

*Dangerous*  
SECRETS

*CORRUPT BLOODLINES*

LYDIA HALL

# DANGEROUS SECRETS

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LYDIA HALL

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## BLURB

*He's been tasked to kill me... but I love him.*

A woman like me is never meant to fall in love. My love is the kiss of death for everyone that comes near me. Except this time, I might wind up dead myself.

As soon as I meet mafia assassin Roman Gusev, sparks fly and the urge to stop fighting temptation sizzles within me.

I want what I can't have.

And what I can't have is him - mysterious, dark, cruel Rome who can only be soft for me.

Rome has been tasked with killing an assassin terrorizing the underworld. A shadowy figure who will never pledge allegiance to Rome's mafia family.

The problem?

Rome has no idea that assassin is the woman in his bed...

*Me.*

**DANGEROUS SECRETS is the fifth book of The Corrupt Bloodlines series of interconnected standalones.**

**This sizzling, spicy dark mafia romance can be read on its own, or binged along with the rest of the interconnected series!**





## ROME

The club is quiet. I'm parked out back, half a block away and watching the back door. The man I'm hunting is supposed to be here tonight, at least based on the intel given by our detective friend. This bastard has it coming too. He's killed at least seven of our men over the past year and just as his name suggests, he is a shadow. L'ombra is elusive and incognito. In fact, I don't even have enough intel to judge whether I'm hunting a man or a woman, though with his stealth and accuracy, and the strength he has displayed when seen on camera, I can only suspect I'm facing one of the most dangerous assassins in the world.

I light a cigarette, inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly, watching as the smoke dances in front of me. The night is still and the only sounds I hear are the faint whispers of cars a block or more away. I check my watch; it's almost ten, and the club will be overflowing soon. I know I need to make my move before my target slips away again.

Suddenly, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. A figure in all black emerges from the shadows, swiftly followed by several others. My hand automatically reaches for my gun, but I pause when I see their faces. They're not here to attack me; they're paying customers, dressed in suits and dresses. They laugh raucously as they cross the dark alley and hug the side of the building, vanishing around the front.

I exhale the last puff of my cigarette and flick it onto the pavement. My nerves are on edge, and the sudden appearance of a van makes me more suspicious of my surroundings than

ever. I've been tracking L'ombra for months, and he's never been so careless as to let anyone get close without knowing exactly who they are. The panel van has no windows; it's an early model too. It turns into the alley and stops near the back door, exactly how I'd suspect an assassin to travel.

I wait a few more minutes, scanning the area for any other signs of movement. When I'm convinced that the coast is clear, I slide out of the car and make my way to the back of the van, hand on my gun. If I can take the assassin out quickly and quietly, I will, but if not, I can at least catch a glimpse of his face, find out what he looks like. So, I make sure no one can see me, then peek around the end of the van. Two men, large and black-clad, escort a third, smaller person toward the door. My chance is now, and if I don't take it, I may not get another.

I leap out from behind the van, gun drawn and aimed at the trio. "Freeze!" I order them, my voice carrying through the silent night. The two men turn to face me, their hands reaching for their own weapons. But the smaller figure, the one they're escorting, freezes in place. I can see their shoulders square. They're waiting for a signal, waiting for my move.

I keep my gun steady, finger on the trigger. "Who are you?" I demand, keeping my eyes trained on the two larger figures. They're both well-built, with muscles straining against their clothes. They're henchmen, no doubt, but I'm not afraid of them. Both of them have anger scrawled over their faces, furrowed brows, narrowed eyes.

"You need to walk away, buddy," the taller one says, and in barely perceptible movements, the third one takes a step toward the building.

"You're going to find more than you bargained for if you don't get lost." The second one draws his weapon. I'm not looking to make this war any worse than it already is. I'm not here for the goons, I'm here for L'ombra and if my suspicions are correct, the smaller third man is the assassin.

"Just step away from your friend there, and we won't have a problem." I flick the tip of my weapon in a gesture to indicate they need to leave, but one of them lunges at me. I fire off a

round that slices into his shoulder, but he keeps coming like a freight train. He's fast and he's hurt, but when he slams into me, I find myself being smashed between his refrigerator-sized body and the side of the van. My gun discharges again before I realize I'm still gripping the trigger. I bring my hand around in a right hook and clock the guy on the jaw. His buddy charges at me too, both fists bared.

I hear the distinct bang of the door slamming shut as the first man drops to his knees, leaving space for his friend to come in with the butt of his gun. It comes down hard on my head, and I clench my eyes shut as I swing my left hand out, grasping for him. It's a miss; I can't make purchase, and I can't open my eyes. Pain shoots down my neck into my shoulders and I drop to my knees next to the injured goon.

"I said you should leave. You didn't listen," the second man says, giving me a swift kick to my gut. I catch his foot and pull, toppling him, then quickly stand and return the favor of a boot in the stomach.

If the assassin was here, he isn't anymore, at least not in this alley. Neither one of these idiots fights like a trained killer. They're hired muscle and nothing more. I stare down at the one who is bleeding while the other coughs and sputters, rolling on the ground. I'll never get in through the back door, so I head back to my car to gather my thoughts and make a new plan.

Bianca is in that club right now, maybe even starting her set. The problem is, I can't very well hunt an assassin under all those lights, and she'll have her eyes on me the instant I walk in. Any more work tonight will only be reconnaissance, but it's all I can do. My oldest brother and leader of our family, Dominic, won't be happy. That's a tomorrow problem.

I use the dome light and the rearview mirror to assess my injuries. There is a gash near my hairline that has left a trickle of blood down the left side of my face, and I feel tender on the chest where the first man's shoulder hit me hard. Other than that, I'm no worse for wear. I use my handkerchief to dry the blood and pour some water on it to wipe the dried blood off my cheek. When I'm presentable, I safety my weapon and

slide it into my glovebox. I have to get in that club and scout the place, even if all I do is memorize faces.

Inside I make my way through the crowd, scanning faces and trying to remain inconspicuous. I don't want to draw any unwanted attention to myself. I spot a booth in the corner and head toward it, slipping into the seat and ordering a drink from the waitress. I watch as the crowd grows larger, people pouring in from the street and filling up the tables and booths. The spotlight on the ceiling is directed at the pianist playing a little tune.

There's no sign of Bianca yet—I must be early—or the assassin. So, I sit and sip and watch. Waitresses clad in short black skirts and low-cut white tops carry drinks and drink orders. A few men stand around the bar, blocking my view of the bartender, but I know him. He's been here for years and he's not harmless, so my eyes refocus on the crowd. I ignore the regulars, whom I see every week, and I pay particular attention to a table where there are four men seated. I easily see two of their faces; one of them I can only see the profile, but one of them has his back to me.

If only they were sleeveless. I know L'ombra has a tattoo on his arm—a triangle with an all-seeing eye inside of it. It's his trademark and he leaves his calling card nearby whenever he claims a victim. But I can't just walk over there and tear their suits apart.

Lights begin to dim, and a hush begins in the front of the dining room nearest the stage. The red velvet curtains are drawn as soft jazz music replaces the sound of acoustic piano. Bianca is on now. Any second they will open those curtains and she will be staring back at me. My window for finding the assassin tonight is closing quickly, and I have only put a few faces to memory now. Without thinking, I draw my phone from my pocket and ensure the flash feature for its camera is turned off, then start snapping pictures. Our tech guy, Lenny, will be able to isolate faces and run them through his facial recognition software. At the very least, we'll know who frequents the club.

When the curtains' part and the spotlight grow bright, I am forced to put my phone away. It's so dark in here, except for the stage, that no one can get a picture. The warm melodic tones of the piano are joined by a hiss and tap of some drums and Bianca takes the stage dazzling everyone.

Jet-black ringlets drape across her creamy shoulders, bared all the way to her plunging sleeveless neckline. Long white gloves rise all the way past her elbows; her dress sparkles with each of her movements. Her voice rises in a husky alto, sending goosebumps across my flesh. Every eye in this place is on her, and so is the spotlight, as she belts out her song and sways her hips.

Her gaze scans the crowd as she sings the love song—a ballad about a woman who has to seduce her man to bring him home from a bar. It's a signature song, and she is a classy woman. She spots me, a half-smirk quirking her lips. Then she steps down from the stage carefully and works the crowd as she heads my direction. Her hand drapes across shoulders, smooths down backs, and cups a few cheeks as the spotlight follows her, and when she gets to me, she goes all out.

Her arms wrap around my shoulders, careful to keep her microphone in range of her breathy voice. She straddles me and the slit on her dress rides up, revealing the garter belt high on her right thigh. I'm tempted to touch her, hold her as if she belongs to me because in my mind she does. We've done this very tango alone in her dressing room dozens of times. But tonight, she is just a singer entertaining the crowd as she fusses my hair and leaves lipstick stains on my cheek.

And then she's gone, headed to the next poor schmuck who thinks she's flirting. I know it's all an act, but some of these men think they have a chance with her. The only thing they have is the right to fuck off and keep their dirty fingers away from my property.

I straighten my tie and smooth my hair, but before I can even have another sip of my drink in hopes that the raging erection swollen within the confines of my trousers will go away, the two goons from out back are here. One of them grabs me by

the bicep and hauls me to my feet while I raise my hands in surrender. The other pulls a gun and puts it in my ribcage.

“I thought you learned your lesson, fellas,” I snicker but I’m forced to comply with them. I can’t blow my cover if L’ombra is watching. To him and anyone else watching, I am an unruly or unwanted patron at this establishment, and I have to obey the hounds.

They walk me toward the front entrance and one of them opens the door. They smell like body odor and pipe tobacco. The man holding me gives me a hard shove, while the second one strikes the back of my knees collapsing me on the pavement.

“Stay the fuck out. Don’t even think about coming back.” The door shuts behind me and I push myself off the walk, then dust my hands. I may not have gotten very far in my pursuit of the assassin tonight, but I learned one interesting thing. An assassin needs bodyguards, or at least some extra muscle now and then, and he is comfortable enough with this club that he enters the rear exit without even so much as knocking, which means he is somehow connected to this business.

Heading back to my car with my tidbit of intel, I feel the blood beginning to trickle down my face again. I hope Bianca didn’t see it, or she will chastise me again next time we’re together. Whenever that may be. Now that I’ve been outed from this nightclub, I’ll have a more difficult time getting back in, at least when those idiots are working.

That’s another problem for another day. For now, I need to get back to Dominic and report what’s going on, then check on my dying father. After that, I can worry about Bianca and the next time we’ll rendezvous.



## BIANCA

I've done this a thousand times. The lights come up; the curtains open. The crowd hushes and waits for me to begin singing and an hour later I'm sweating, exhausted, and ready to be off my feet. Today is no different, except for a few new faces. I croon out the familiar notes that I sing so regularly I do it in my sleep as I sway in beat to the music. My dress clings to my curves as I step down onto the floor. I don't relish this part—hanging all over men in this club—but it's part of the gig.

The more I work the crowd the better my tips are and I'm a fan of money. How else will I afford all the trappings of the expensive lifestyle I've made for myself? So, I weave through the crowd, fawning over them, and my singular goal is to finish the set and have a glass of something strong enough to make me not care that I debase myself by wearing this dress. Half my chest is bare, and all of my tattoos are covered with loads of makeup.

Roman is here too, sitting in a dark corner by himself as usual. He's the only man in this place I enjoy seeing in my audience. He's dangerous but he doesn't know I know, and God is he sexy. I want to run my fingers through his hair while his face is buried between my thighs... like last week.

I move from one tobacco-scented man to the next until I come to his table. Conveniently he is alone; I like that. I curl my arms around his thick shoulders and sing my tune while climbing onto his lap. He makes me ache to have him, but this is just for show. I hear the whistles and catcalls as I kiss his



cheek and what the crowd doesn't see is how I grind on him and feel his cock hardening beneath me. I can't linger though, or I'll draw suspicion and not just from my brothers. This crowd is fickle. If I offer one gentleman more attention than any of the others, they keep their purse strings tightly shut.

But I'll see more of Roman—Rome Gusev—I'm sure. So, as I reluctantly withdraw from his presence, I leave a trail of soft touches across his jawline then his shoulders. Then I move on to the next brute of a man who is begging for my attention. Being a woman in a mostly male environment isn't easy, but it is how I was raised. Four brothers and a male-led business has been everything I've ever known, except my mother who is always there for me if I need her.

I finish the song, a preamble to the rest of my show, then head backstage to change. The next three songs will be done in a totally different dress, so I have just a few minutes to prepare. Meanwhile, Ben will have another one of the singers do a little ditty for the crowd, though they'll all want me back. They don't come here to be entertained; they come here to be charmed by Bianca Moretti. My name, for whatever reason, embodies power and class, and just a single touch from my fingertips sends men wild. I wish it sent them to the bank for larger bills.

“What the hell was that!”

I set my mic on a music stand in the cluttered backstage hallway and glance over my shoulder at my brother. Tony is a complete control freak and micromanages all of my shows, right down to who I pay the most attention to so that we make the most money. I'm sure he's seen me give Rome a little too much love and decided to lecture me about it and I don't care. There are high rollers in tonight's audience, and I know exactly how to get them to drop their loose change.

“What?” I ask, unzipping my gown as I walk. I hate this material; find it scratchy and too tight.

“You know what,” he snaps. “You think this is a joke, Bianca? That you can just slut around with that Russian and not finish the job?”

I whip around on my heel and glare at him. My hair swings into my face then dangles across my chest. He has no clue what my plan is or why, and he is not the skilled killer I am either. Which is why I am the one doing the job, not him.

“Every kill is like art, brother. I don’t rush in and slit throats; I make them hurt.” I am seething mad, ready to smack the smug angry look off his face. “Do you want to do this? Leave a mess the don has to clean up and draw attention to the whole family? Or do you want me to handle it? Because if you want me, then back the fuck off.”

They’ve been on my back my whole life. It’s part of why I’m so strong, because I have four brothers who like to pretend they’re protecting me. They’re not. They’re just power hungry and trying to control every aspect of my life because theirs are out of control. I didn’t get to this status within the organization by following their rules, however, and I’m not about to start now.

I open the door of my dressing room and walk through it, hoping the way my dress slides down over my hips is enough to make Tony stay in the hallway, but he follows me right in. Serves him right. He deserves the show he gets for being in my private space when it’s time for me to change.

I step out of the sequined fabric, leaving it piled near the door on the floor as I kick off my shoes and head to my dress rack. The light blue number with feathers dangling from it is my next costume. Comes complete with a giant blue feather for my hair and I don’t even have a spare second to worry about whether my brother sees my tits. I snatch the dress and toss it over the back of my chair as I lean down and grab the matching hair clip from my vanity.

“You’re on a timeline. You know the best way to break the entire family is to keep the pressure on them. With that reporter on their case, now is the time to strike.”

“Let me do my job, okay?” I eye his reflection in the mirror and see his scowl deepen. “You can’t rush art,” I remind him as I sweep my black locks up into a messy bun and clip the

soft blue butterfly around it. He crosses his arms over his shoulders and turns his back on me, but he doesn't leave.

I grab the gown and hold it up, leaving myself space to step into it and pull it up. The thin feathery straps slide up my arms and onto my shoulders and I clear my throat and spin around again. I watch in the mirror as Tony turns to face me. "Zip me in."

His jaw is still clenched but he does as he's told—perks of being the face of this place and a few others around town. He knows as well as I do that no matter who they bring into this place for entertainment, no one packs the house like I do. Those ogling men are not out there for some lounge singer. They want The Bianca Moretti, and that's who they'll get.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a show to put on." I head to the shoe rack and select the white bedazzled heels and drop them. Leaning against the rack, I balance on one foot as I slip the other into a shoe and glance at him. He is so angry all the time. It's like that's the only emotion he can ever feel. What is wrong with men in this family?

"Mickey ain't gonna like that you're messing around with him. You've had how many chances to kill him? You haven't even taken one of them." Tony crams his hands into his pockets and watches me put the other shoe on and I shrug a shoulder and raise my eyebrows.

"Then he can do the job himself."

As I walk out of the room my stomach ties itself in knots. If Mickey does step up and handle things himself, then Rome is gone for good. It's not like I ever had a shot with him anyway, but the fun will be over. Fuck if he isn't the best lay I've ever had, and I am enjoying this. I want to milk it for all it's worth a little while longer. I know I'm not supposed to let my heart get involved in these things and I've tried not to, but dammit if Roman Gusev hasn't bewitched me. It won't stop me from doing my job—killing him and his brothers—but it will hurt like hell.

Shuffling down the hallway, I yank on the seat of my panties, now damp from my little tango with Rome. And when I round

the corner into the backstage area to find my microphone, Ben is there staring at me. His lips are puckered into a deep frown, and he is tapping his foot.

