high-speed race, cars or horses, things like that.”

Her eyes studied mine for a second before she continued. Maybe gauging my emotional status through my eyes. “Lothario rose to power by default, and he allowed the practice again. He did this because he wanted Brando Fausti dead. He would have been the rightful next heir to the Fausti throne. Venice is proof of the lengths he went to keep his position. Even before that, though, he tried to destroy Brando and Scarlett like they were enemies.”

Malum came to mind, and I nodded. “Nazzareno told me a little about it.”

“Nazzareno is not his father—Leandro is. Nazzareno is more like Marzio. He even looks like him, down to the same haircut. Lothario has never been able to stand it, but he tolerated it because Nazzareno quietly flew the skies and went along with his wishes.”

“I understand that part. What does this...*Lodi* have to do with what Lothario did to Brando, though?”

“Luca might feel entitled to do the same to Lothario’s son. Twist fate and let it ride.”

A sound that sent a chill through my veins seemed to echo inside of the stone room. Noemi noticed how I flinched.

“The first call by the ancient Roman Cornu,” she said. “Renato will answer it. He was the first accuser. Luca is allowing him out first, since so much has been stacked against him in this fight.”

“Then Nazzareno.”

She nodded. “There will be three calls in total.”

“I’ll walk out last.”

“Yes, but the third call will signal battle. After the second call, we will give it a few minutes, then we will walk out together. You’ll remove your mask, like a bride with a veil, once you face the two opponents from your perch. Don’t be afraid, Ava.” She grabbed my hand and squeezed. Her voice was strong. “*You* are the power here. These lions will bow at *your* feet.” She took my hand and pressed it against my chest. “You have the heart of a lioness. *You* bring dinner to the table. The one who hunts is the one who feeds the desire. *You* rule *them*.”

You rule them became a chant inside of my head as we waited for the second call. Once it was sounded, I reached out for Noemi’s hand and held it. She was a steady presence in a trembling world.

She led me closer to the door, where she opened an old wooden cabinet and grabbed a gold mask imprinted with the face of a lioness. She placed it over hers and then grabbed another one for me.

After she secured it, I asked her for a minute alone.

She searched my eyes and then left.

I ran over to my bag and dug around. I pulled out the *pistola* hidden in my tampon box and secured it behind the girdle.

Time didn’t seem to exist in those breaths, but after she knocked and then led me out, I took a deep, steady inhale, and held my head up as I silently exhaled. The two soldiers outside of the room bowed to us and then led us to a shaft that was controlled by what seemed like a wooden pulley. Men oversaw working it, and after we stepped on, their muscles strained as they manually lifted us higher and higher.

The noise outside was insane. The men were already scenting bloodshed and ready for dinner and a show, and I had

an equally insane urge to lift my wrist and check my watch to see if it was warning me about the high decibel levels.

Technology didn't exist here.

Only ancient traditions.

As we rose in the center of the crowd, complete silence engulfed the previous riot, and then music started, like the music I'd heard after we'd arrived, but softer, more angelic, heralding our arrival.

My eyes found Luca right away. He was sitting in the VIP area of the amphitheater. He wore a mask connected to a crown and a purple robe.

My next breath trembled out when our eyes met.

I'd seen those eyes up close and personal not long ago, but in this setting, they were different.

They each claimed a side between romance and ruthless, the centers of two opposing sides in all this madness, but they worked together with a focus that rivaled twenty/twenty vision.

He'd proved he was the king of balancing the two, which was why he was crowned king of beasts.

He gave me such a subtle nod, I would have second guessed it if Noemi wouldn't have noticed it, too, and squeezed my hand.

The second thing I noticed was the two boxes next to Luca's. It was hard to tell by bodies alone, because they were all so similar, but it seemed like each man had a side of supporters. On Nazzareno's side, Beni and Aristide, and who I thought were Luca's sons.

The third thing I noticed was all the red. One single scarlet rose was placed on the arm of each seat. Petals trembled when a gentle warm, wind blew, sending a few of the delicate pieces of flesh from the flowers swirling.

I smelled carnage in the air.

Manure and blood from the amphitheater's crude floor.

My eyes naturally went to the center of it.

Two men stepped up at my attention.