“You have less than ninety seconds left, Bianca. You need to stop cutting it so close. You’re going to give me a cardiac incident.” Always the drama queen, Ben hands me the mic and shakes his head. “You look fabulous as always, honey.”

I kiss his cheek and take the mic. “Thanks, Benny. You’ve always got my back. Now, make sure that music is loud. Are the girls ready?” I ask, glancing around. I’m supposed to have at least four backup dancers to help me do the first song, but I don’t see them anywhere.

Ben points up and looks toward the ceiling with a massive grin. “There...”

I peer over my head toward the ceiling where the ladies sit on large trapeze swings ready to be lowered to the stage below at a moment’s notice. It’s a genius idea, but we never rehearsed this, so I’m hoping he knows what he’s doing. When I bring my eyes back down to earth to look at Ben, Tony is there with my large feather in hand.

“Forgot this,” he mumbles and thrusts it into my hands.

I glower at him and take it from him, then shove it in my bun and turn, ready to take the stage. The music from the previous song ends and the curtains close. I hurry out to my mark as the intro to my song plays. Tony stares at me from the wing where he stands next to Ben. One of them is here to cheer me on, support my career. The other one is just a nuisance and if I had my druthers, he’d be handling some grunt work for Mickey. I just have to put up with him until a few more jobs are done and then the boss will see my true value. Maybe I’ll rank up or something.

The crowd hoots and whistles as the curtains rise and the dancers descend. I begin to sing, squinting against the bright spotlight, and in no time the dancers join me in step just as we have rehearsed countless times. Their new entrance has added a flare to the show that catapults my creative energy to new heights. I find myself hitting notes I’ve never attempted before

and I feel like I'm on cloud nine until I look to where Rome was seated and notice he's gone.

He never leaves during a show. He's always here to come backstage when it's over. I try not to let the disappointment affect my performance, forcing a smile and pouring even more effort into my seductive touches lavished upon unworthy masculine figures who ogle me.

One song passes, then the next, and I'm just going through the motions. It's obvious to Ben, because when I return to the stage for the part where I drape myself over the piano, he's there in the wing with his fingers pushing his cheeks up in a forced smile. His prompting reminds me to paste my smile on, but it doesn't remove the frustrations stirred by my brother or Roman's disappearance.

I should have learned by now that all men let you down eventually. There isn't a single male in the human species who can consistently show up and be trusted. It's why I am who I am today. A killer. I'm sure if Rome knew, he would have taken me out by now, but that's why I keep myself hidden as my name indicates. L'ombra isn't just an alias; it's me. My alter ego. The truest sense of my personality and who I really am in this world.

I am a shadow beneath the feet of all these men who think they control me, but soon, they will all see that I'm not attached to them, and if they don't respect me, what lurks in the shadows will come out to bite. And that thought brings a genuine beaming grin to my face, energizing me to sing louder, dance harder, and collect more tips.

I refuse to let any man bring me down or distract me from my job, even Roman Gusev. And especially my brother.



## ROME

**D**ominic and I stand over Matvey's bed as the heart monitor beeps rhythmically. He has stirred a few times, though Brewster—our vet and the only doctor we will ever trust—has kept him pretty sedated. The bullet that pierced his chest nearly killed him. If it hadn't been for the quick thinking of that damn reporter, my brother would be dead. I'm not fond of the idea of keeping her around since she is likely the one who led him right into this situation, but his last words before passing out were not to lay a hand on her, and Dominic, the oldest and our leader, is very strict about that honor code. A man's last wishes must be respected.

"He's struggling," Dom says, rubbing his beard. He's been up for forty-eight hours straight watching over Matvey, whom we also call Matty. He's older than me, but in his critical state, he feels like my little brother; I want to fiercely defend him and take vengeance on whoever the monster was that did this to him.

"He'll be fine. We have to stay positive." I glance over my shoulder as the vet pops his head in then promptly backs out. He knows better than to interrupt us when we're here talking. Family business what it is, Brewster is lucky he's even alive. There have been so many run-ins and he's covered so much up, if he even slips one word of any of this to the authorities, Dominic will have no choice.

"Detective Akers found more intel that suggests the men who did this may be directly linked to L'ombra. One of them may even be him. Either way, this was definitely a couple of

Italians, and I'm putting you in charge of finding out." He eyes me for a second as Matty's hand twitches and clenches, then he relaxes. "How is the hunt for The Shadow?"

I've learned the hard way that I cannot hide anything from him. He has eyes and ears everywhere. My brothers have all had their moments of stupidity, thinking their lies went unnoticed, but Dominic knows all, and I can't take a risk. Not when my brother's life depends on it.

"I almost had him; I swear." I lick my lip and remember the smack to the head that drew blood. My hand unconsciously touches the scab in my hairline, now a few days old. "Out behind The Flatiron I was watching. I followed the detective's tip that L'ombra was supposed to be there. When a dark van pulled up and three people got out, I approached it. I took a beating as two of them distracted me, and the third got into the building. I left before any cops showed up. Clipped one of them in the shoulder with a round."

Dominic's head nods. He's not entirely thrilled; I can tell by the way his forehead has deep furrows. But he's not angry with me either. At least, he's not lashing out.

"We're getting closer but not close enough, Rome. We need to put this to bed. I'd like to have this settled before Dad is gone. It will give him peace as he crosses over."

Dad, suffering from severe Parkinson's and most recently a cancer diagnosis, is only breaths away from dying it seems. I know as much as Dominic how much it would mean to him to know his boys are handling the business as he would. No stone left unturned; no string left hanging. But some things are outside my control. If I had a few men with me, we'd have taken L'ombra alive that night. As it is, the man remains a literal shadow—untouchable.

"You know, Dom, when all this started with our issues with the mole infiltrating the family, I thought we'd weed him out and be done. I didn't realize it would lead to all of this." I move my hand in a sweeping gesture. We've suffered so much in the past year—one of our best men turned out to be a mole. Several of our soldiers sacrificed their lives. We've gained a



few good men, but we've also been put under scrutiny with the NYPD and now this report Matty has hanging around. If her source turns out to be L'ombra, we are all screwed.

“None of us thought it would go this far, and all we want is resolution now, before it gets worse. We know our mole was working with the Italians, and all we want is to remove anyone within that family that has intel on ours.” He turns and walks out of Matty’s room, and I follow him, heading toward his den. His shoes squeak on the marble floors and the faint hint of tobacco hangs in the air behind him. “We’ll never end the feuding between our families, but we can try to put a stop to the nonsensical killing that’s been going on, and my money is on that assassin. He’s stirring up trouble by setting fires we’re too busy putting out while he kills us off one by one.” Dominic stops and faces me abruptly. “Stop him, Roman. Before you’re next.”

The pressure is on, though I feel like it always has been. I walk behind him silently as he continues to his den, then stand in the doorway. He pours himself a drink and sits down on one of the large leather couches. I have the chance to end the warring that’s been happening for more than a year now with a single bullet—if I can determine which of those putrid mongrels is the assassin. I can’t just go haphazardly shooting, which is why they chose me for this job and not Sven. Doing that would only make things worse.

We need precision and finesse, and we need it done quickly. I don’t have time to waste at all, but for now I have to take it, even if it means another body drops before I isolate our target and find a way to take him out.

“And this lounge singer you’re so infatuated with...” His words hang in the air as he sips his whiskey. I look up at him as he says, “Lay off a while. You need to focus on your job. You’ll have time to get laid after.” He sits behind his desk.

I want to protest but he’s right. Still, I believe I can handle Bianca and still do my job successfully. I just have to balance how many nights I spend with her. I’m sure Dominic understands the carnal needs of a man.

“I need you to bring Dad here. He should be able to spend a few minutes at Matty’s side—you know, in case he dies.” Dominic chokes out those last few words. It’s been on all of our minds lately. We know that the assassin has been tasked with killing us all. It isn’t a light thing to think about our brother dying, and it’s even heavier knowing the rest of us will fall one by one unless I can finish my job.

“Of course,” I tell him, turning to go. He mumbles something I don’t understand but my task is clear. I just have to focus on killing an invisible enemy before he kills me and my family. Easy peasy.

I make it across town to Dad’s house where he’s on hospice and back with two of his nurses in tow in under ninety minutes. He’s hooked to several IV’s and the nurse carries an oxygen tank with her. He’s barely coherent but I understand why Dominic had me bring him here. If we move Matty, he’ll likely die. The vet told us his stitches will tear and who knows if we’ll cause internal bleeding.

“Sorry for the bumpy ride, Dad,” I tell him, gripping his knee. He sits in the front seat next to me, mostly reclined. His words are barely audible, but he thanks me for giving him one more chance to see Matty in case something goes wrong.

It’s a pain in the ass to get him into a wheelchair, and Dominic has to come out and help me lift him up the steps to his front door. After that it’s smooth sailing. It’s all a lot of work but it’s a small price to pay for the man who gave me life and who leaves us all this huge legacy. They are large shoes to fill, and when he goes, I don’t know how we’ll cope, but we’ll keep the family running strong.

I push him down the hallway to where Matty lays sleeping. The same chirp of his machines tells me his heart is still beating strongly. The nurses come in and bustle around, setting up Dad’s IV cart to hold the myriad of bags of liquid that he is constantly hooked to. When they are finished, and the activity in the room calms, I pull up a chair and sit next to him, watching Matty’s chest rise and fall. It’s a familiar position I take up regularly, either at Dad’s side or my brother’s now.

“He’s not so good.” Dad’s voice is hoarse, likely from coughing fits and intubation. It’s hard on him being crated across town, but I know he appreciates this more than he will ever let on.

“Brewster did everything he could. Now we wait.” I fold my hands in front of me and rest my elbows on my knees. It’s hard to watch someone you love just to lie there suffering. If I could take their pain and carry it myself, I would.

“Life is so short—” Coughs overtake him, cutting him off. A nurse is there instantly with a white cloth to cover his mouth. When she pulls it away it’s speckled in blood. He takes a deep rasping breath and closes his eyes slowly, then opens them. “Don’t wait... to make... hard choices...”

I’m not sure what that means. I’m not waiting to make any choice. As soon as I see that bastard L’ombra and know with finality that I have the man who is responsible for Matty’s shooting and the deaths of so many of our soldiers, I will pull that trigger without hesitation or remorse. No choice about it. But I listen to him intently because he is my father, and because everything I know I learned from him.

“Love... makes you weak, Roman.” I’ve never seen him struggle for breath so badly, and it gives me so much compassion for him. “And this woman, the Moretti girl, you need to be careful.” There is more coughing. I want to tell him not to speak, to save his breath for someone worthy of this wisdom, because God knows I will make mistakes and never live up to him. “Vet her carefully. You know she is Italian. Focus... on your job.”

Focus on my job... that’s what I need to do. But that doesn’t mean I have to give up Bianca. I just have to kill this assassin first. Then nothing will keep me from her.



## BIANCA

I dab a bit of blush on my glistening cheeks. The crowd at the Stiletto is soaking up everything I do tonight, though I haven't seen Roman yet. He doesn't always come, especially when I sing here, and given that it's a family-owned business, I understand. Any Russian who walks into this place is suspect and vulnerable. But he's my mark, and I've made it clear to everyone that it will be my hand that takes him out in a way only I can plan.

The lights around this mirror are blistering. Someone needs to tell their stage director that if he wants my makeup to look right, he needs to give me lights that don't make me sweat the way the spotlight does. It's hard to find good help these days, and I'd fire the man and hire someone else myself if it were my job, but it isn't. I have to put up with whomever my brothers hire.

"It's time," a woman says as she enters my dressing room. Here I have to share with a few other singers because I am just a fill in. Not like at Flatiron where I am the singer, the one folks come to see. Here I blend in with the crowd and it's for a good reason. My brothers won't draw attention to their business by advertising my name.

I rise and adjust the bodice of my red, scoop-neck dress. The shoulders have black feathers dancing off them, a trail of black beads decorating the neckline. I wear a matching headpiece that frames in my face and crowns my head with more red and black feathers. It's not my style, but it fits the theme of tonight's Broadway songs. I'm good enough for Broadway,

just not desperate enough to stoop to some other man's standards for what I should sing and wear—well, any man other than Mickey.

“How are the tips?” I ask the other woman who shrugs and tosses her hair piece into a laundry bin to be washed. I have one last look over my makeup and turn and walk toward her. She hands me the mic.

“They're mostly dried up, but there is a table with a new guy and another couple of men by the bar just came in. They look ready to pay up.”

She begins to peel her costume off as she talks and I turn toward the door, hoping one of those men is Rome. After the lecture I got from Tony last week, I know I need to begin to step up my game. It's only a matter of time before I find the way to do what I'd like to do—take them all out at once—and Rome is my ticket to that. Why? Because I have him wrapped around my finger.

More than eight weeks ago he came backstage to visit me with a “gift.” Ben let him see me after I told him it was okay. He'd been coming to my shows for months anyway and after being tasked with taking him out, I thought it harmless—beneficial even. So, I allowed him to visit which led to some very kinky sex talk, which in turn led to him fucking me over my vanity while I watched in the mirror. Since then, we've had an understanding.

I walk out into the wings and wait for the stage manager to announce me. The din of piano and saxophone fills the air and I take flight, belting out my melodies to a cheer from the crowd. Before I'm even on stage, flowers are being thrown. My last song of the night is off to an excellent start as I step out into the blinding spotlight and make my way to each blue X marked on the stage. My hips turn and dip, my arms sway and I caress my body in a seductive pattern.

Only after I step off the stage onto the short blue carpet do I see the chiseled jawline I recognize so clearly. Rome is seated front and center, hand wrapped around a glass tumbler. His five o'clock shadow looks a few hours old, his platinum hair

coiffed stylishly as always. I can't wait to tousle his hair, watch his jaw tighten down against my advances. I move his direction in minx-like fashion and continue serenading him with my haunting melody.

His eyes drink me in, and I know why. The dress leaves little to the imagination, with a slit all the way to my hip on one side and my tits bulging out of the top. It's skintight, and though it's difficult to move in, it has the desired effect.

I walk around behind him, running my hand over his shoulder, then up through his hair. When I glide back to the front of the table, I plant my ass firmly on his lap and drape an arm around his shoulder. My wink at another table earns me a whistle, and I shake my shoulders back and forth, jostling my tits. I feel Rome swelling beneath me. I know why he came tonight, and I intend to make sure he gets what he wants.

I sit for a few more seconds, tempting him to touch. But no one touches. Only me. It's a house rule. Ladies can fawn over the men, but if they touch back, they get thrown out. I know it has to be tormenting him, by body that he enjoys so well just out of reach. So, I relieve him and stand, making sure to give him the best view of my ass as I climb the few stairs back to the stage to finish my number.

When I bellow out the last few notes, applause goes up and I lock eyes with Rome. He is determined and full of lust. I offer a polite smile, then bow, again showing off my tits, and then I blow a kiss to the rest of the crowd and wave as I exit stage left to the beat of their applause. Before I'm even fully out of the wings, I tell the stage manager to show Rome back to my dressing room, and then I wait.

Within a few minutes someone is tapping at my door. The other singers are all gone for the night now. With my performance being the final one, it's easy to have a bit of privacy. The stage manager will be putting props away, turning off instruments and sound equipment, and setting up for tomorrow afternoon's crowd. The customers will have their final round while the kitchen and wait staff shut the place down, and I will be having the best sex imaginable.

“Come in...” I plump my tits and sit on my vanity chair facing the door. The knob turns and the latch clicks, and Roman Gusev’s face appears as the door sweeps open. I poise myself for his words as I lift the head piece off my head and set it on the vanity. Before he’s fully in the room I smell him—a musky mixture of whiskey, cigars, and cologne. He has my groin tensing already.

“Wonderful performance as always.”

“You were late.” I pluck the pins out of my raven hair one by one and lay them by the headpiece. My long wavy locks fall bits at a time, framing my face and draping across my shoulders and chest.

“Business,” he says, shutting the door behind himself. I see the bulge in his pants that indicates this is anything but business to him and again my pussy aches. He takes a few steps into the room and pushes his hands into the pockets of his trousers. The tan-colored suit he wears is a good look on him. It stretches across his broad shoulders and thick biceps and makes me crave what’s beneath.

I drop one heel then the other and stand. “Does business always come before pleasure?” I ask, reaching behind myself to the zipper pull. This dress will fall the instant I unzip it, and because I had a gut feeling he would be here, I purposefully wore no undergarments. It’s been a few weeks and the need inside my body to have sexual release has been building. I could probably have any man I wanted, but the one standing in front of me has proven far superior to any other specimen I’ve ever experienced. Why settle for less?

“Who says business isn’t pleasure?” he asks, loosening his tie. We both know why he’s here but the back and forth makes it fun and entertaining. Who wants to just show up and fuck?

Then again, this is the exact reason I’ve found myself at the end of an ultimatum with my brothers. I like Rome. I like this back and forth, the saucy talk, the sex. I like his wit and strength, and I like how he makes me feel.

The problem is that I’m supposed to kill him.



And he has no clue who I am.

“Well, let’s get down to business then...” I tug the zipper pull and feel the material wrapped around my thin frame begin to loosen. Each tooth of the zipper that pulls open leaves more room to breathe until the red and black material slips from my body and drops to the floor. I stand before him as nude as he will ever see me. The water- and smudge-proof makeup on my arm and chest will always remain there.

“I think we can arrange that,” he says as he undoes his belt. The whoosh and snap of the leather as he pulls it through his belt loops gives me goosebumps. My nipples harden in expectation and in response to how fucking horny it makes me to see him get that animalistic look in his eyes.

“What sort of arrangement are we talking tonight?” I walk across the room, letting my finger trail across the vanity, then the dress rack. I pick up a red satin belt, dropped from one of the robes another singer wore tonight. I let the material slip across my fingers and then turn to him.

Rome moves toward me, with belt in hand, and I pause. His hand slides up my back and tangles in my hair. He grips a handful and pulls my head backward until my neck is exposed. “Your body around mine until I make you scream my name... And when you drip with my seed and your thighs are coated with moisture, you’ll know what sort of business I want with you.” He sinks his teeth into my throat, and I shudder. I press my hand to the back of his head, further encouraging him to mark me. The pain and pleasure of him sucking and nibbling at the skin of my neck sends me into a frenzy.

“Fuck, you taste good...”

I smirk and turn my lips to his ear. “I want you to see what you’ve been missing.” I slide my mouth over the shell of his ear and suck. “I want you to see how good of a whore I can be for you.”

Rome releases me and steps back. His eyes are a flame I can’t look away from. He holds my gaze as he pushes the belt down the length of my body. The leather slides over my skin, over my breasts, over my navel, and over my pussy. The top of the

belt lands on my hip and the material rests against my lips, a hair away from touching me. I don't dare move.

The belt slides around my back and over my ass, comes back, and drags over my pussy lips.

“So, fucking wet,” he growls as he wraps the belt around my neck. “I’m going to fuck you so hard, and you’re going to hold on and take it. You’re going to fucking love it.”

“Yes,” I whisper. He yanks the belt, and the edges dig into my neck. I gasp, but I don't fight the pain. I feel his hand between us, undoing his slacks. Then I feel the heat of his pulsing cock press against my center.

“You’re my whore, aren’t you?”

“I am. You can use me.”

“I’m going to use you.” He tightens the belt again, and I squeal. In response, he drops his other hand to my ass and smacks it hard. I like when he plays rough, when he dominates me. Because I’m used to being the powerful one and for some reason this is better. I’m naked and hard nipples are exposed, pulse throbbing against the material of the belt around my neck.

His hands are hot on my skin, and I can't help but moan. He slides his hands up my thigh, and I allow myself to relax, letting my head fall back. His grip tightens around me, and he moves to stand behind me. His hard cock presses against the belt, sending a shiver of pleasure through my body all the way to my toes.

“So do it then... use me...” I egg him on pushing my hips backward against his body. The metal zipper of his slacks scratches my ass cheek and I feel his cock push into my crack. My comment earns me another smack to the ass, and I yelp then bend, straining against the belt.

As my breathing gets cut off, I feel him press his cock against my ass and then slide his hand over my stomach and down between my legs. I hear him chuckle. “You’re dripping on the fucking floor.” He slides his fingers over my clit, spreading my wetness.

I gasp for a breath, choking slightly as he lines himself up to penetrate me. Then he's sliding into my pussy, deep and hard. My muscles clench around him, spasming in pleasure. I exhale loudly as I feel him pull out of me and then slide back in. He fucks me with an agonizing slowness, rubbing my clit with confident strokes.

I squeeze my own tits, kneading them and rocking my hips in rhythm to his thrusts.

"Fuck, your pussy is so tight," he growls. My brain is getting foggy, and my vision starts to blur. I feel myself getting closer to orgasm and the room starts to spin. I'm going to come, and I'm going to enjoy it. I can't respond to him except to encourage his thrusting by clenching around his thick girth.

"You like this?" I can feel him pulling almost completely out and then driving back into me, cock hitting me deep over and over again, and my head falls forward. My neck strains against the belt wrapped around it and I can no longer breathe at all.

I find I don't care. I feel my toes curling, and I don't care about anything but coming. I try to whimper, but no sound comes out. I feel the belt scrape against my neck, and he speeds up, pistoning himself into me. This is what I love, what gets me off. The feeling of being used, the feeling of being taken, of being desired. His hand pushes hard against my clit, rubbing and encouraging me to come. My fingernails dig into my own thighs as I writhe and buck.

Then the first glorious wave of orgasm hits me, and I feel my pussy clamp down on his pulsing dick. He grunts and thrusts. I feel the belt loosening around my neck and my head lolls to the side as I finally take a full breath. The burst of oxygen supercharges my orgasm, making me lightheaded and every part of my pussy that much more sensitive. I scream out in pleasure and my knees give out from under me.

Rome grabs my hips, letting the belt fall to the floor with a clatter.

I feel his cock twitch and throb, and I can feel some of his hot cum pump into me, filling me up and causing me to moan. My pussy grips him tightly, milking his dick and urging the rest of

his hot cum out of him. When he pulls out, I feel empty, and I know I want more.

I don't know how long I stay like that, bent over and dripping sweat onto the carpet. I'm too tired to move. But I straighten and feel more fluid drain down my inner thigh. I take a deep breath and try to steady my still-weak knees, and Rome is there, pulling me backward against himself. I feel his cock pressed against my skin, still hard and now moist.

"Incredible as always," he whispers and turns my head so he can kiss my cheek.

"As were you..." This is the part that gets me in trouble. When my hormones are raging, and most women would be bonding with their partner. I try to remain aloof, but he turns me in his arms and holds me by the shoulders.

"I went to Flatiron..." He's doing it, pressing me again.

"We've been at this for more than two months, Roman." I use his full name, not the nickname he requested I use, then I turn away. "My brothers are watching."

"Then tell them," he says, following me. I hear his zipper and then the jingle of his belt as I reach for a towel. I need to hit the locker room and shower his cum off my body before I dress. I smell like sex and sweat.

"I belong to no man... not even my brothers."

"You belong to me." He captures my wrist and brings my hand to his lips. "Have dinner with me."

If only it were that easy. With the flick of a wrist to negate the orders I've been given. Had he not been so damn attractive that first night when he approached me it would have been easy enough to have Ben chase him off. But now, after these encounters we've had... My heart is getting too tied up in this. I peer over my shoulder when he says nothing more and watch him from the corner of my eye. I have him right where I want him. How easy it would be to have a family dinner with him and his brothers, bring a single bottle of wine laced with arsenic, then abstain.

I've been feeling ill anyway. It makes sense. It's a good plan. So why can't I manage it?

"I belong to myself." I hug the towel to my chest and turn. "It's not time to make this public." I walk up to him and cup his cheek. "Be patient with me."

As I walk away, I half expect him to say something, but he holds his tongue, and I hear the door click shut as he leaves just before I turn the water on in the adjoining shower.



## ROME

**H**orns honk and the roar of a bus engine deafens me temporarily as Alex, Dimitri and I walk the sidewalk toward yet another Italian-controlled business. These poor business owners have no clue how badly they're being treated. More than thirty percent of their revenue is spent just keeping the Italian Don happy, and when they don't pay up with cold hard cash, they pay up in blood—theirs or someone they love. And that fact is making them awfully quiet today.

“Think that one?” Alex—one of my best soldiers—nods at the little corner deli. This entire block we've discovered is controlled by the Don. I'm positive there isn't a single business on either side of the street, and maybe for another whole block or two, that hasn't been under the Don's thumb for years. These people are terrified, and rightly so.

I nod. “Yeah, let's go in. If nothing else, we can get a pastrami on rye.” My joke earns a chuckle and I follow the boys in, glancing over my shoulder. I've had this nagging feeling someone is watching us, and I'm never wrong. Our presence in the Italian neighborhood hasn't gone unnoticed. I've seen a few eyes linger on us a bit too long.

As we approach the counter, I pull my suit coat open as I normally do and the man standing with a white towel in his hand begins to tremble. A few customers scurry out, fear scrawled on their faces, and I close my coat and button it.

“We aren't here to make trouble; we just needed some privacy.” I grab one wrist and rest my arms across my puffed-

out chest, and Dimitri walks to the door as he has the last several businesses and turns the “open” sign to “closed.”

“Please, sir, I cannot speak with you.” The man, probably Middle Eastern, raises his hands in surrender. He’s likely had this scenario more than once a week for months or years. Probably has a family dependent on him and maybe children who look forward to him coming home every night. It’s a shame to see him under the dark cloud of Italian oppression.

“I just need information.” I take a deep breath, puffing my chest out farther. Alex stands aside, watching the interaction, and Dimitri watches the door. He’ll alert me if we have any company.

“I have no information for you.” He shakes his head and backs away. “Please, sirs. Let me ask you to leave my deli. My family—”

“Depends on you, I know.” I nod my head. “I understand family, sir. I have one of my own, and someone is hunting them.” I catch his eye and hold his gaze. His face grows paler and his tongue flicks over his lower lip. I’m not a fool. These business owners may be under the thumb of the mob, but they are also under their protection. Which means, when rival gangs or street thugs move in, good old Don moves in to clean up the trash. This man has probably been mugged more than once and the Italians have taken care of it.

“I cannot help your family.”

“But I think you can. You work so hard for your money, so why do you give it to someone else simply because they walk in here and say they own the street?” It’s a tactic we use in Lower Manhattan with some store owners, but we give them more than just protection. They become family to us, and that means something. Here, though, I get the feeling it’s just an exchange of cash and blood.

“Sir, please. You must understand fi I speak to you, they will —”

“Kill you. Yes. I know.” I flash my weapon at him again. “I am a man with a like mind. I understand your predicament. Just



tell me what I need to know, and I will be on my way.”

His eyes flick nervously at the door and then back to my face. Beads of sweat pepper his forehead. His tongue flicks over his lip again and he shakes his head then kneads his hands against his chest.

“What is it you must ask me?” His chin drops. He can’t. Make eye contact. He knows the space between my gun and the Italian’s guns is very narrow and he’s looking for an out.

“The assassin known as L’ombra. Have you ever seen him?” I keep my eyes fixed on his pallid features as his chin slowly rises again. There is now terror in his eyes, glassy and wide open.

“Sir, no. There is not a man who has seen the face of L’ombra and lived.” He trembles and I know I’ve hit something. None of the other shop owners have even so much as batted an eye at me when I mentioned that name. This man knows something.

“Has he come here? Have you spoken with him?” I move closer and he shakes his head profusely.

“No, sir. The Shadow is not here. He does not speak to us.”

“But you’re afraid of him?” Again, I step closer, and he backs away.

“My brother was killed by him.” His Adam’s apple bobs, and he blinks several times. “It is why I must pay them.” His head nods and dips. “They will kill me too. I try to not pay them one time and they killed him... my brother I mean.”

So, I’m getting nowhere with this guy today. He’s afraid because he’s tasted the blood part of their little business. His family has been touched and now he is their pawn to do as they please. He probably cleans money for them too, risking his livelihood and his home in this country all to stay alive.

“Let’s go,” I tell the boys and we turn to retreat.

“They are dangerous. I am telling you. You leave them alone. They will come after you.” His voice rings out behind me as I leave the shop and the bell hung over the door chimes.

“What now?” Alex asks, falling into step beside me. Dimitri lags behind as always, covering my six.

“Now, we head to the car and find some other way to learn the identity of our assassin friend.” I continue walking back up the block toward where we parked but the same nagging feeling someone is watching us pricks my awareness. I see one more shop we haven’t entered yet, and as we near the door, someone inside turns the sign to closed.

“There, Rome.” Alex nods at the same door—a computer repair shop. The man is in the window, his hand on the lock, and Alex reaches for the door and tugs it open before the guy can lock it. “You don’t mind if we have a look at your computers, do you?”

The stout man with a full beard shakes his head. “Sorry, fellas, closed for lunch.” He tries pulling the door shut but Alex is stronger, nearly yanking the man into the street. He stumbles away in a huff and has an angry scowl on his face.

“I said, we need to look at your computers.” Alex leads the way and I follow him; this time Dimitri waits on the steps. This guy was closing up pretty quickly, which means he has probably already seen us scouting the block. And that means if he’s seen us, the Italians have too.

“Look, I’ll level with you,” I tell him, not even bothering to brandish my gun this time. “I need information about a very powerful assassin who works for the men who threaten you.” I stare at him and cock my head, making my assumption as I have with all the other shop owners here that he is under the Italian Don’s thumb.

“You don’t know what you’re doing here, do you?” He straightens and scowls at me again. This time I get the distinct impression that I may have been wrong with my assumption. Nothing seems any different than any of the other shops we’ve stopped at, but this man doesn’t seem to cower like the others. He’s not been brow beaten and controlled.

“Tell me, what am I doing here?” I nod at Alex who walks around behind the man and looks over the counter. He’s

checking for a weapon as I instructed him to do before we came out today. He shakes his head at me as the man answers.

“Word has it that you’re harassing folks out here. You’re crossing a line. You’re not even going to make it out of this neighborhood without hellfire raining down on you.” His chest puffs out as he squares his shoulders, and a cold chill runs down my back.

Alex reads my mind as I take a single step toward the door. We entered the wrong place.

The man moves toward me as I back away and Alex follows. Something tells me this man is someone we don’t want to tangle with. “I apologize sir for any misunderstanding.” I’m not scared because I know what I’m capable of, but I don’t want to make the situation between our families worse. I reach the door and push it open just as the man pulls a gun out of his waistband behind his back.

Alex darts toward the door and we both step out onto the street as he moves quickly to shut and lock the door. At least no shots were fired, and we can just move out, or so I think. When I turn around it’s to meet the fist of a very large-chested man with a thick mustache and gold rings on his fingers. The blow sends me tumbling backward into Alex and we both stumble before regaining our footing.

I look up at the man and he just laughs, revealing a mouthful of gold teeth. “You boys think you can just walk away from me?” he says, his voice rough and gravelly. “You got a lot to learn about how things work around here.”

I feel heat rising in my cheeks as I realize that this man is a member of the rival mafia family. I get to my feet and take a step forward, feeling the adrenaline pumping through my veins. “We didn’t mean any harm,” I say, trying to sound as confident as possible. “We were just leaving.”

The man laughs again and takes a step forward, his gold rings glinting in the sunlight. “That’s not good enough,” he says. “I think you boys need to learn a lesson.”

Before I can react, he lunges forward and swings another fist at me. I step to the side and try to throw a punch of my own, but he's too quick for me. He dodges away and comes at me again, this time with a knife in his hand. I step back and pull out my own knife, feeling the weight of it in my hand.

Alex steps forward to defend me, but the man knocks him to the ground with a hard punch. I grit my teeth and focus on the man in front of me. He's grinning, obviously enjoying the fight, and I know that I'm in deep trouble.

We circle each other for a moment, both of us with our knives out. He lunges forward and I block his attack, twisting my wrist to disarm him. The knife falls to the ground, and he comes at me again, this time with his fists. I duck under his punch and strike him in the gut with the hilt of my knife.

He doubles over in pain, and I take the opportunity to grab his head and slam it into my knee. Blood spurts from his nose as he falls to the ground, unconscious. I take a deep breath and look around, realizing there are people watching us. I quickly grab Alex's arm and pull him away, knowing we need to get out of there before the police arrive.

Dimitri joins us, but as we are walking, he collapses, crumpling to the sidewalk with a sickening thud. I rush over to Dimitri, my heart racing as I see the small, feathered dart sticking out of his neck. Panic sets in as I realize that he's been poisoned. The world around me blurs and my mind goes numb as I struggle to come up with a plan. I can hear Alex shouting something, but his words don't register in my mind. My focus is solely on saving Dimitri's life.

I grab his arm and drag him, not knowing from where the dart was fired. A large green dumpster in the alley presents a good place to take cover, so I head there. He is heavy, and my muscles strain as I drag him behind the dumpster. I kneel beside him, pushing his hair back from his forehead. His skin is slick with sweat, and his breathing is labored. The poison is moving quickly through his body, and I know that we don't have much time.

I run my hands over his chest, feeling for a pulse. It's weak, but it's there. I take a deep breath and rip open his shirt, exposing his chest. The wound from the dart is small, but I can see the outline of the poison spreading through his veins. I look around for something to stop the bleeding, clean his chest, and as I do I see someone watching, a woman. She's wearing a dark red dress, standing across the street. The way her hat dips over her eyes obstructs my view of her face. It strikes me as odd, but I can't worry about her now.