Both were bare chested, but wearing the same lion masks, and they landed above their throats. Three slashes across created opening in their faces. A dark burgundy cape was secured by a brooch matching their face shields. Each man had leather wraps around their wrists and wore sword belts. Both men were barefoot. Loin clothes were the only scrap of fabric covering their privates, and they each held a bronze shield with the imprints of a lion.

Noemi leaned over and in a voice above a whisper, to be heard over the music, she named each piece of clothing and explained how it helped protect them. There wasn't much of it between the two of them.

Nazzareno and his cousin were built similarly—they all were—but I knew the shape of my husband's body intimately. I knew the scent of his skin and could close my eyes and imagine those powerful thighs wrapped around my body. It was an odd thing to think of while I was freaking the f out on the inside, but the way he would thrust inside of me, the power in those thighs...it made me shiver when I remembered it.

Maybe because I was inflicted with this insanity too.

This was such a powerful display of manly virility...it was hard for me not to feel it pressing in on the softer woman inside of me.

Or that was what it felt like.

Maybe I was just losing my mind.

The music faded, and the quiet was so intense, the wind was loud as it whistled through the air.

“Take your mask off,” Noemi whispered. “Make a show of it.”

That almost felt like too much pressure, to perform under this much stress, but I knew the fate of our relationship might depend on this. It almost felt like the wheels of a cart—one spoke goes and the entire thing stalls in the mud.

I stared straight ahead, and sort of like a strip tease, slowly reached for my mask, and inch by quivering inch, pulled it away. A tender breeze passed, like the men had all collectively sighed when my face was fully exposed, and then they roared with applause.

Each man before me took a knee, withdrawing his sword, and stabbed it in the ground.

A few seconds after, I felt all eyes on me, and I nodded subtly to my husband while raising my arms like a bird about to be set free.

At my signal, unleash hell for me.

My husband bowed to me, kissed his fingers, then offered them to the sky.

Luca stood, raised his arms, and the crowd became silent once more. He said something in Italian or maybe even Latin, and I was pretty sure it meant, *let the challenge begin*, or something close, and the men all applauded while I followed Noemi to where Luca was.

We each took a seat beside him.

Two men walked onto the amphitheater's floor, one going toward Nazzareno and one going toward Renato. I wasn't sure about Renato's box, but Nazzareno's was missing a man. It wasn't Beni. His build was different. He was tall and a bit lanky. He must have felt me staring at him and turned his masked face towards me. He lifted a hand and so did I. Then he turned forward and I could tell his knee was bouncing a little.

Whoever had gone to Nazzareno unfastened his robe and removed it, then disappeared underneath the colosseum. Renato's man did the same thing. After a minute or two, the two men hadn't made it back to their seats, so I assumed they were waiting underneath.

A drum started to beat, and it was loud, but not as loud as the pounding of my heart as Nazzareno and Renato stepped in the middle of the field and stared at each other. The drumbeat stopped suddenly, Luca lifted his arms, the third horn sounded,

and as soon as his arms came down and the horn faded, the two men started to circle each other, a sword in one hand, a shield in the other.

I had a moment of flight or fight, but instead of doing either, I sat, my blood frozen in my veins.

For a second, I thought I had turned to stone, like a statue, and I wondered if those statues were woman who had come before me and had felt fear on this level.

Another tepid wind surged against my face, and I felt something cool rolling down my cheeks. Tears. I hadn't even realized I was crying. I was too paralyzed to wipe them. I let them roll silently.

Luca noticed.

I wondered if he was thinking about his mamma in that moment—how she had asked to stop this on her deathbed.

I wondered if tears had silently rolled down her hardened cheeks too.

The clash of swords clanged in the air louder than the drums.

Nazzareno found an opening and took it. Renato took a step back, but not before I saw blood rolling down his arm from where Nazzareno had nicked him.

This wasn't a battle to the death challenge, but it could still result in death. One wrong move and either man could get mortally wounded. Judging by the faces they were making, it was the same as fight to the death for them.

No matter what, though, one man had to get seriously injured for this challenge to be called. And I wasn't sure if Luca was going to throw something unexpected into the battle because of what Lothario had done to his son.

Another swipe of silver through the air.

Every swipe at Nazzareno felt like a swipe at me.

And when he took a slice to his arm, I took one to my heart.

It was keeping score.

Arms.

Legs.

Stomach.

Nazzareno was getting more hits in, but he was still taking his licks.

As time wore on, and both men were coated in sweat, cut down to bone and bloodied, and the crowd seemed like it wanted to rush the field for a taste of both, a sudden urge to scream, STOP!, rose up in me as strong as my next breath.

It wouldn't have made a difference, though.

The fight was too intense, and the men who had turned into beasts around me were enjoying this play too much. They were shouting, cheering, even booing, depending on who they were rooting for.

It was hard to tell who had more support.

Nazzareno knocked the sword out of Renato's hand, and instead of going in for the kill, he sheathed his sword and tackled him. They started fighting in the dust. Clouds of it were bursting in the air like dead flowers as they seemed to wrestle and punch.

Then Renato reached his weapon, Nazzareno was back on his feet before he could get a swipe in, and the clanging started up again.

Renato was tired, though. When Nazzareno made a step and surged forward, his sword went clean through Renato's side, and the crowd went wild. Nazzareno stepped back, and Renato looked down, like he was in shock, and pulled back a hand slick with blood. He swayed like he'd drunk too much wine, and then fell to his knees before he fell to the dirt.

The man who had taken his robe ran to his side. It seemed like he was talking to Renato, or trying to, but it was impossible to hear over the roar of the crowd.

Nazzareno kept his sword in hand, but he was swaying too. His body was coated in dry mud and blood. It caked to his skin in some spots, maybe even staunching some of the wounds.

Then I thought about infection, and...

His eyes found mine and he stopped. A hard wind blew, and he seemed to follow its direction as his feet rocked.

I jumped to my knees, holding the dress, charging toward the steps leading down to the floor and thundered down them. Men were cheering in my direction, *ah, ah, ah!*, and clapping. No one tried to stop me from getting to him.

This amphitheater was different from the one in Rome. At the end step, there was a drop, but it wasn't all that steep. Nazzareno met me, lifting his arms up for me, and I went into them like a bird being set free.

Once I was on my feet, he held my chin in his bloodied hand, and he stared into my eyes. "I unleashed hell for you, my wife, and now I have earned your heaven." He smiled at me, and it was the brightest thing about him. His face was coated in dust, and his teeth were lined with blood. His lip was busted from the fight.

He removed his helmet and flung it to the ground.

Words wouldn't even register, only action, and I flung myself in his arms, trembling and sobbing.

He groaned but didn't rock on his feet. He held me steady as the crowd turned thunderous. Then I happened to open my eyes, and what I saw coming for us from behind froze me for a second.

Renato charging.

Nazzareno looked behind him, and as he turned to grab his sword, I had already pulled my gun and pulled the trigger.

FIFTY

NAZZARENO

ONE SHOT from the *pistola* my wife held sent Renato back to the ground. He fell in a puff of dry dirt, and his sword landed next to him. His brother took off running and slid on the dirt beside him, falling next to him. It was his job to tend to him, checking his wounds, and if any last words were offered, he would repeat them back to the family.

I did not think my wife mortally wounded him. She had hit him in the arm.

In the eyes of the crowd, it did not matter the wound, only that she had intervened.

She did not put up a fight when I took the gun out of her frozen hand. Her eyes were distant, as if she was still seeing him charging me from behind.

The roar of the crowd died, and in its place, deafening silence.

Zio Luca rose from his seat slowly. He looked to his left and to his right, his eyes scanning over the entire crowd.

“Oh my God,” she sobbed out, but it was controlled, almost automatic, like she had been holding in the plea. “What’s happening? Nazzareno! What’s happening?”

I kept my eyes on my uncle, but I knew it was out of his control.

She grasped my arms, and even the small individual scalding-hot fires of her nails against open wounds could not touch the cold fire that had seized my heart.

“You intervened,” I said.

“I did!” She rushed out. She turned around and shouted, “I’d do it again! Do you all hear ME?! I would do it AGAIN! DO. YOU. HEAR. ME? I’d do it again! That man, RENATO FAUSTI, who doesn’t even know me, tried to take away *MY LOVE!* A WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO FIGHT FOR HER FATE TOO!”

She spun around to face me.

“Let Luca Fausti hear me,” she cried loud enough that he could. “Let him hear the growls from a woman’s heart. It’s a lot better than hearing the sobs from her soul if her love is taken away!”

“My uncle can no longer intervene,” I said, my eyes scanning the crowd before they landed back on hers.