I quickly reach for my knife, cutting a long gash into his chest. Blood pours out of the wound, and I use my fingers to dig around inside him, searching for the dart. I finally find it, but it's buried deep in his muscle. I grit my teeth and pull it out, ignoring his groans of pain.

It's too late. The poison, whatever it is, has already completely drained out of the small dart into his chest. "Fuck's sake!" I shout and Alex taps my shoulder.

"We got company..." he says. I have no time to think or react. I hoist Dimitri, blood and all, to my shoulder and move swiftly up the alley. He's heavy, but I can't leave him behind.

By the time we get to my car the bleeding has stopped and he is well and truly dead. Alex pops the trunk and I lay him into it, but something is nagging at me. I hold the dart from his chest and look at it. The fletching is fine, like a feather, red in color and light weight. Who, in this day and age, uses a dart gun? I bring the thing to my nose and inhale; some poisons have a distinct scent, but all I smell is something sweet, like saffron and sage. It's a women's perfume.

"What is it?" Alex hovers nearby, probably quivering and grateful to be alive.

"I'm not sure," I tell him before shutting the trunk with our fallen soldier inside. "But I intend to find out, and when I do the person who shot Dimitri will go down."

Mark my words...



## BIANCA

I stand behind the large open umbrella watching the scene unfold across the street. Rome doesn't know how to keep to himself, and his nosiness has gotten him in some trouble again. But he's no weak man. The way he carries his friend to safety is remarkable. I've felt the strength of those arms a few times and it's no laughing matter. He and his friend are trying to get away to save their buddy, but he's gone already. The poison on that dart kills instantly.

Clipping my clutch shut I begin walking. There is no sense in staying here at the scene of a crime to watch it all unfold. Everyone in the area will be questioned and my face can't be connected to any crime scene. It never has been because I maintain my distance. Besides, I have other things to do today than sit around and wait for the police to see my signature weapon, and Rome looked right at me. From that distance there is no way he recognized me.

My heels click on the sidewalk as I weave in and out of the strangers filling the sidewalk. New York has more people than seems physically possible, and they always seem to be walking these damn sidewalks. It's something I've gotten used to though it still annoys me at times.

Less than a block away from the coffee shop where I stood to observe Rome and his friends, my brother catches up to me. I didn't realize he was even around, though it makes sense. If Mickey isn't pleased with the way I'm handling this job, sending Tony to watch me and make sure I'm doing it is the next logical step. It's a good thing I'm an excellent shot too.

With the action there it was easy to intentionally miss my target and hit Rome's buddy instead of him.

"Keep walking, Bianca. No one needs to know you were there." Tony's grumbles are unnecessary though I know it's his brotherly compassion kicking in. He doesn't want me arrested any more than I want it.

"What are you doing here?" I tuck my clutch under my arm and continue moving. This dress isn't the most typical attire for me to wear during a hit, but I knew it wasn't going to be the true hit anyway. I have to make it look like I'm after him without actually killing him. Not only do I want to take all five of them out at once, I want to do it once I've had my fun. Roman is too intoxicating for me to be able to cut him loose yet.

"You ought to know why I'm here. Mickey sent me to watch you." We sidestep a large homeless woman begging for money and Tony scoffs in disgust. "These people can't just get jobs like the rest of us?"

"They are homeless, T. Kinda hard to shower for a job interview when you have no shower." I roll my eyes at him and reach into my bra to pull out a dollar, which I drop into her hand and keep walking. I'm not heartless. I understand what it's like to not have a penny to your name. It's a right of passage for every made man—or woman in my case.

"Well, they smell." He snorts and chortles then grabs my elbow as we continue walking. "You missed. You're off your game. Is it because you've been getting close to him? You're not thinking clearly?" His voice is quieter now, so no one around us can hear him but I catch every single word. He's doubting my ability which is a natural side effect to me purposefully missing a shot. There is nothing I can do about that now.

"No." My short reply saves me from a bigger explanation, one I'd have to repeat to Mickey and my other brothers.

"Well, you can't come off as weak here, Bianca. Mickey doesn't play games. I'm worried about you." I hear real compassion in his tone as he speaks. This isn't the Tony who



is ultra-loyal to the Don. This is my brother who regrets dragging me into this nonsense years ago when we had no other choice but to forge forward after our parents' deaths.

"I'm not weak, Tony, and I didn't miss." I let the words slip off my tongue without thinking. I'm angry that he would question my ability and it's leading me to make mistakes.

"You meant to hit his partner?" Tony pulls me out of the flow of foot traffic and pins me against the wall. His eyes are alight with angry flames, narrowed to bear down on me with the weight of all of his wrath.

"I meant... I didn't gauge the wind." I swallow hard. "My aim was true and when the traffic on the street zoomed past it created an eddy of air that caught my dart. Those feather fletching's are so sensitive. You know that." Doing my best to keep my facial expression calm, I take a slow deep breath. "You honestly think I'm failing? Need my eyes checked or something? How many kills have I made in the last three months?"

"And you haven't missed once. Not with your gun, not with your poison, not with your darts." He's right to question me and I have no way to defend myself here, except to hold to my guns about the air currents because of traffic. I push him back and smooth my dress with one hand while taking my clutch into the other.

"I do not have to answer to you." I barely take a single step when his iron grip clamps down on my elbow again.

"No, you don't. You have to answer to Mickey, and he will want answers. I'm trying to protect you, sister. Who else will say that in this world?" Tony forces me to face him and I whimper as his thumb digs into the crook of my elbow.

"Stop, that hurts."

"Listen to me. He's not playing a fucking game. You have to take out the five of them soon or you're getting cut loose, and you know what that means."

My brother's words ring true. I've seen how Mickey "cuts people loose" and it terrifies the fuck out of me. I look into

Tony's eyes as I remember one particular soul who found himself being cut loose. Mickey had his ankles tied to a fifty-gallon drum filled with cement and dropped off the garbage barge in the bay. His bloated, rotting corpse surfaced a month later missing its feet, which still haven't been found to this day.

"I care about you, Bianca. You're playing with fire. You can't be sleeping with the enemy. Roman Gusev is your target, not your fuck boy. End that, and then end him—and his brothers. Because if I know about this, it's only a matter of time before Mickey finds out."

I wrestle my arm out of Tony's hand and rub the spot on my elbow where he was grabbing me so tightly. I'll have a bruise there now, thanks to him, and it will be yet another part of my body that needs to be covered by makeup, so I'm not questioned about my private matters.

"I appreciate your concern, but I can handle myself. I don't need you, or Micah or Soren following me around anymore. I'm not a child." I take a few steps and he calls out to me.

"Micah and Soren wouldn't be here, and you know it. Their loyalty to Mickey has been clear from the beginning—"

"As has mine!" I spin around to glare at him. "So, stop questioning me and get behind me, not in my way. Back off, Tony, or you're going to regret it."

Tony raises his hands in surrender and takes a step back, his eyes never leaving mine. I can feel the tension in the air, thick and suffocating. But I refuse to back down. I won't let Tony or anyone else stand in my way. I turn on my heel and continue down the sidewalk, my heels clicking against the pavement. The city is alive around me, the sounds and smells of New York filling my senses. And yet, I can't shake the feeling that I'm being observed.

I glance over my shoulder and see Tony still standing there, watching me. I can feel the weight of his stare on my back, but I don't stop. I can't. I have work to do. And I have too much on my mind now.

As I walk down the sidewalk, I can't help but think about Roman Gusev and the way he made my body feel. The memory of his touch sends shivers down my spine. I know that I shouldn't be thinking about him like this, but I can't help it. There's something about him that's just too irresistible. I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I have a job to do, and I can't let my feelings get in the way. But I have—I am.

The sound of my heels clicking against the pavement is the only thing keeping me sane as I walk the busy sidewalk. I'm surrounded by people, yet I feel so alone. The weight of what I'm tasked with doing is bearing down on me, making me feel vulnerable and exposed. I reach into my purse and pull out a pack of cigarettes along with a lighter. As I light up, I take a deep drag and feel the smoke fill my lungs. It's a bad habit, but right now, I need it to calm my nerves. I lean against a nearby building, taking in my surroundings. The city is an endless maze of concrete and steel, and it's easy to get lost in its chaos. But I don't let it overwhelm me. I'm a professional, and I know what I'm doing.

I exhale a cloud of smoke and check my watch. I have about an hour before I have to be at the club. The thought of seeing Rome there tonight sends my heart racing. I know that I shouldn't be feeling this way, but I can't help it. There's just something about him that draws me in. I take another drag of my cigarette, trying to calm my nerves. I need to focus on the task at hand. If I'm going to do what Mickey wants, I can't let my emotions get in the way. I toss the cigarette onto the ground and crush it under my heel. Time to get to work, and that work starts with me carving Roman Gusev out of my thoughts.

The streets are crowded, and I have to weave my way through. Finally, I see a small, quaint café on the corner of the street. It's just what I need to clear my head and shake off the unwanted thoughts. I push open the door, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee hits me. It's a cozy place, with soft lighting and a few customers scattered around the tables. I make my way to the counter and order a cappuccino.

As I wait for my drink, I notice a handsome man sitting alone at a table. He's reading a book, and his eyes are focused intently on the pages. Why can't I be drawn to a normal man like that? One who works an honest job, who wants a quiet life to raise two children—a boy and a girl—and owns a golden retriever and lives in Scarsdale? Why must I be drawn to the bad boys and thugs?

The barista plops the frothy cup into my hand, and I can't help but smile at the cute little heart he's drawn in the foam. I lift the cup to my lips and take a sip. The drink's smoothness coats my tongue, melting in my mouth with a hint of hazelnut. The paper cup is hot in my hands as I sink into a booth and lay my clutch on the table, inside which is all the evidence needed to put me away for life. The compact dart gun and two poison-laced darts could have taken out Rome's entire group this time.

So why can't I do it?

Why have I allowed myself to grow emotionally attached to my enemy? I'm supposed to be killing him. Not falling for him.

I take another sip of my cappuccino, trying to shake off the unwanted feelings. I know what I have to do, but it's easier said than done. I've been working as a trained killer for years, and I've never let emotions get in the way of my job. But there's something about Rome that makes me want to protect him instead of killing him.

I glance over at the man reading his book. He looks up and catches my eye, giving me a small smile before returning to his novel. He's not my type, but something about his calm demeanor and simple life is appealing. Maybe it's time for me to leave this life of crime behind and start anew.

But before I can even contemplate it, my phone rings. It's Mickey, and I know what he wants. I answer the call and hear his gruff voice on the other end.

"Did you get the job done?" he asks.

I hesitate for a moment before responding, "No, I haven't done it yet."

“What the hell is going on?” Mickey growls. “You know how important this is. Roman Gusev needs to be eliminated, along with his brothers.”

“I know,” I reply, feeling the weight of the situation bearing down on me.

“I’ll get it done. I just need a little more time.”

“You’ve had enough time,” Mickey snaps. “You either do it now, or we find someone else who will.”

I hang up the phone, feeling my heart racing. I know what I have to do, but the thought of killing Rome makes me sick to my stomach. I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that I can’t do it.

I grab my clutch and coffee and rise, heading for the door. I’ve gotten myself into bigger pickles before, but this one could prove the deadliest.

Soon, I’m lost in the sea of faces as I fall in step with the crowd on the sidewalk again. This constant warring inside myself between what I’m tasked with and what I want is making me overthink everything. I feel nauseous and tired. I want to soak in a hot bath and push the world away until I have time to think straight. The logical side of me says to just follow Mickey’s orders—take out the whole family and be done with it. But there is a small voice in my heart screaming at me that Roman Gusev is the one... He completes me in a way I haven’t yet discovered.

I’m second-guessing myself all the time now, doubting and obsessing. It isn’t like me. Maybe Tony’s right. Maybe I’m growing weak and it’s all because of Rome. Or maybe it’s some game he’s playing. Maybe he’s out for me too, ordered to kill me but toying with me like a game of cat and mouse.

I toss the coffee cup and turn toward the club. All of them have gotten in my head, Tony, Mickey, and Rome. If I don’t take some time to think things through soon, I’ll make rash decisions and that’s never good.



## ROME

I t's been a rough week. Watching Dimitri's lifeless body be carted away by the cleaners we hire to fix our messes was tough. He didn't deserve that—to be poisoned and his life taken from him. It messed Alex up too, swears he sees Dimitri's ghost at night begging him to avenge his death. I think that's nonsense—a sign of a weak man. But I can't shake the feeling that Dimitri is waiting for vengeance. I would be if I were the one to have taken the poison dart.

I puff on my cigarette and watch the club from across the street. It's Bianca's night to do her set and I am craving her body. When things get difficult, I find a way to mitigate the stress and for months it's been her. After my run-in with those idiots, I can't show my face in this club anymore, so my plan is to catch her as she leaves for the night. I glance at the radio clock, getting antsy. It's almost time for them to shut down. By now they've given the call for last round and Bianca is doing her final number.

Flicking the ashes out the car window, I exhale a steady stream of smoke. Smoking used to be the thing that calmed me, but not anymore. I need something stronger, more intoxicating, but nothing that will dampen my senses or ability to think clearly. There is an assassin out there with his eyes on my family and everyone is on edge now, especially after Dimitri was shot with that dart in broad daylight.

I take the final drag off the cigarette and flick it out the window, then exhale and roll it up. Bianca said she's not ready for us to go public yet. It's probably because her act relies on

the idea that she's single and available to any man who she hangs on. I know she'd never bed a single one of them, not that she's committed to only me. She just has standards and I meet them. Those men can never do to her what she really desires because they look at her as the dominatrix. She wants to lose control; I figured that out the first time I fucked her, and it's been the highlight of all of our encounters since.

Movement around the door catches my eye. I watch a few men come stumbling out onto the sidewalk spilling drinks carried in paper cups. One of them, a very stout man, is shouting at a taller, lanky man with large curly hair. They're comical. I watch them swagger away while bickering, probably over which of them should have asked the pretty singer to dinner.

A few moments later another round of men walks out, these ones a bit more put-together. They chat by the front door for a moment before separating and heading to their cars. It leaves only two more cars on the street out front, mine and one other. When a limo pulls up and stops, I know that's the one Bianca will be getting into. I've seen it before. Whoever pays her to sing at this joint also taxis her around in their ritzy ride.

I watch as a driver climbs out and hurries around the front of the car. He dashes into the club and the door shuts behind him. I decide now is my time. If Bianca won't go public and have dinner with me, then I'll take her some place private so we can talk about it. I climb out of my car and head across the street. If the goons who kicked me out last time see me, I'll be in for a beating for sure, but the limo driver isn't very smart. He parked two spaces away from the streetlight. I lean against the car and cross my arms over my chest. In the darkness, I'm visible but barely.

My wait is short, as Bianca struts out of the club wearing a cream-colored gown that drips with gems and feathers. The slit on the dress rises all the way to her thigh, baring her entire right leg. Her head is down, face buried in a purse she carries. Her dark hair is tied up, revealing more jewels dangling from her ear and around her neck. She's gorgeous, especially with the way her tits bounce a little with each step, the deep V of



her dress giving no challenge to my imagination. I'm getting hard just watching her walk. Fuck I want her.

"Care to dance?" I ask, not intending at all to dance with her.

Bianca looks up in shock and gasps; then her eyes register my face, and she exhales. Before she can protest, I move toward her. She glances anxiously at the nightclub entrance, but she doesn't need to worry about a thing. I've planned this as perfectly as I can. I bend, putting my shoulder into her hip, and grab her legs, hoisting her up onto my shoulder.

"Fuck... Rome," she protests and stiffens, but draped across my shoulder there isn't much she can do. "What are you doing?" Her voice is low. She knows I won't hurt her at all—except the ways she begs me to.

"You won't go public? Well, I'll take you some place private." Moving stealthily, I whisk her into the darkness of the alley, then turn and hasten my steps. It took me about an hour to find the perfect spot and prepare things. I did that earlier this evening when I realized I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight without this release. I could have any woman I want, but she is the one I chose.

"Rome, they'll come looking."

"Good, shut your phone off." I don't care if they come looking. One way or another I will convince Bianca to commit to me. I've already made up my mind that she's mine even when my father told me to watch what I'm doing.

She sighs and I feel her body relax across my shoulder. I continue to move in the shadows until I find the old, rusty, white door that's propped open with a brick. The old button factory was shut down in the nineties and this building has been vacant for decades now. Squatters and homeless folks set up their tents in here, but the cops keep chasing them out. Right now, only one lonely soul uses it and I gave him some money to make himself scarce tonight.

"What is this?" she asks as I open the door and walk through it, pulling the brick aside so it will shut behind me.