“What?” she barely got out. “Didn’t he call the *ludi*?”

“Not yet,” I whispered. “We were supposed to stand together and face him first.”

A man from a faction of the family who played music at the games walked out onto the field carrying a cornum and started to play when he was in the center of it. It was reminiscent of Ancient Rome, and the sound was ominous. The Cornu cried.

Five roses came flying down toward us, hitting the ground in quick successions. Brando, Rocco, Dario, Romeo, and Beni had all stood, releasing them.

“What’s going on?” Her voice was panicked. “Tell me what’s going on, Nazzareno!”

“The crowd,” I said. “It has become the judge of our fate.”

Another rose spiraled down from above.

“The roses,” she barely got out. “That’s how they give their input?”

“They are voting. My performance during the *ludi* and your impassioned speech to Luca about our love. These are what they are judging us on.”

“What—” She made a choked sound before she cleared her throat. “What happens if we only get these roses?”

“We lose. It is not enough.”

“Even after you’ve already won?”

I took her in my arms and kept her at my side, my eyes on the crowd. She stared at me and then squared her shoulders, holding on to me as tightly as I was holding on to her, but her eyes were softer, somehow pleading, even though out of the two of us, she was the more powerful one.

We both looked up as another rose flew down, this one blocked out by the glare of the fading sun, as it landed by the rest.

She set her hand over my arm, where a wound bled freely, trying to staunch it. “I’m scared,” she whispered when it had been a few seconds of nothing.

“You are next to me,” I said. “I have you in arms. We are together.”

“I’ll never let go of you,” she whispered.

We looked at each other, and our eyes connected. I touched the palla covering her hair, and then leaned in close and kissed her.

It had nothing to do with the roses.

It had everything to do with needing to be near her. No matter how twisted the evening became, I had earned her love regardless. She whispered to me all the places she wanted to go after we started to fly together, and I told her I was going to take her home first, to entangle our roots together.

A rose hit us, and we barely moved.

Then sounds like the patter of rain started to fall down around us, and when we turned together, the crowd was getting to its feet, tossing roses down.

The patter of rain became as loud as a storm.

Until it suddenly stopped.

The field was flooded with red, like a pool of perfumed blood.

Ava looked up when I did, and Zio Luca was still on his feet, staring down.

He gave us a nod of approval, tossed his rose at our feet, and the entire crowd erupted into sounds of thunderous applause.

FIFTY-ONE

AVA

“*GRRRRRRR.*” Nazzareno roared like he was in pain, and I snatched my hand away, holding both of my hands up like I was surrendering.

I’d been changing one of his bandages, and I guess I was a little too rough, but he usually didn’t complain. Even when he had over a two hundred stitches, he still liked my hands on him and the attention he got.

It was December, and he was almost all healed, except for one spot that was taking a little longer. It had been a deep gash—down to the bone.

I narrowed my eyes when he started to smile, and when he started laughing, all deep and raspy, I shoved him. “Ass!”

He laughed even harder and pulled me on top of him. He entangled us, wrapping his arms and legs around me. He kissed me all over the face, what Scarlett had called Italian smooches when she’d seen him do it once.

“Tell me I get to keep you forever.” He kissed me even harder.

I smiled so hard my face hurt. “You get to keep me longer than that. Wherever we go after this, we go together. I’ll cut a bitch even in ghost form—I don’t share. You’re *mine.*” I growled.

He stopped kissing me, and rolling over on his back, roared with laughter. “It is only fair,” he said once he was able to stop. “I cut a bitch for you.”

This time, I laughed so hard, we both started laughing, even though the memory of the *ludi* was still too fresh in my mind. As fresh as the wounds and scars on my husband's skin.

We both sighed, probably taking trips down memory lane together. Then after we both returned to reality, we pulled even closer, so thankful we were both breathing the same air. We had conquered that time together, and unless a challenger came at Nazzareno for something else, he wouldn't ever have to step back into that ring ever again for me.

In fact, he wouldn't ever have to touch that ground again. He'd found favor with his uncle, and if a serious issue ever came up, it would have to be worked out in a different way, unless Nazzareno tried to steal another man's wife or disrespected her.

He seemed perfectly fine with that clause.

So was I.

This love was more than enough for the both of us.

It was good enough for his family too.