“This is privacy...” I set her down in front of me and rest my hands on her hips as I back her toward the room I’ve prepared. It’s the old office. I’ve left a few things to entertain her, for lack of a better word.

“You could have just come to my dressing room.” She sets her jaw and resists me, but I know she’s only beginning the fun.

“You could just give up now and not fight me. Might like it if you try it...” I feel the silky fabric of her dress beneath my fingertips, and I want to tear it away and feel her flesh. I hear something clatter and she stumbles, suddenly a few inches shorter. I step on the heel that she’s kicked off and almost trip, and then she kicks off the other.

“You are going to have to make me, because I don’t give up.” Bianca’s hands rest on my biceps. They’re hot, radiating warmth through the fabric of my button down. Her eyes take on a hungriness; she’s waiting for me to make my move. I press my thumbs into her hip bones as I turn her and back her into the office. A candle glows in the corner of the room.

Bianca looks around, her eyes widening as she takes in the sight before her. There are chains hanging from the ceiling, whips and paddles scattered across the floor, and a large bed with a selection of toys laid out on top.

“What is all this?” she asks, her voice trembling with a mixture of lust and hesitation.

“This is where we play,” I reply, my voice low and husky. “Where we explore our darkest desires.”

“Play?” Her chuckle has me eating out of her hand. “You call this play?”

“I call this taking what’s mine.” Bianca’s breath hitches as I press myself against her, trapping her between my body and the wall. I can feel her heart beating rapidly against my chest as I lean in and whisper in her ear. “You belong to me, Bianca. And I’m going to show you just how much I own you.”

I reach down and run my hand along her smooth, bare leg, feeling the goosebumps rise under my touch. She shivers and

closes her eyes, giving herself over to me. I smile, knowing that I've won this round.

I press my lips to hers and taste the sweetness of her mouth. Bianca responds eagerly, her tongue sliding against mine as her hands roam over my back. I pull back slightly and trail kisses down her neck and across her collarbone. She moans and arches her back, giving me better access.

I reach up and pull a handful of her hair back so I can see her face. She's flushed and her breath is ragged, and I know she's ready.

I untie the bow at the top of her dress, and it falls away, revealing her curvy body clad in a black, lacy bra and panties. I run my hands over her curves, feeling her shiver beneath my touch.

"Do you want me to touch you?" I whisper into her ear. Her eyes meet mine and I see the lust burning in her eyes.

"Yes," she replies, her voice barely audible.

My fingers trace the edge of her bra, teasing her before I slowly undo the clasp. Her breasts spill out into my hands, and I run my thumbs over the hard nipples. Her head falls back against the wall as I tug gently, rolling the little buds between my fingertips.

"You are so fucking sexy," I say, my voice full of awe. "There's nothing about you that I don't want." I bend my head and take one nipple in my mouth, flicking it with my tongue as I roll the other between my fingers. Bianca's hands fist in my hair and she moans, the sound of her pleasure spurring me on.

My hands move down her body and slip beneath the waistband of her panties. I push them down and over her hips, and they fall to the ground, leaving her completely bare. I run a finger along her wet folds, and she shudders and moans. I smile against her skin and slide a finger inside her, feeling her clench around me.

"You're so wet, baby," I say, my voice husky. "I think you like this."

“I do,” she gasps. Her hands are on my shoulders, gripping tightly as she tries to control her breathing.

I slip another finger inside her, my thumb working her clit and she hisses. Her body undulates as I thrust my fingers in and out, slowly building up speed. Her head is thrown back against the wall and she’s panting as I take her closer and closer to the edge, but this isn’t how I want her. And it isn’t going to sate her deep lust. I know that much.

I pull my fingers out and bring them to my mouth, tasting her arousal as I stare into her eyes. The flickering of light from the candle reflects off the chains hanging just over her head. I take her wrists in hand and pin them over her head, keeping her gaze the entire time. She doesn’t even fight or resist me at all. She watches as I take a leather cord from my pocket and lash it around her wrists then reach for the chain.

“So now you’re tying me up?” she asks, breathing heavily as I lean into her to reach the hook dangling from the end of the chain.

“I’m restraining you,” I correct her. I make sure the chain is tight before I let my hands slide down her arms and across her body to her hips. She tugs at the leather binding her wrists and I can tell she likes it. The half smirk playing on her lips has my dick twitching as I back away to remove my shirt.

Bianca’s eyes stay fixed on me as I peel the button-down off, then work on my belt and fly. She tugs at the restraint and whimpers. I see her stomach tense; she’s probably aching to be touched, and I’m going to torment her a little before I give her that pleasure. “Your body is incredible,” I murmur as I reach for the button of my jeans.

“You’re too far away,” she whines. “I can’t touch you.”

I step toward her. “You sure you want me to touch you?” I ask, my voice low. I shove my pants down and kick my shoes off as I wrap my arms around her, pulling her against me. She moans loudly; she’s completely at my mercy.

“Yes,” she breathes. She arches into me, pressing her breasts against my chest and I kiss her, my tongue all-consuming and

demanding. Her skin is on fire, pressing along the length of my body. Every inch of me longs to be inside of her even as she nips at my tongue.

“Bad little vixen,” I tell her, backing away again. “You want to play rough?”

“I’m not here to play,” she mewls. “And the rougher the better.” She jerks at the restraint now, lust flashing in her eyes. “You have about two minutes to—”

“To what?” I chuckle and bend to pick up a whip lying at my feet. “To fuck you? Or you’ll do what?” I could do this all night long.

She scowls at me but it’s all part of the game. “Tease me until I get so wet that I drip onto the floor,” she says.

I raise an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

She nods and I get closer, letting the leather strips of the whip drag across her skin. “Maybe you’d like to mark me up too. I’m not a delicate flower, you know. I’ve got skin like leather.”

“Is that so?” I wrap my hand around her tit, and she gasps, her eyes going wide with surprise. She throws her head back, exposing her throat and I lean in close to her, my cock twitching at the smell of her arousal as it wafts up to me. I can feel her heat, her need.

It’s not enough, though. I want her to be desperate. I want her begging me to fuck her. I back away and smack her with the whip, letting it land across her thigh. She gasps and her eyes go wide as she realizes what I’m doing. “Yes,” she whispers. “Yes, please.”

I can’t help but smirk. It’s only my first blow and Bianca’s already begging. “You don’t sound certain,” I tell her, looping the whip and bringing it down again. It lands on her other thigh, and I hear her breath hitch. A red mark appears across her skin, and she moans, tossing her head from side to side.

“I’m certain,” she pants. “Please.” She looks at me through a glaze of arousal and I can’t help but be pleased at my effect on her. “Please, Rome. Fuck me now.”

I growl and step toward her again, pressing my body against hers as I yank her head back. I bite down on her neck, and she moans, tossing her head back. I kiss down her body, settling between her legs. Her scent is incredible. I press my face against her, and she shrieks as my stubble brushes her delicate skin. I love the way she tastes; I love the way she feels, writhing beneath me. I love the way she moans my name. I bury my fingers in her pussy, thrusting.

“Please, Rome. Now,” she pants.

I suck her, slurping up her juices until she’s whimpering and grinding her hips against my face and hand. I feel her tight muscles contracting and know she’s so close, but I want to fill her with my seed when she comes. So, I stand and pin her to the wall, letting the whip come down across her thigh and the side of her ass cheek. She hisses and bites my lip when I lean in to kiss her.

She’s so wet my cock slides between her thighs easily and she opens to me. “Fuck me, Rome... please.” I thrust into her, reveling in the tightness around my cock. Her walls grip me tightly and I can feel her clenching. She’s so close.

“Come for me,” I tell her, my voice rough and low.

Bianca screams and I feel her muscles contracting around me, her pussy rippling. She throws her head back and I bring my hand down with the whip against her thigh again. “Rome!” she screams, her voice echoing in the room. I groan and thrust into her again, letting my cum fill her. She’s moaning, her muscles still milking me for all I’m worth, and I can’t bring myself to pull out. I hold her against the wall and thrust into her, my hand rising and falling with the whip. Her skin breaks easily, and I can see the red welts rising on its surface. I want to mark her. I want to make her mine.

I feel her muscles begin to relax and I pull out of her, letting her hang. I slide my hand between her thighs and feel her wet pussy. I thrust two fingers inside of her and Bianca’s hips jerk. She’s so sensitive, so responsive, and I find the idea of making her feel this way even hotter.

Bianca moans and lets her head relax back against the wall. I could do this with her all night long, but I have to hunt an assassin whom I heard is working tonight. So, I back away and let her enjoy her post-orgasmic high. Her chest is heaving, her body glistening with sweat. I may just pay my little homeless friend to keep an eye on this little sex den I've created.

Her phone buzzes and I look over where her dress lays to see her clutch glowing. The light from the phone shines through the material. Her escort is looking for her most likely and she'll have to get out of here. I reach for my slacks, taking the knife from my pocket, and then I move back to her. Her eyes are heavy, slowly opening to watch me slit the leather cords. Her knees almost buckle, and I catch her.

"Why do you do this to me?" she asks, smirking.

"Because you like it... And if you made us public, I could do this every day, instead of only a few times a week." I kiss her, sealing the fact that I have claimed her as mine. "It's up to you."

I release her and watch as she leans against the wall to gain her composure. My cum slides down the insides of her thighs. There is no mistaking that I've marked my territory. "You know I can't..."

I reach for my clothing and dress in silence. I'm biding my time, because right now she says she can't openly admit we're together, but one day she will. For now, I have to respect her wishes. I won't push her away by being hasty.

"You're still mine, Bianca, even if no one else knows it." With one last glance over my shoulder, I head out the door and down the dark hallway. So, tonight isn't the night I'll woo her into submission, but soon.





## BIANCA

**M**y flat has always been my safe haven. I selected it because of its location and security features.

Decorated it with modern furnishings in colors that are calming—blues and greens. Organized every aspect to maintain my sense of control and make my life as easy as possible, but even in this space I'm not feeling myself today. For weeks I've been feeling off, sick at times, achy, overly tired. I know all the symptoms and I've been avoiding what I feel is the inevitability I can't escape from.

Now I wait, seated on my navy-blue sofa, staring at my glass top coffee table. The grocery delivery people will bring my order soon and I'll be face to face with a truth I feel in my core even before the empirical evidence confirms it. I'm pregnant with Rome's baby. My cycle is late, and my moods have changed. My tits are tender; I've been overly emotional. I want to eat everything in sight while not being able to stomach anything most days. It's obvious.

But I wait. Because I have to take the test in order for my heart to allow me to believe it fully.

I stare at the unmoving coffee ring on the glass, wondering when I left it there, which mug dripped with the dribbles that sluiced down the side of my mug. What morning was it that it happened and how long has that gone unnoticed? I'm a tidy person. I don't like messes or stains, but my flightiness lately has made me scatterbrained, impulsive even. Is it the shift in my hormones?

The remote is moved too, not lying where I normally leave it. I'm meticulous, organized. It's what makes me a good killer. I obsess about every detail of everything and for good reason. One tiny mistake leads to being caught and I cannot get caught. So why is my remote lying on the end table instead of in its slot in the small, brown wicker basket on the entertainment stand? And why would I make mistakes like that?

I think back to when I watched television last. It was when I was making the darts, one of which I used on Rome's friend on the sidewalk that day. That was almost two weeks ago now, and I can't remember specific details. I'm so busy I don't have time to sit and watch television, so that means for two weeks I've been distracted enough to not notice the remote is not in its rightful place. Which means I may have made other mistakes too.

The thought makes me feel antsy. I stand and pace. I can't trip up. I can't forget something or leave something out. It is the difference between life or death—literally. New York state still enforces the death penalty and when I get hauled in, I'll face capital sentencing for sure. And I will be hauled in if I make mistakes.

I glance at the clock. Still twenty minutes until the delivery is supposed to arrive. I'm a fierce woman and I don't scare easily. When Rome dragged me off the street into darkness that night I was startled only because I wasn't prepared to see anyone. I would have handled myself had it not been him, but even so, I didn't run away. Other women would have been screaming for help at the sight of him.

But this? The idea of being pregnant with my enemy's baby, it's nerve wracking to say the least. I know I'm playing with fire; I feel it every time he touches me and I can't get enough. The risk of getting caught, the thrill of knowing how wrong it is—they combine to create a desire so overwhelming for a man so irresistible. It's a heavy emotion that guts me and I have to sit back down.

Mickey will most certainly kill me if he finds out I'm procrastinating on the task he gave me because I'm enjoying

frequent wild sex with my target. It didn't start that way. I was always aroused by how attractive Roman is, but I intended in the beginning to get close to him in a way that made me close to his whole family. I don't even know when it changed from me weaseling my way into his life to me wanting to be in his life.

But it changed and now I sit on my sofa knowing something else is changing too. My body. No period means something, and I can't bring myself to fully admit it. All I can do is sit and stare at the wall. This is my day off. I should be out hunting Gusevs, not agonizing over how much my life will change the minute I piss on that little plastic stick.

I stare into space, deep in thought, for so long I don't even realize it's time. The bell rings and I know it's the grocery delivery. My stomach tightens and I stand and walk to the door. A glance through the peephole shows me the delivery person is gone, sat my things down by my door and left exactly like they're supposed to. I crack the door and see two brown paper sacks full of the things I need.

Nobody sees me pull them into my loft. I shut the door and carry them to the kitchen counter where I unpack things. Fresh produce goes in the fridge; cans and boxes go in the pantry. I ordered a stack of toiletries: toothpaste, deodorant, toilet paper, and of course, the pregnancy test. It stares at me accusingly. I don't for a second regret sleeping with Rome.

To regret my choice would be to miss out on an exhilarating exchange that has shifted my thinking about what I want out of life. Before Rome I only wanted to do my boss's bidding. I wanted to follow orders, rank up, prove myself and make my brothers proud of me. I never thought of my own desires or wants as being important. I was part of a big machine that made Mickey money, kept him safe.

But I want more. I don't want to kill people the rest of my life if it leaves me in isolation, secretive about my every thought and action. To remain within my identity as L'ombra would be to remain isolated and alone. No one could ever know the real me, and even if I married within the family, no one would ever be able to bear my burdens, know my jobs, listen to my

sorrows and victories. Mickey owns my life and I don't like that.

I pick up the test and turn it over in my hand. This isn't my first rodeo. I've taken them before, but they never turned up positive. Somehow, I know this one will, and I'm not sure I hate that idea. Rome may be the enemy and my target, but he's a good man. I've laughed with him and argued. We've had incredible sex and exchanged our ideas on life and politics. We have so much in common.

My chest feels heavy as I walk to the bathroom. This test doesn't have to change anything about my life. Even as I lower my pants and sit on the toilet, I'm thinking how L'ombra will still go on. Mickey will call me to new jobs, pay me well for my service, and promote me. I may be sidelined for a short time when my stomach is full and large, but I've lived a double life for so long, I know how to balance it. My duties as Bianca Moretti, stage performer, will shift and change. I'll have to find some other cover for how I make good money when my body is large, and men don't find me seductive.

But once the pregnancy passes, I can return to singing. I'd have a child, my home, my life as L'ombra kept secret as always, but is that what I want?

I hold the stick between my legs and relax my pelvic floor, emptying my bladder. I feel the weight of the piss as it hits the wand and soaks into the cotton swab at the end. This moment seems to last for ages. I lay the wand on the counter and clean myself, then wash my hands. I don't even have to wait the full three minutes. Within thirty seconds I see the tell-tale lines. Two of them—pink and very loudly shouting my sentence. Roman's baby is in my womb.

Tears threaten to well up and not for what most people would think. I didn't even know how desperately I wanted to be a mother, how much I love him, until now. Until I look down and see those lines telling me what I have to go through for love and how it's going to affect me. I love him. I honestly, and sincerely love him from the depths of my soul. He is the only one I can be myself around—well, my true self. L'ombra

is just an alias, just a job. It's not me. I'm Bianca... I'm the singer he fancies.

I jump when I hear a loud banging on my door. I have no clue who could be coming to my house right at this very second. I blink my eyes hard, pushing the tears back as I rush to the door and look out the peephole.

"Oh fuck," I whisper to myself. It's Mickey. He's at my fucking loft. Holy hell this is all I need.

I run quietly back into my bathroom and grab the test and the packaging and look around for someplace to hide it. The trash can is full. I can't put it there, and I have no clue why he's here. So, I lift a handful of trash out of the can, toss the test and packaging, and cover it with the trash again. Then I wash my hands hastily and carry the hand towel to the door, drying my hands as I open it.

"What took so long?" Mickey's goon says, pushing in as I back up. I scowl at him.

"I was having a shit, okay?" The towel in my hand must be convincing enough because Mickey struts in and nods at me, unbuttoning his suit coat. He's not as impressive as he thinks he is, though he does have a commanding presence. Mostly because he will slit any man's throat who looks at him wrong, not because he's anything to look at.

"Bianca, you know why I'm here." Mickey slides his hands into his pants pockets as his second goon enters and shuts the door. I've met them; I just have no interest in learning their names. They're not important in this game. They're just the muscle.

"Do I?" I ask nonchalantly as I drape the towel over my shoulder and walk toward the kitchen. "Beer? Glass of wine?"

"Cut the crap, Moretti; the boss is talking." Goon number one is seriously angry today which makes me smirk and chortle. He really needs to chill out.

"I'm quite fine thank you." Mickey stays put where he is on the living room side of the bar. I circle around behind it and open the fridge, raising my eyebrows at goon number two who

seems quieter. He shakes his head and scrunches his nose, so I grab one beer, only for me.

“What can I do for you, Mickey?” My heart is pounding so hard I can hear the blood thrumming through the veins in my head. Mickey never pays a personal visit unless he’s out for blood or very invested. I know how much he wants the Gusev family gone because they’re his rivals. If he can remove them, he can take their territory.

I’ve told him from the very beginning that the best opportunity for me to take them all out is for me to get so close to my original target—Roman, the youngest Gusev—that he clings to me for comfort when his old man dies. The funeral seems very fitting. He knows my plan. I’ve made it clear to him despite my brothers being out of the loop. He can effectively crash the funeral or plant a bomb. He doesn’t need me. But if he wants stealth and to do the hit without blowback from Russian hands or friends, he has to trust me.

“Alexsi Gusev is on hospice now.” His eyes narrow at me as his chin lowers. His forehead wrinkles as he furrows his brow. “It is only a matter of time before his death occurs. I have word that he will not have a wake. How will you carry out your plan?”

He’s a bit of a stout man, standing an inch shorter than me. His pinstripe suit is too cliché, straight out of those sixties’ gangster films. He takes it too far I think, but maybe it’s part of the code of made men everywhere. He has to represent the family and everything they’ve stood for ages.

“My plan remains the same.” I use a magnet from the fridge to pop the cap on my beer and hold it to my lips. It’s cold, and the moment the liquid hits my tongue I know I shouldn’t drink it. Not while pregnant. I swallow only a tiny sip but I make it appear to be a much larger drink. These men cannot see any uncertainty or weakness in me at all. It will spell my death.

Mickey’s grunt is a sign he’s approving of me, though he’d never admit it. I know him. I’ve studied him for years now and my own personal hypervigilance helps me learn how to read everyone, including the most dangerous mobster in the city.

“You are certain you can get close enough to him to warrant an invitation to the funeral of the most powerful man in the Russian mob?” His eyebrows rise in the middle, and he purses his lips. I set the beer down, thankful for the excuse to get it out of my hand. I’m so on edge I could chug the whole thing just for the effect of relaxation, but I won’t do that to my unborn child.

Walking around the corner of the bar I begin to chuckle, lightening the mood. “Your men are so inept they left me alone with him for five minutes out front of the club last week. Roman was there, whisked me off to his sex den. We were there for hours screwing like fucking animals.” It’s not a complete lie, but I have to keep my lies so close to the truth they’re easy to remember. “I’m certain he is falling in love with me. He calls me his own.” I narrow my eyes at Mickey. “I’m in, boss. He is wrapped around my finger. Any day he will get the news his father is dead and he will come to me for comfort. I will fuck him and tell him I will be by his side every step of the way. I will go to the funeral, and his entire family will fall prey to L’ombra.”

As I’m talking, I move toward the door. When I’ve finished, I twist the knob and open it. “Now, it’s my day off and I have a lot to accomplish. I plan to find Roman and give him more of what he truly desires. He’s already eating out of my hand. Besides, you are far too busy of a man to worry about the fine details.”

I think I may throw up from nerves now. I’m not just stuck between a rock and a hard place. I’m uniquely positioned between a man I love deeply and a man who’s going to take my life if I don’t do my job. And that’s worse than any rock or hard place.

“Good, well I’ll be off. I’m waiting for the news it’s done. It will be a happy day for our family.” Mickey pats my cheek as he walks out. It’s a demeaning act and I hate it, but I don’t shy away. How the fuck I’m ever going to do this job is beyond me. I cannot—no, will not—kill Roman. Not unless he leaves me no other choice. I don’t want to choose between him and our child, but if I confess to who I am and he threatens my life,

I'll have no choice. That is the only way Roman Gusev will ever die by my hand.

"Goodbye, Michaelo," I mewl, his given name rolling off my tongue like honey. He winks at me, and I feel a bit of bile rising in my throat. If his wife weren't up his ass all the time, he'd have me bent over the hood of his car; I'm certain. Lucky for me, she's a viper and a half and that keeps my body sacredly mine.

I wait for his men to follow behind him and then lock the door and deadbolt it. The pressure I'm under terrifies me. I don't have any choice but to play along, and I have no way out. Mickey will hunt me down and slaughter me and my unborn baby if I don't follow his orders. My only hope will be to feel Rome out, see if he knows anything about my true nature. And then, to trust my life with him when I tell him I'm having his child and that I'm the assassin who has threatened his family. I only pray it works.





## ROME

I'm here again, sitting a block away from the nightclub watching the back door. Only, this time my brother tagged along. Leo, sent by Dominic to watch me, uses the binoculars with night vision to keep an eye on the dark entrance. We haven't seen any movement so far, but our intel says this is the most likely place to find our target. We believe it's his home base and I am not coming off it until I figure this out.

It's a rainy night, the kind where the darkness seems to suck every ray of light in and hoard them all. I don't relish the idea of having to do my business in a downpour but if it gets the assassin off the street and the threat hanging over my family's heads removed, it will be worth it. I'm certain that until we settle the score another assassin will always rise in place of the one I take out, but my duty is to follow orders. If Dominic thinks this one is the biggest threat, that's where I aim.

"You think he'll show tonight?" Leo holds the binoculars up to his eyes scanning the side of the building. His nostrils flare and his forehead has deep furrows lining it. The silver appearing at his temples relays to me how none of us are getting any younger. It's time for us to raise a new generation of Gusev men to take over the family business when we meet our inevitable demises.

"He'll show. The detective gave us solid intel that this was the place to watch. I've watched it almost nonstop for weeks now. One of the men going in and out of here frequently is definitely our little "Shadow" and I'm going to find out which

one. He just has to slip up.” I pull a cigarette from the pack lying on my center console and the lighter from my breast pocket and light up. Leo scowls at me so I crack my window to give the smoke some place to go.

“Those things will kill you. You know?” He coughs a little and lowers the binoculars to his lap and sits back. “I feel like this is a dead end. If L’ombra is going to show himself, do you really think it will be at a nightclub? And what’s he going to do, walk in and announce his name? How will we tell him from anyone else?”

“Very good points.” I take a long drag from the cigarette, feeling the smoke fill my lungs and ease the craving. Not all my cravings—I crave Bianca tonight too, but this will have to do. “But we’ll know. And besides, Detective Akers knows we will off him and his daughter if he gives us bad intel. He’s onboard, Leo. Just trust the process.”

Leo knows nothing of my job and how I get it done. He’s spent the last ten years of his life stalking his lady friend. His work in the business was reduced to shipping fish and guns. I’m the hitman; I’m the one who knows how to stalk and hunt prey, then clean the mess so no one finds the carcass.

“I’m just saying, Dominic sent me to watch you for a reason, Rome. You’ve been distracted, careless. You’ve made mistakes. You had the damn assassin a few weeks ago and you let his two goons stop you.” Leo’s eyes train on my face instead of the building but I don’t take my gaze away from the backside of that nightclub for a split second. I can’t miss him again.

“You weren’t here. You don’t know how it went down.” Leaving the cigarette dangling from my lips where I pinch it to inhale more smoke, I reach for the binoculars.

“I hear you barely grazed one and missed the assassin who snuck into the building, then got yourself kicked out.” He chortles and hands me the device and I put them to my eyes.

Everything is crystal clear. I can even see glints of light dancing on the rain that falls. It’s amazing the technology these days. Without this, I’d never be able to make out a single

thing in that dark alley, but with them, nothing will escape my notice.

One more drag from the cigarette and I toss it out the window and exhale before closing it. Leo may have facts right, but in those situations, there is split-second timing that has to occur. I'd have been more successful if I'd have taken a different approach, but I'm not going to go in haphazardly shooting. I had no way of knowing if that black-clad figure that night was L'ombra, or just an entertainer with a dark jacket. Killing random men will only exacerbate the problem.

"Look there..." The night vision works so well I see the back door open. A figure in all black emerges and looks both ways.

"What is it? I see nothing." Leo reaches for the dashboard, and I glance at him to see him squinting.

"There, coming out the back door. Someone in all black. That has to be our guy. No one that is up to any good dresses in all black in a dark alley this late at night." I reach for my weapon and then for the dome light, all while keeping my eyes trained on the man through the night vision binoculars. I flip the light switch to off, so it won't turn on when I open the door, then I nod at Leo. "Let's go hunting."

Leo opens his door and climbs out and I mirror his movements. Both of us shut the car doors as silently as we can, and we meet in front of the car. "I'll flank the building, you come around the side. We cannot lose this guy again." Leo's orders aren't welcome in my mind, but I don't have time to argue. If that's the plan, then one of us will nab the guy. Besides, I can see him, and Leo can't. It makes sense for him to hug the building.

I head off without making a sound, rolling my feet across the wet pavement one step at a time. It's good that the rain gives us cover because this alley is like a damn echo chamber. That guy would hear every footfall and spook. This way, we can move in and surprise him.

I watch as I walk. He pulls out a lighter and a cigarette and lights up. The closer I get, the more I can see. It's a man with a short beard, hoodie zipped to his chin with the hood up. His

eyes dart around as if nervously watching for someone. It's suspicious, but only because I know the type I'm looking for. Of course, he'd be watching for someone to attack him. He knows he's a target at all times. With as many lives as he's taken from us, he's got to know we're watching him, hunting him.

Sweeping the binoculars across the side of the building, I see Leo advancing too. He's almost to the dumpster, and the man stands only ten yards on the other side of that. Which is where my gaze stops again. The man, puffing out a lungful of smoke, jerks his head in Leo's direction and stares for a second. I don't look to see what my brother is doing again because I can't lose this guy. So, when he takes off, so do I.

The guy darts down the alley, dropping his cigarette in a puddle and I chase after him. He's fast, but I'm not going to let him get away. I grip the binoculars in one hand and my gun in the other. I can't fire until I have him in range. I hear Leo's footsteps behind me slapping the pavement and splashing in the collected rain.

"Fuck's sake," I grunt. I had no intention of doing a chase tonight. I just needed a few more steps and I could have taken him out and Leo made a noise or something.

"He's turning right!" Leo shouts but I don't need his play by play. I can see with my own eyes now that we're out on the street under streetlights.

It's after eleven p.m. and it's raining, but this is the city that never sleeps and there are still people wandering around. I run past a couple sharing an umbrella and then a homeless man who holds a newspaper over his head. The guy I'm chasing weaves between the people and the legs of the massive scaffolding erected in front of the row of shops. It's slippery, and it's hard to keep my footing at times on the oil-slicked pavement, but I chase him across the street and into another alley.

I'm winded, sucking air. My chest burns and I feel like I will pass out if I don't catch up to him soon. Leo is still behind me, breathing heavily and stomping the pavement.

“This guy can’t get away, Rome!”

“Don’t you think I fucking know that?”

The man disappears into the darkness again, and just as I round the corner and lift the binoculars to my eyes, I hear the sound of a round being chambered. I slow my steps and raise my gun, but Leo charges forward, plowing into him. They fall to the ground in a heap, rolling and punching. I stand over them, heaving, catching my breath as Leo dominates the man with blow after blow.

When the guy gets the better of him, flipping him over, I have no choice but to act. I fire my weapon in a loud discharge that rattles the windows and drops the man to the ground instantly. He falls with a sickening thud and lays motionless, and Leo crawls out from beneath him.

“Waited long enough,” he says, rubbing his throat. He’s out of breath still, as am I, and both of us stare down at the dead man on the ground. “We need to check him and get out of here before someone calls the cops.”

I hand him the binoculars and pull my phone out, then holster my gun. If I’m correct and this man is the assassin we’re hunting, my job is done, and I can focus solely on Bianca for a while. That is what I truly want to do. Leo was right about one thing; I am distracted because she is the most intoxicating woman I’ve ever met.

Crouching, I turn on my phone’s flashlight feature and pull the hood of the man’s jacket back to reveal his face. Dark bushy eyebrows crown his hollow eyes that remain wide open. Blood covers his ear and neck, a massive hole on the other side of his head. There are no indications that this is our guy, but there is no proof it isn’t yet. In one swift movement I grab the neck of his t-shirt and hoodie and pull hard, tearing it down his chest.

There are no tattoos here, nothing that lines up with what I’ve heard about L’ombra. That makes me frustrated. There is only one thing that can confirm with absolute certainty that this isn’t our man and I have to check. I reach into my pocket and pull out my pocketknife then hand my phone to Leo. ” Hold this.”

Using the tip of the knife I cut down the shoulder and sleeve of the hoodie and t-shirt to expose the man's right shoulder. There should be a tattoo, a very distinct one of a triangle with an eyeball in the center. It's the trademark of L'ombra and without seeing that, there is no proof I've finished my job. My family will still be at risk. As I fold the cut material back, Leo shines the light onto the man's bloodied skin. I wipe at the blood with my thumb and reveal bare skin, no tattoo. No mark. Nothing.

"Fuck!" I stand abruptly and grit my teeth. This is the last thing that should have happened. Dominic is going to be furious. At best I've killed one of the Italians—that'll escalate things for sure. At worst, I've killed an innocent man.

"Look, he ran for a reason, and he had a gun. It was me or him. You did the right thing." Leo shoves my phone back into hands. "Let's go."

Scowling, I follow him up the alley away from the direction we came. I'm soaked to the bone now and cold, but we have to take the long way around. Anyone who sees us around here will have to give witness to the cops when they get here, and I think I hear the faint whir of sirens in the distance already.

Water squishes between my toes with each step and I hang my head in frustration, staring at the ground as we move in silence. I was certain he was our guy, and now I'm not certain about anything, except Bianca. I'm certain I need to connect with her soon. She works at that club, maybe she's seen something. It might be a long shot, but I have to try.





## BIANCA

When Rome sent the message through my stage manager that he wanted to come back and see me, I almost turned him away. This isn't the Flatiron. I can't control the optics here. He has no clue that my brothers own this nightclub, and that Mickey holds stock in it too—a lot of it. If any of them see Roman Gusev enter my dressing room here I'm as good as dead. There will be no awkward standoff where Tony tells Rome to buzz off. They'd shoot him on the spot and maybe me too.

"I missed you," he coos, standing behind me with his hands on my hips, nipping at the crook of my neck. I have thirty minutes until my set starts and I know Wren will come back to call me up, though he knows I have Rome back here since he is the one who showed Rome in. He won't come until it's almost time.

"It's been a week." I joke with him to hide my nerves. It's my normal night across town but I knew he'd come, and I knew I'd have to swallow this hard truth I need to tell him. I can't come right out and say I'm having his child because I need to know first if we even stand a chance at having a future together. Rome is a smart man; I'd never be able to hide my true nature from him for long.

"A week too long..." He kisses my neck and pulls my body into his. I watch his reflection in the mirror as he stares back at mine. I see the flash of desire there, the craving he has for me. I crave him too, in ways I shouldn't I'm fighting my own

urges to copulate and only because I feel like we need to talk more than we need to fuck.

“Is this all I am then? A whore you visit when you have a need?” I crane my neck to the side so he can enjoy kissing me and nibbling on my flesh. The bra and panties I wear will never hide my secret from him in a few months’ time, but for now, my body remains trim. Although, if he were astute, he’d notice the way my tits are slightly larger. When I bend over, they fall out of my bra, which is quite embarrassing.

“You are so much more, Bianca.” Rome turns me within his embrace and looks me in the eyes. “I told you; you belong to me. Every part of you.”

“Even the dark parts?” I’m pushing now, toying at the edge of my secret, wondering how much he means what he says. If he only knew what I’ve done.

“Every part.” Rome kisses me hard, and I respond in kind, parting my lips. His fingers push my panties down over my hips and gravity does the rest. I want this, but I want security in knowing this isn’t all it is, that when he learns about me, it won’t result in my death. I’m hunting him. I’m supposed to be gaining intimacy with him to hunt his family. Something tells me if he knew that, he wouldn’t feel the same way.

But the desire stirring in my body compels me to stay in this moment, leaving my worries for a future conversation, perhaps after his dick isn’t so hard and he isn’t grinding on me. I reach to put my arms around his neck, but he grabs a wrist and holds it behind my back, growling against my mouth.