Nazzareno told me we had set a record with the number of roses we'd received. The Fausti family loved a romantic and ruthless story, and what I'd done...they considered it a great plot twist.

The ending was so much more satisfying because of it.

Zio Luca, as he instructed me to call him, sentenced Leandro to time in Malum for attempting a coup with Alvaro, and he also made a marriage arrangement between Leandro and Elettra Buratti. It settled the Burattis complaints about the broken arrangement (the marriage hadn't been publicly announced, so it was easy to switch out Nazzareno's name with Leandro's), and it gave Elettra what she wanted: children who would be born with Fausti blood and who would carry the name. Leandro would get conjugal visits because of it.

He also wasn't allowed to take any mistresses. Luca made sure to add that clause to the arrangement. Even if Leandro needed more romantically throughout his life, if Luca's word

was respected, Leandro couldn't do anything about it. If he tried, it could mean his own *ludi* or even straight death.

My husband's *ludi* didn't result in any deaths. Renato had survived, too, though he had sustained some damage and was still in the hospital.

As far as Nazzareno losing his spot in his faction, Luca had arranged a meeting between my husband and his father. It seemed Nazzareno's new fame after the *ludi* had reached Lothario. He wanted Nazzareno back, even though he made it seem like he was only doing it because he'd lost Leandro. The only reason Nazzareno agreed to it was because he wanted to carry Marzio's legacy on through his line. If he'd switched over to Luca's faction, his position would have dropped to solider.

That was all family politics, though, and I looked around at the renovated place in **(Place HERE)** and sighed.

A place to put down roots while Nazzareno gave me wings to fly. It wasn't the trap I'd always thought it would be, but a place to take my rest when the world became too much.

"We've come so far," I whispered to my husband, "in just a short period of time."

He looked at me seriously and nodded. "This is a love worth living for and worth dying for. When hard times come at us, we will have the *ludi* to remind us of how much we can endure, ah?"

"Ah." I nodded.

He smiled, leaned in, and kissed me softly.

"There's one thing you haven't given me, though," I breathed when we pulled apart.

His forehead creased.

I laughed and smoothed it out. "A card to the Mile High club. I mean, you're my *capitano*. When are you going to give me one of those?"

His grin came slow, and then he was nuzzling me, and we started to make out.

A knock at our front door made him growl.

“You knew about this!” I stood from the bed and smoothed out my clothes. A winter white slouchy sweater and a pair of white slacks with red heels. Nazzareno had started a jewelry collection for me, and between the gold and diamonds, I was as sparkly as the lights decorating the piazza. All but my hair, which I had decided to keep brunette.

He grabbed my hand and held it. He wore a black suit. His eyes were lit up, and the gold streaks around his pupils seemed more pronounced. Paired with the olive green of his irises, and his tan skin and black hair...he was so dreamy.

Almost like a mythical figure who came alive from my wildest dreams.

“What?” I breathed when he was looking at me in the same way.

He shrugged, his Adam’s apple bobbed, and I knew.

“Me too,” I whispered. “I keep waiting for a voice from above to tell me this is real. Us. Forever. Then I hear it. Right here.” I set my hand over my heart.

Never in a million years would I have thought words like that would flow so easily from my mouth, but Nazzareno had changed my life. He romanced me in so many ways—some big, some small—and it took me from harsh bulbs to swaying candlelight.

He squeezed my hand, like he couldn’t find the words, and it seemed like we both walked to the front door with a lump in our throats. Then it cleared when my sister and her family stood on the other side of it.

We all hugged, except for Nazzareno and Lilo, who shook hands.

Minnie pushed past us, stomping as she ran, calling out for Hoffa. A surprised screech, then a hiss, and Minnie’s pounding again. Luci and I smiled at each other before Nazzareno and I gave them a tour of the villa. It was nowhere near the size of our place in Orvieto, or even in Rome, but it was everything.

The colors were warm, rich in chromatic tone, and the tiles were some of my favorite features, but beyond the face of the place, it was the bones that made me feel relaxed and safe. Like Nazzareno, it seemed to wrap itself around me, chase the loneliness away, and I never felt empty when I thought of leaving or returning.

It was mine. It was his.

Ours.

After the tour, Nazzareno showed Lilo something about the villa, something he recommended they do for theirs, and Luci started looking around the kitchen, asking me if I bought this or that for the meal.

“No worries,” I said, showing her I’d gotten everything she’d put on the list. “And look—” I showed her even more groceries. “This is for my dishes.”

She held her hands up and took slow steps backwards. “Who are you?” she said in a breathy tone. “And what have you done with my sister? AVA, if you can HEAR me, make it knock three times!”

“Hardy har har har,” I said. “Off with you and your jokes.”

“Who has jokes?” Lilo said, wrapping his arms around Luci.

Nazzareno set his hand on my neck after I handed Ava an apron and secured one on myself.

“Ava,” Luci said. “She’s going to cook.”

“She going to help?” Lilo asked.

“No,” she said. “She’s *actually* going to cook us something.”

He looked at Nazzareno. “You have an anti-food-poison remedy here?”

Nazzareno grinned and kissed my temple. “She is actually quite good.”

“Yeah.” I used my pointer finger and pushed on Luci’s shoulder a little. “You’re not going to be talking smack after

you eat it. And besides, if you don't believe me, wait until Neil and Andrea get here. They're my proof of life. He and Andrea are still breathing after I fed them."

Luci looked up and made praying hands. "A miracle."

A knock came at the door—and Luci's eyes came straight to mine.

"I can't really believe it," she whispered.

"Me either."

The four of us moved toward the door again. Minnie stormed through us to get to it first. She asked who was there, and Sonny said very seriously, "Sonny and Bonny." Minnie opened the door in a rush, and cold air surged inside.

Bonny was holding on to Sonny's arm. I smiled, and I noticed Luci was smiling too. She'd spent time with him in Florida, and I knew it did them both good to clear the air like we'd done.

Sonny seemed like an entirely new person. His dark hair was cut in a nice haircut, he had grown a beard, and he was just...warm. He must have gotten a tan in Florida, but I thought it went deeper than that. His life was finally coming together. He wasn't constantly being chased by the ghost of Janis Hickey.

For the first time since I was little, he looked...so content.

We talked every week, and the more we did, the more I loved him. Yeah, he was quiet, but I didn't mind filling in the silence. He seemed to enjoy it. He even laughed when I'd tell him stories about living in Italy. I even told him about my Instagram and how I was going to start posting my travels and experiences there. I hadn't had time to add to the first post yet, but I was aching to write again and share photos that complemented my words.

Minnie hit Sonny so hard he made an "*ung*" noise, but he held her against him, and I was pretty sure the three women watching melted—even in the cold. Then we all hugged, and Nazzareno and I gave him and Bonny another tour while Luci went back to the kitchen.

After that, it seemed like we all congregated there. Bonny put on an apron, and we all got to work, chatting as we cooked. The kitchen had plenty of space because I wanted it to be the biggest room in the house. The kitchen should be spacious, but the bedroom...I wanted to be squished in with my Gladiator husband.

Luci and I had decided to tell dad about his villa after we saw how much he seemed to like the idea of us being close.

It was time.

“Dad,” Luci said, and I could tell it still choked her up to call him that. Same for me.

He was looking up, hands on his hips, checking out the dark wooden beams on the ceiling. Nazzareno had been telling him something about them, and in between, Lilo was telling him about their villa. After the men stopped talking, he was still looking up, like he was contemplating something.

It took him a second, but he turned and looked at us.

The honor of the word “dad” seemed to choke him up, too, but it was all in his eyes. He couldn’t hide his feelings there.

“We love it here,” I said, “but we’re missing something.”

He looked around. “You could use a tall lamp over there.” He nodded to a dark corner.

Luci and I grinned.

“Maybe, but that’s not what we’re talking about,” Luci said.

His entire face seemed to pinch, and he looked at Bonny. She shrugged.

“We bought you a villa here, right down the street.” My chest tightened and I had to take a deep breath. “Minnie has one, too, for when she’s older. We want to be close to you, Dad. We need it.”

The villa seemed to have a pulse of its own, and after the words left my mouth, it seemed like we could hear it speed up, like it was nervous about his answer too.

“You didn’t have to do that.” His voice was strangled. “I have a place in New York.”

“We did,” Luci said. “The house in New York is yours, but not the small apartment. And the place here, it’s *all* yours. Lilo and Naz are going to help you redo it. We’ll pitch in. It’ll be nice.”

“You can have a hundred tall lamps, if you want,” I whispered. “To light up the darkness.”