“What’s so dark you think I won’t like it?” he asks. “Is it the way you like to be dominated? The way you like me to fuck you until you can’t walk?” His fingers work my bra hook and undo it. I find the need for his cock to be inside of me growing.

“Yes,” I moan.

“That is so hot.” He pulls my bra off and drops it. “I like the way you need me to fuck you.” His right hand grabs my left breast, kneading it, lightly pinching my nipple.

“Rome.” I wrap my arms around his neck, and he drops his mouth to mine once more. I kiss him back with the same intensity. My hips roll forward into him, putting pressure against my mound. “I want you.” I feel the cool air of the dressing room on my exposed chest, my nipples hard, my body aching for release.

He unbuckles his belt and pulls it free from the belt’s loops. I’m not sure whether he’ll choke me or spank me, but it sends my body wild with desire just thinking about it. I love the way he dominates me in bed. The way he leaves marks on my body. The way he makes me come.

“I can’t wait to fuck you,” he growls into my mouth. “You’ll come so hard.”

I want to say the same, but he’s kissing me so hard, his hand on my breast, his cock hard against me, I can’t even form words. He reaches between us and unbuttons his pants, pushing them down in front, along with his boxers. His thick dick protrudes from the fly of his pants, standing proudly erect, so I take hold of it and squeeze it, stroking lightly.

He groans and I stroke harder, up and down, moving my hand to the base, then to the tip, then back down again. I can feel the precum at the tip of his cock and I want it inside me. I want to be filled with him, his desire, his lust. My pussy aches so badly, sending me into a frenzy. Our kisses are sloppy, teeth raking across each other’s lips. Then his mouth travels to my neck, then my shoulder, where they sink in, breaking the skin.

“Ah...” I whimper but he bites hard. If he moves even a few inches farther, he’ll wipe away the makeup that covers my tattoo. So, I distract him, grabbing his dick with my fingernails. He straightens and hisses, looking me dead in the eye.

“So, you want to play dirty?”

I narrow my eyes at him. I can’t be found out, and I’ve had a few close calls lately. If he sees my mark, he will know who I am and even though I have to tell him eventually, during sex is not the way I want to communicate that.

“Spank me,” I whisper, and before I can even finish the phrase the belt in his hand comes down across my legs. It’s not painful, but it startles me. He does it again, this time on my ass, which stings a little. “Ah!” I can’t help but moan. The combination of pain and pleasure mixing together sends my body wild. I want more.

Rome leans back, smiling at me. I run my tongue along my lips, and he drops the belt to the floor. His eyes scan the table beside the vanity where we store all our lotions, makeups and headpieces. My pussy is dripping wet. I can’t wait to have him inside me, but I’m shocked when he takes both hands in a long sweeping motion and tosses everything from the table onto the ground, leaving only one hairbrush.

I gasp and scowl. “Woah, what the fuck?” I keep my voice quiet, not wanting to alert the stage crew or other performers. That’s going to take me ages to clean up. Luckily nothing broke.

“Shut up and be a good girl, or I’ll drag you outside and spank you in front of the whole crowd.”

I laugh, grabbing the hairbrush from the table. “You wouldn’t.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Try me,” he says, and I can tell from the look in his eye that he’s serious. He grabs the hairbrush from my hand and nods at the table. “Get up there.”

I smirk at him and move to the table, climbing on. “Spread your legs wide and bend over,” he says, and I quickly do as he says. He takes the hairbrush and positions himself between my legs, running the back of the brush up my thigh. I shiver at his touch as his hand glides up my back to cradle my head and he leans against me. “You look so fuckable like this.”

“Then fuck me,” I mewl, even as he pulls my hair hard and forces my neck backward. His teeth scrape across my skin. I know there will be more marks there to cover with makeup which I’ll have to find in the pile on the floor.

The head of his cock brushes against my pussy and I push back, trying to get him inside me. He clicks his tongue and

grinds on me. My moisture smears between our flesh, and each time his girth smoothes across my entrance I moan. He's teasing me, working me up for something.

"You're wet tonight... Good girl." I feel the whiff of air before I feel the sting as he uses the back of the hairbrush like a paddle. My outer thigh burns.

"Ah!" I wince and lean back, planting the heels of my palms on the table behind me as it wobbles. "Shit..."

"Did I say you could move?" His voice is stern and laced with hunger.

I shake my head, eyes wide. "No," I mutter, playing his game. "I'm so sorry." I, too, let the desire bubble to the surface in my tone, a thickness to my words he doesn't misunderstand.

"If you were sorry, you wouldn't have moved in the first place." He looms over me. I can feel him press against my ass, the head of his cock rubbing against my entrance. "You need to be punished." The brush comes down hard against the side of my ass again and I wince. Then he lifts one of my legs up and drapes my foot over his shoulder. My back scrapes along the brick wall behind me, threatening to rub the makeup off my arm. I grab his shoulder to keep my arm away from the rough surface, and he lifts my other leg to his shoulder. I'm folded in half, barely sucking in tiny breaths as he grinds against me. His cock still smears my juices.

"Fuck... Rome..." I whimper.

"You're such a bad girl." His cock slides into me, and I try to push back, but he holds me in place. His teeth graze my ear. The way he claws at my sides intensifies my arousal. I shudder and clench, groaning for more. "

"Please fuck me, Rome," I mewl as his cock barely moves inside me. I'm so desperate to feel him pound into me; I want him to fuck me raw.

Gasping as he slams into me, I throw my head back. The table beneath me shakes with each thrust and he grunts and growls. His fingernails dig into me deeper and I whimper. My arms are trembling. My legs are shaking. The table rocks and creaks

with each thrust, but he doesn't stop. He just holds onto my hips and slams into me.

"Fuck! Oh my god..." I squeal and moan. My muscles tense and I pant and writhe against him. He drives into me again and I feel my orgasm building.

"You're cumming for me, good girl?" he huffs against my ear. His teeth graze my neck and then his lips are on my shoulder and his arms are wrapped around me.

"Yes! Oh my god! Fuck!" I moan and clench around his cock as I cum. I feel him pulsing inside me, filling me with his cum. It's hot, warming me and making me shiver at the same time. Rome does things to my body I've only ever felt with him in moments like this. Things I never want to feel with anyone else. I'm overcome by the strong connection we have, almost whispering those three little words I'd love to hear him say back to me. But I can't.

He pulls out of me, and I am left on shaky legs as he throws the hairbrush on the table. I hear him zip his pants as I let my legs drop and rest my head on the wall behind me. He never sticks around long, and tonight will be no different, I have to go on soon. He has to leave before Tony or Soren comes in to check on me.

"I wonder if you can help me with something." Rome's voice is gravelly.

I slowly open my eyes and have a deep cleansing breath. Sex hormones are so heavy in my body my vision is blurred. I find it hard to pull myself out of it to focus on him. He's putting his belt through the loops and staring at me with delight. I love it when he looks at me like that. I have that power over him and even though it's a tool I use on some of my victims, I know I can never use that against him.

"What's that?" I'll humor him with an answer before I feel him out for the answers, I need from him.

"I'm looking for someone... Someone who frequents the Flatiron club." He sighs as he buckles his belt and straightens

his gig line. “I wondered if you might have seen or heard anything.”

“Bianca! Open this door,” Tony shouts, banging on the dressing room door. I huff and glance at it. I knew they would come searching for me, but I wanted more time with him.

“You have to go,” I tell Rome, snatching my panties off the ground.

“Yeah... Maybe we can chat another time?” He lingers even as Tony bangs and shouts again. I pull my panties on and rise up on my tiptoes to kiss Rome on the cheek.

“I have things I want to discuss with you too. Important things.” I whisper so he gets the point that we have to be quiet. “You remember the way out?”

He nods and touches my lips, staring into my eyes. “I’ll be back... I can’t get enough of your body.”

I snicker and watch as he vanishes into the adjoining bathroom. It loops through to another dressing room where there is a window to the back alley. He’s done this more than once, though I wish it didn’t have to be this way. It’s my own fault for getting emotionally involved with him. If I had just done my job, I wouldn’t be pregnant; Tony wouldn’t be hounding me, and the Russians would be scrambling for a new leading family.

“Bianca!” Tony screams and I stutter step to the door with my bra in hand. I snap it in place before pulling the door open with an exasperated look on my face.

“What the hell?” I am angry my time with Rome was cut short and I haven’t gotten to find out what he might think of a woman like me, but business is business.

Tony bursts into the room looking around with suspicion and anger on his face. He stops by the mess on the ground and stares at it for a second before turning to me. “What’s this about?”

“Accident,” I blurt, shutting the door. I’m about sick of him barging into my dressing rooms and confronting me. “I was masturbating. Have a problem with that?” I know he’s not

stupid. The smell of sex is heavy in the air and the idea of his adult sister self-pleasuring is enough to turn him away from the topic. He scowls and crosses his arms over his chest.

“They’re on to you.”

“Who?” I walk past the mess on the ground and see my reflection in the mirror. The makeup on my arm is smudged. I can faintly see a trace of the black ink beneath the surface. No doubt if Roman had stayed any longer, he’d have noticed it too. The makeup had to have gotten smeared during our romp.

“The Russians. They know about L’ombra and they’re hunting you.” Tony’s words froze my blood. It made me shiver to think Roman knew about my alter ego and that he might be hunting me.

“How did you find out?” I ask him but my back is to him. I don’t want him to see the very real emotions on my face which I cannot hide. I sort through the clothing rack for the dress I’ll wear for my first song. My brain is foggy, and I can’t think straight now. If the Russians are hunting me, and I confess to Rome my little secret, what will his reaction be?

“I don’t know how Mickey found out. I just know they’re coming. You need to end this before they do.” Tony walks up behind me and grabs both of my elbows, kissing the back of my head. “I can’t lose my baby sister.”

I drop my head and clench my jaw. This is beyond fucked up. “You’re not losing anyway. Just let me think.”

Tony backs away and I hear the door shut, but my mind still won’t focus. Between the whirlwind of emotions, I felt in Rome’s presence and the frustration and fear I now feel, I don’t know if I can even go on tonight. There is no way to get out of this now. I can’t kill the man I love, whose child I’m carrying. But I can’t let him, or his family kill me.

I sink into the vanity chair overwhelmed and speechless.

How the hell do I get out of this? My only option might be to actually stop him myself. But how?





## ROME

I stalk into Dominic's office in his home. Nanette, his wife, was gracious enough to welcome me and offer me a cup of tea, but I'm not in the mood. I know I fucked up badly with Leo a few nights ago, but Dom has been so busy handling family business I haven't even spoken to him yet. No doubt Leo told him all the details. It isn't like I had a choice. If I hadn't popped the guy Leo would be dead, or he'd have done it himself. Our mistake was not confirming it was L'ombra before following him, but why would anyone sneak around in a dark alley wearing all black? I just made a bad assumption.

Dominic sits at his desk staring at his computer screen. His sleeves are rolled up, tie loosened around his neck. His hair sticks up at odd angles and he looks tired, dark circles beneath his eyes. I've seen him in better sorts, which means something is out of place and stressing him. It's not often I see him this stressed though, so I know it's personal. And since his beautiful wife seemed happy as a clam, I know it's something to do with my family.

"Is it Matvey? Has he had a relapse?" My brother, shot and almost died on the street a few weeks ago, is at the forefront of everyone's thoughts right now.

"It's Dad... Sit," he orders, nodding at the chair across from his desk.

I move toward it and have a seat. The leather squeaks as I lower my full weight into the chair and Dominic rubs his forehead before reaching for a whiskey tumbler on a coaster on the corner of his desk. He takes a swig and raises an

eyebrow at me. I wave him off. I don't need a drink right now, though if the news about Dad is bad, I may stop by the bar. I trust Dom to lead the family once Dad passes, but no man is ready to send his father to the other side, no matter how old he gets.

"Dom, I—"

"You fucked up bad this time, Rome." He sets his glass down and I see we are going to talk business before personal matters. I'm ready for it. I have explanations and I know it's probably riled the Italians. There is nothing I can do except make it right moving forward.

"Yeah, I've been told by Leo enough times." I unbutton my suit coat and cross one leg over the other. "It wasn't out guy."

"No, he was a fucking cop. Works at that club for security in his off hours. He has a fucking baby on the way." Dominic's face is red with anger. We aren't cop killers, especially innocent ones, so I know why he's so angry.

"I didn't know, man." The news is shocking to me, but in the hunt for a deadly assassin there are always casualties of war. "We got that intel from Akers, and I sat on that place for days. There is no way to tell which of the guys who come and go from that club could be L'ombra. I chose a very likely subject by selecting the man who exited the rear entrance dressed in all black.)

"Well, you fucking chose wrong. Lucky for you, they have no cameras out back or you'd be on the front page of every newspaper, the headline of every evening news broadcast." Dominic acts angry with me, but I can tell something else is stirring in him he hasn't yet processed.

"Was he connected to the Italians?" I watch his face as he skims the computer screen again, but there is no hint of what he's actually thinking. My guess is Dad took a turn for the worse. Dad and Dom are close, closer than any of us. Dominic is the oldest and was there for our family when Mom passed. I know it will be hard on all of us when Dad goes, but Dom has big shoes to fill on top of grieving.

“There is no way to tell right now, but it doesn’t look like it. If so, we’d have seen some retaliatory strike of some kind. As it is, it’s being reported as a mugging. You did well taking his wallet.” Dom picks up his drink and sips it again.

“I didn’t, neither did Leo.” I try to recall that night clearly, but all I can think about is how I went to Bianca later and she calmed every ounce of anger I had over the situation.

“Hmm...” Dominic looks puzzled as he sets his empty glass down. “Well, someone mugged a dead man.”

“What’s really wrong here? You called me over to tell me off about this? It’s a non-issue since the Italians weren’t connected to the man.”

He glares at me. “Killing an innocent is not a non-issue, Roman. We don’t kill for killing’s sake. We do not make mistakes.” He rises slowly, pressing his hands against the smooth wood of his desk. “And one of New York’s finest is down because of you. You’re taking that to your grave. We might be organized criminals, but we are not monsters. Let that shit happen again, and you’ll see how the hand of God works. Because I won’t tolerate senseless violence.” His nostrils flare as he speaks, and I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes. It’s an honor thing and I get it; I just hate how he rains it down on me.

“Fine...” I cock my head sideways and loosen my collar. “So, what’s this about Dad?”

Dominic’s chin drops and he slowly sits back down. It’s like the anger drains out of his feet and leaves his face pale. I know what he’s going to say before he says it; I can tell it by his body language. Dad’s not doing well.

“They’ve given him only a few days. We all need to stop in and see him, spend as much time with him as we can. But we can’t let it affect our jobs. Death is a part of life, and we who remain must carry on. We have no choice. We owe it to those who have gone before us, who have built this family and this business.” All the words coming out of his mouth are rehearsed, something Dad told him to recite to us in the wake of his death.

“I’m going to miss him too, Dom.” My body rises but my heart sinks. “I’ll be on the street looking for my mark. I’ll stop by and see Dad later, maybe tomorrow. If you need anything, text me.”

There is nothing more shameful to a man than to be seen as weak, so I leave Dom’s office before I see that in him. I know he needs space to process, just like me. We have a few new lives joining our family soon. Leo’s gal will pop any time and Nanette just announced she’s expecting too. We’ll raise the next generation of Gusev men to take our place and one day we’ll all die too. Dominic has a lot to think about, all of us who he will lead and protect, and how he will do it without the wisdom of our father to guide him.

My shoulders feel heavy as I get in the car and wish I’d have taken him up on that drink. I could use it right about now. I have to stop a few places to get more intel on my shadow friend, and one of those places is Bianca’s dressing room again. We got interrupted by her brother yet again, and I had to sneak out. If Dad is right and she’s part of the Italian family, it only makes sense that she may have heard something about L’ombra. If so, I know she will tell me.

Still, I head to the bar for a drink. I need to loosen up a bit and put my priorities in order. They should be: my target, Dad, Bianca, but when I’m on edge I always put her first. That’s gotten me into some trouble by delaying my research at times, and it has to stop. She is more important to me than anything, but if I can’t protect my family from this risk, I won’t ever be able to protect her from future risks, and I plan to make her my wife—enemy or not. She might be Italian now, but what we have can’t be denied by anyone.

By the time I sit at the bar and order my first beer, I’m feeling a little more relaxed. Dad’s death is going to rip through our family and upset a lot of people, but us five brothers are prepared. We are so close to the epicenter we’re already prepared. We’ve done as much mourning as anyone can do before someone they love dies. Now we are just waiting for it to happen and trying to make Dad’s last days as memorable as possible.