He turned around, looking up at the ceiling again. “I don’t need lamps,” he barely got out. “Not when I have my girls.”

Luci and I locked hands, grabbing Minnie along the way, and we all hugged him. He was stiff, but we all knew it was because he refused to cry. Maybe he felt like if he did, he would never be able to stop. He was still healing. We all were.

Once we all let go, he went to his bag and dug out five boxes, two of different sizes. He handed one to Luci, one to me, and one to Minnie. The two different sized boxes went to Nazzareno and Lilo.

I wiped a tear from my cheek when I opened mine. A beautiful snow globe, and inside of it, New York underneath snow.

Luci and Minnie had similar ones.

With the new ones, the cracks were all healed, none of us still bleeding out.

Nazzareno and Lilo got socks and soaps on ropes.

I couldn’t even describe what happened after that, but it felt so good. Soft Italian music played in the background, something Nazzareno had put on, but the house was loud with laughter and chatter. It even smelled beautiful from the delicious aromas in the air.

More guests started to arrive.

Neil and Andrea.

Beni and his new girlfriend.

Edna and Great Uncle Francesco.

Lilo's father, Michele, and his uncle, Aren. He wasn't too happy about me being married to a Fausti, after what had happened to Tigran, but he accepted it for Lilo's sake, since we were all living so close.

Aristide and his date arrived last.

We were just setting the table when another knock came at the door. I answered it and froze in my spot.

Lothario and Belaflore stood on the other side—dressed as if they were going to a party at the Ritz. We had sent them an invitation out of respect but didn't expect them to show up.

Nazzareno squeezed my shoulder. He spoke in Italian, then translated. "Father. Mother. This is my wife, Ava. Ava, these are my parents, Lothario and Belaflore."

"Pleased to meet you." I curtsied and then felt like a total ass, but this was the kind of thing I'd tell my dad about, and he'd laugh.

Belaflore seemed to like that I did, though. She nodded and handed me a beautiful basket. It smelled like garlic, and I remembered what Scarlett had told me about her. Bela was safe from vampires because she could kill one with her cooking. She had a heavy hand with it when she cooked.

I thanked her, and then we welcomed them inside. We gave yet another tour, but his parents were quiet, and I knew they were silently judging. It didn't matter, though; our home was our home.

Bela joined the women in the kitchen, and Lothario went straight to Great Uncle Francesco to talk.

It wasn't perfect, maybe it would never be—too much family politics at play—but...it was working, and the night was moving along pleasantly.

Dinner done, Lothario and Bela left, and it seemed like a little more air was added to the villa. Everyone seemed to relax, except for Great Uncle Francesco, who had been relaxed the entire time. He wasn't intimidated by Lothario and was feeling no pain after his umpteenth glass of wine.

It seemed like we were all glowing from the haze of the fireplace and burning candles, and as Edna and Great Uncle Francesco danced around the villa to Glenn Miller, my husband removed my heels, and I rested my head on his shoulder, absorbing our life like a sponge—so thankful in that moment that my wish to become a jellyfish without a heart had never come true.

Later that night, as I lay next to Nazzareno in bed, I reflected on my life.

In the quiet, something I'd read once, something Sigmund Freud supposedly had said, came back to me. I wasn't Freud's biggest fan, but if the words were his, they had resonated with me. Just like these had when I'd read them: "We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love."

I sat up in bed, but before I could even stand on my feet, Nazzareno hooked his arm around my waist and pulled me back in. I kissed his arm. "I'm not going far. To the bathroom, and then I need to write something really quick."

"Your phone." His voice was deep, gruff, and as sexual as midnight when there's moonlight.

He'd made good on his tingling promise by making me tingle all over for hours and hours, but he was always ready for more. The man never tired.

"I need to use the bathroom, too." I laughed too loud for the quiet night when he stuck his finger in my side and wiggled it. "Cease!" I shouted. "*Cease!*"

He stopped and kissed my neck. "Every second you are away from me, I will lose a pint of blood."

"You are so *dramatico*," I said just as dramatically as I finally shimmied free from his hold. I snatched my phone from the night table, slid my glasses on, headed for the bathroom. After I was done and washed up, I took it with me to the small office I'd claimed as mine.

I turned on the lamp and sat in my chair. My computer further lit the room as I looked through all the emails I'd sent to myself and all the documents I'd saved over the last couple of months. I couldn't seem to find what I was looking for.

Then I remembered the quote that had kept me up.

"We choose not randomly each other. We meet only those who already exist in our subconscious."

Maybe the quote didn't belong to Freud, but it belonged to someone, and after I'd read it, it had burrowed underneath my subconscious and sprouted up like a resilient flower in winter as my life up until that point came together as a story—from page to screen—playing out against the dark canvas of my mind with flickering light like Sonny's old television.

I was sure the quote could be interpreted many ways, but to me, it meant that my love had always existed in my subconscious, and it had only been a matter of time before my passion—*obsession*—led me to him.

Meeting Nazzareno had never felt like a random meeting.

It had always felt like I had just arrived home—consciously knowing it was where I had belonged all along.

I opened the app on my phone and checked the lone picture and caption there. "*Nooo*," my voice was a deep whisper in the night.

"*Nooo*," another voice, a deeper and sexier one, mimicked mine, and I looked up to find my husband standing behind me.

I fell in love with him for the umpteenth time.

He set his arms on each side of me and met my eyes. "This does not sound good."

"Actually," I whispered. "It's very good. That was a shocked reaction, not a bad one."

He nodded to the screen. "A picture from our honeymoon in Cairo."

"Right." I forced my eyes away from...all that manly virility...and back to the screen. "I posted this on the plane to

Rome, after we were married. I wrote a caption and decided on this picture and shared it and now...look at the hearts and comments! It went viral!”

He took my phone and read the caption. “Your words are beautiful, my ink bird. They do not sit on the page, they pound like a heart, and I feel the truth in every breath of them.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“You will do another.”

It didn’t sound like a question, but I nodded anyway. “Yeah, I think I will. Once we start traveling, this is what I’m going to do. It fulfills me.”

His eyes stilled for a second, before he said, “AF. Air Fausti, no?”

“Actually, it stands for Ava Fausti.”

Our eyes met, and a feeling passed between us. It was that feeling that all wrongs had led us to this life-changing right.

A right that would stay with us forever.

“I thought you’d stolen my heart, Nazzareno Fausti,” I whispered. “But all along, you had it, and it was tucked safely away in yours.”

He slid his knuckle down my face, kissed me softly, and then urged me up from the chair. I took a seat on his lap, and together, we wrote a new caption for our continuing story, and shared the picture of us in Rome that Beni had taken, the fire of the eternal sun—*love*—forever burning between us.

BONUS SHORT STORY

AIR FAUSTI



AIR FAUSTI IS COMING SOON!

If you're a part of my Facebook group, then you know I've had a lot going on in my personal life, which put my writing schedule behind. I'd planned on writing *Air Fausti*, a short story featuring Nazzareno & Ava, and having it available after the last chapter of *Dangerous Obsession*, but due to time constraints I couldn't finish it in time.

I'm not one to ever allow something that pops up in my book to go to waste, like when Ava brings up joining the Mile High Club, so...we get an idea of where this story is going.

Also...there's going to be a lot more to it. We're headed back to Venice!

I'm hoping to have *Air Fausti* done SOON, but until then, you can sign up for access to the **VIP AREA** of my website so you can be the FIRST to know when *Air Fausti* goes live. It even has a cover. Isn't it gorgeous?

[Grab your ticket to Air Fausti here!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bella Di Corte writes criminal romance that will steal your heart. She brings to life stories of men who walk the line between irredeemable and savable, and the women who force them to feel. She's known for her rich world building and strong characters. She's also an International Bestselling Author.

Apart from writing, Bella loves to spend time with her husband, daughter, family, and four dogs. She also loves to read, listen to music, cook recipes that were passed down to her, and take photographs.

Bella was born and raised in New Orleans, a place she considers a creative playground.



ALSO BY BELLA DI CORTE

The Fausti Family:

[Man of Honor](#)

[Queen of Thorns](#)

[Royals of Italy](#)

[Kingdom of Corruption](#)

[War of Monsters](#)

[Ruler of Hearts](#)

[Law of Conduct](#)

[King of Roses](#)

[The Fausti Family Boxed Set: Books 1-3](#)

[A Fausti Family Holiday Novella](#)

(The holiday novella will give you a peek into Saverio and Mia's world past the epilogue.)

Gangsters of New York:

[Machiavellian, Book 1](#)

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