I slurp my beer and watch the news, numbing myself. As images of the crime scene where I gunned down that guy in cold blood flash across the screen, I feel my chest tightening. It's a sob story about his wife and unborn child, one at home too. They bought a new home and were just moving in. I am an utter asshole for taking him out but why the hell did he run? It only makes me think he was a dirty cop in bed with someone he shouldn't have been, even if it wasn't the Italians.

"Another?" the keep asks, and I nod, pushing the empty bottle toward him.

Four beers later and a good buzz going, I drop a few twenties on the bar and stand. I haven't eaten all day and I'm tired. The alcohol hit me and made me feel a little dizzy but not bad. I have a bit of work to do before I can head to the nightclub to visit Bianca and finish our conversation. I head toward my car to find it's not there. It's been stolen or moved, or maybe I'm disoriented.

I suddenly feel weaker, like I've drunk twice as much as I know I had. I press my hand to my temple and feel a tickle on my wrist. My hand slides down the side of my face and I feel something soft protruding from the end of something hard—a dart. Fuck...

I pluck it from my neck and look at it as my vision begins to blur. I'm dizzy, so much so that all I can do is lean against a light post. The dart has red feathers just like the one I pulled out of Dimitri's chest. I hold it to my nose and inhale the same scent of saffron and sage too. It's a match to the one that killed him, which makes me feel sick to my stomach.

My legs are weak. I cling to the light post and hear footsteps behind me. I whip around and reach for my gun which I instantly realize is not on my hip. It's in my car where I left it when I visited Dominic. "Who are you? What do you want?" I know it's The Shadow. And I believe I know what he wants.

Something dark flashes in front of me and I try to follow the movement. I push off the light post and try to stand but a boot connects to the side of my face, making me reel around. I collapse to my hands and knees, coughing and dry heaving.

The attacker says nothing, and I feel powerless to defend myself. Isn't it bad enough they've shot me with a poison dart? They have to beat me too? I wonder how quickly the poison will set in. How fast I'll die.

"Stop... They'll come for you," I try to protest but another blow to my side forces the air out of my lungs. I feel a sharp pain in my rib and shout in pain, sweeping my arm out to connect to the attacker's leg. They drop to the ground and I hear a sharp exhale. "Bastard," I yell, bringing my hand up to strike them, but they kick out and knock my hand away. So using all my focus, I roll to the side, landing on my shoulder, and use my foot to provide a hard blow. I'm not sure where I hit them but I hear a gasp and a grunt of pain.

I'm weak, so weak I can't even move now. My energy is spent. The toxin is sucking the life out of me. I feel darkness creeping in. I'm in no pain though; it feels like a pleasant sleep sneaking up on me like a Sunday afternoon nap after a large meal with family.

Then I smell the perfume again, sweet saffron and sage. It's a woman's perfume. My attacker is female. That's why I got the dart. She can't overpower me physically; she needed some help in the form of chemicals. I lie there at her mercy, praying this isn't the end of me because now I can't even move.

I pry my eyes open, seeing the blurry outline of a petite figure dressed in all black. Fingers push my hair out of my eyes and touch my face gently. She stoops, her perfume strong as her lips brush my ear. "Stop hunting me, Roman, or you and your brothers die. Do you understand me? L'ombra is off-limits to you. Find someone else to hunt. I'd hate to have to kill you all."

Her whispers tickle my ear the way Bianca's breath does. I close my eyes again, forcing myself to memorize every hint of that scent. I hear footsteps retreat from where I'm lying on the sidewalk—she's limping. It was a warning, nothing more. Whatever she dosed me with won't kill me. If it was going to, she wouldn't have given me the warning for my brothers to back off too. She was sending a message and it is received loud and clear.

Except, she has no idea who she's up against. I know now that L'ombra is not a man; she's a very intelligent woman. She knows how to dose someone twice or three times her size to make them weak so she can fight. She knows how to mix toxins to kill instantly. And she is now injured, at least slightly. That limp tells me she'll be in pain for a while, and when I catch up to her I'll be ready for her.

I let my body relax. I have no clue how long it will take for the toxin to wear off, but someone will stumble upon me here and help. If not, I'll wake and message one of my brothers to come get me. Then, we'll start the search for the assassin with a new parameter in mind.

L'ombra is a woman, and even though I frown at killing women, I won't hesitate to slit that bitch's throat.





## BIANCA

I hurry away from where Rome lays in a puddle of blood. He won't die. I made sure to cut him enough to leave a mark but not enough to really harm him. It's the tranquilizer that has him knocked out. Me, however, I'm hurt, and bad. I feel my stomach cramping and tensing and the blood on my side from where I fell on my own fucking knife isn't a good sign.

Dragging one leg, I make it around the corner into the alley. Pain radiates down my side as I lift my shirt and see the cut. It's deep; I need stitches, though I probably won't bleed out as long as I get somewhere quickly. Roman really did a number on me even half-drunk and tranquilized. I knew he was strong, but I hoped the dose I gave him was enough.

I can't stay here though, because even if no one comes for him, I can't call my family in for help with him so close. They will assume I've failed because of him and they will go after him. Seeing as how near he is to me, I need to put space between us before I get help. So I limp on, four blocks, then another few. When I feel faint, like I'm going to pass out if I don't stop, I lean against a building and pull my phone from my pocket with my bloody hand and dial Soren's number.

When he picks up I hear loud music and a woman making horrid sex noises in the background. It's disgusting, but I have no choice. I know he's the closest to where I am. "What? You're sort of interrupting." He sounds angry, but this is the exact reason we have a rule in place that no call goes unanswered.

“I’m hurt,” I grunt, sliding down the brick wall. I don’t know if I’ll be conscious when they get here, but they can ping my location if they need to. “Get help.”

“Fuck, Bee... You had to go and get yourself hurt?” Soren sounds upset but understanding. “Where are you?”

“Hey!” I hear the woman in the background who is now quiet and sounds upset. I can always count on my brothers to be there for me.

“I’m not sure. You’ll—” I wince as my hips hit the ground and pain shoots through my side. “You’ll have to ping my phone. Please.... I’m bleeding bad.”

“Stay with me,” he says and I hear shuffling in the background but I can’t stay with him. I’m so lightheaded the darkness takes me and I drop my phone.

The next thing I know I’m in a car with two of my brothers leaning over me dotting on me. Tony sits on one side, Micah on the other. Soren is driving. I blink my eyes open only to clamp them shut again as headlights flash in my face. I moan and try to move, but someone has their hands gripping my side hard.

“Move faster, Sor. She’s bad.” Tony pushes hair out of my face but I’m in and out of consciousness. Only when the car stops and they drag me out do I fully rouse. I cry out in pain, but they don’t stop.

“Get her up here,” Soren says, and I’m coherent enough to see a glowing blue sign with a white cross on it. They’ve brought me to the clinic, which is good. They’ll be able to stitch me up and give me blood too. It might be dangerous for the baby though, so I need to get the doc alone.

“Boys... please. I’m not dead yet. Just take it easy. It fucking hurts.” With my arms draped around Micah and Tony’s shoulders, I try to keep my feet under me. The doctor—Chip—greet us at the door and hurries us into the back where he has a room prepared. It’s so bright I squint against the light but let them guide me to the table in the center with even brighter lights shining down onto it. I feel hands on my clothing,

working to pull it off, and I attempt to help only to have. My arms heaved over my head as my shirt is torn off.

“Fuck’s sake, Bee. Look at you.” Soren tosses my bloody shirt as he helps me onto the bed. There is so much blood caked to my side I can’t see what’s cut and what’s just stained, but the doctor clicks his tongue.

“We need sutures. Get back boys.”

Never in my life have I been injured like this. I’ve seen my share of cuts and bruises, but most of them were on my brothers’ bodies. The only thing I can say is that Rome was stronger than I thought, or maybe I just let my feelings for him make me weak. I was hesitant to strike, didn’t want to hurt him too badly.

I lie on the bed on my side in just my bra and panties as the doctor works, washing me then stabbing me with a needle as long as my fucking arm. At least the pain is gone as he stitches me up. Soren and Tony talk quietly, and I have no idea where Micah went but I don’t see him. I’m in a lot of pain still in other parts of my body too, which concerns me.

“Uh, guys can I speak to the doctor alone?” With the cramping I’m having, I fear the baby is hurting too, and I don’t want to lose it.

“What the hell happened? You never get hurt. You never get close enough to your target to get hurt. Was it Gusev?” Soren leans over me, brooding. His angry features are only communicating how he worries about me, nothing more, but they’re unnecessary.

“Please, Soren, it’s female stuff. I’m hurting. We can talk later.” For good measure I clutch my lower abdomen and he steps back. None of my brothers want to watch me get a pelvic exam, at least, I hope not. And I’m right. They back off and scowl at me, but they leave me alone.

“We’ll be back.” Tony smooths some hair out of my face before he follows, but then I’m alone with Chip.

“Everything okay? Where do you have pain?” His fingers palpate my hip and side. I roll to my back and try to relax. It

isn't like I haven't seen a doctor before, or that I'm shy in my undergarments. I'm just nervous about my brothers finding out I'm pregnant. That will be a career killer immediately, and someone else will step in to kill Roman and his brothers. I can't let that happen.

So I do the only thing I can think of. I bluff. "Can you reach my pants?" I wiggle my fingers as he bends to pick them up. They're soaked in blood, but I manage to pull my knife out of the pocket slowly without him seeing. Then I grab his shirt and put the knife to his neck and stare him in the eye. I may not be stronger than Rome, but this guy is a joke.

"If you tell my brothers anything, I will kill you. Do you understand?"

His throat constricts, and he stares at my hand as he nods. Then I watch his Adam's apple bob and he raises his hands in surrender. We've been here several times. He's Mickey's guy. Which means he's used to shit like this anyway. It also means I need another threat to make sure my secrets are well guarded.

"Mickey either. Got it? I will gut you like the pig you are if anyone finds out."

"Threats aren't necessary, Bianca. You have doctor-patient privilege." He takes a step back but leaves his hands in the air, and I keep the knife poised to act at any second. "What is it?"

The cramps are bad, bad enough I fear I may be losing the baby. I took that kick hard and the fall even harder and even though the amount of anxiety I have about this is irrational, I can't stop it. I didn't realize how much I want this baby until now.

"I'm pregnant, and I..." My eyes well up with tears. "I'm afraid." My hand trembles with the knife in hand and I can barely see.

Chip takes my hand gently by the wrist and lowers it. "You don't need that knife, hun. I'm not going to speak a word to anyone." I feel the knife slip from my grip and he cautiously lays me back on the bed. "You need to stay lying down. I was going to give you a few units of blood, but I appreciate you

telling me you are pregnant. We need to be even more careful now because blood transfusions can be dangerous to a fetus.”

I feel weak and vulnerable. I can't lay here sobbing on a table, covered in blood, almost naked, with a stranger touching me. This isn't L'ombra. This is a weak woman who is falling apart. It isn't me.

“Please, help me. I don't want to lose the baby. No one knows about it.” I am blubbering but I keep my voice as quiet as I can. I have no idea where my brothers are, but if they are within earshot, I'll lose everything.

“Okay, take a deep breath. I'm going to get an ultrasound machine and I'll send the guys away. I'm keeping you here overnight and there is nothing they can do.”

I snatch his wrist and hold it with every ounce of strength I have left. “They cannot know.”

“They won't know a thing, Bianca. Remember, doctor-patient privilege.” He takes my hand from his wrist and walks away and I'm left shivering on the table while he's gone. The room is much like any other exam room, but I have a feeling they don't usually see stab victims like me here, let alone perform surgery like the one I just had. At least the pain at the laceration site is gone. Whatever he numbed me with really worked. I try to focus on things around me to keep my mind calm, but with the blood loss my eyes won't really focus. I'm tired and I have to fight to stay awake.

When Chip returns he pushes a large machine. He also has a load of blankets and a gown draped over the machine, which he helps me into, then covers me to my waist. When I'm situated back on the bed, he plugs the machine in and stands at my side. “I need to start an IV. Since we can't do blood, we will do a drip of saline. Your liver will definitely help pick up the slack, but you'll feel weak for a few days. That's okay, though because you'll have to do light duty. No more chasing bad guys.” He smiles awkwardly and I can tell he isn't very informed about what I do.

“So the baby?” I ask, still shivering. It's cold as fuck in here, almost like it's a morgue not a clinic.

“Let’s see the little guy.” Chip turns to the ultrasound machine and pushes buttons and I raise the gown up over my belly. I’m not really showing much, but I can feel the way my stomach is more firm than normal. He turns and with gloved hands presses on my stomach gently and I wince. “Does that hurt?”

“Yeah, like a bruise.”

He touches and pushes, and nods. “Based on the fundal measurement, I’d say you’re almost twelve weeks. You’ll be showing before too long.” He turns and grabs the ultrasound paddle. It’s not news to me. I knew something was going on a long time ago; I just never said a thing. I hold my tongue as he pushes the paddle covered in lube across my belly. The concentration on his face worries me until it softens and he smiles.

The soft *whir, whir, whir*, of a heartbeat hits my ears in the sweetest sound I’ve heard in months. Tears burst from my eyes and I cover my face. “Oh god... Oh my god.” I sob and shake my head. “He’s okay?”

“Actually, he’s a she... or at least from what I can tell. It’s still early to determine sex, but within the next two to four weeks you’ll know for certain. I’m usually not wrong though.” He sounds happy and I lower my hands. “Healthy and growing... Your pain is likely just from shock. Your body needs blood and rest. And with a baby on board, you will really need to listen to my directions carefully. Alright?” Chip continues to smooth the paddle around my stomach, and I watch the screen as he does. I see my perfect little one growing inside of me and I melt.

Rome has no idea what he almost did and it’s all my fault. I should have just told him. I need to tell him, but I don’t know how to get out of this pickle I’m in. This rock and a hard place situation is getting worse by the day. How do I decide whose side I’m on before anyone has to die?





# ROME

I awaken to a nudge from a boot and pry my eyes open to see through a blurry haze a man standing over me. “You alright, buddy?” Either I’m still very drugged or he’s very drunk, because he sways back and forth like a skyscraper in a windstorm.

“Fine...” I wince as I try to force myself off the sidewalk and feel the pinch of pain in my side. The ground is wet, a puddle of my blood beneath me. It looks like a lot, but if it were that bad I wouldn’t be waking up. L’ombra did a number on me, but she didn’t kill me. I say she because I know now that our little assassin is definitely female. I smelled the perfume again and I know it’s a woman.

“You don’t look so good. Should I call an ambulance?” My drunk friend tries to crouch next to me but falls over and ends up planting the palm of his hand in my blood too.

“I got it... Okay? Don’t call anyone. I’m fine.” I wince again but force myself to sit. My clothing clings to my skin, stuck there and dried in place. I’m not sure how long I was out but it’s not dawn yet, so not that long. The dart she drugged me with lays in the puddle of my blood too. There’s no chance of lifting a fingerprint or any DNA now, but I slide it into my breast pocket.

“Well, I might need you to call me an ambulance,” the man slurs, looking at his hands. “I’m covered in blood.”

It appears my hero is about as intelligent as the lamppost I lean back on. I watch him struggle to his feet and stagger down the

sidewalk mumbling something about needing a drink and I reach for my phone. Every injury she inflicted was done to send a message. She had no intention of killing me, though if she knew what was good for her she would have.

It all makes sense now, why the assassin kills with darts or bullets, never a knife or a physical altercation. A woman could never overpower a man in a fair fight. That's why she drugged me to make sure I wasn't as strong or coherent. She even waited until I left a bar, where she knew I'd be drinking. This woman is smart, very smart, but I'm smarter. She has no clue the storm coming for her now that I know it's a woman. It's no wonder we've made zero progress on tracking L'ombra. We've been mistakenly thinking it was a man the whole time.

Bracing myself for more pain, I dial Leo's number and hold the phone to my ear. Dom has too much on his plate with Dad getting sicker, and I need someone who will come straight away. I may not be dying immediately, but I know I will if I don't get this stitched up, or infection will set in at the very least. I am still too groggy to drive so Leo is my best bet. He picks up on the fourth ring, sounding like I awakened him from a deep slumber.

"Yeah, Rome... Talk."

"I'm at the bar... Well a block away. I got attacked." I suck in a deep breath to stave off the worst of the pain as I apply pressure to the slowly seeping wound. "The assassin is a woman. She drugged me and got the jump."

"Fuck, man..." I hear rustling in the background and know he's dressing. "Is it bad? How bad? Should I call Brewster?"

A car passes driving a bit faster than is legal. The engine's roar makes it difficult for me to hear him as his voice cuts off for a moment but I hear him say, "...need stitches?"

"Yeah... call him, but don't get anyone too worked up. I'm not dying. Just got a good cut." The phone drops from my shoulder where I pinched it to my head and clatters on the sidewalk. I don't even have the energy to pick it up. My head still swims with whatever tranquilizer she used to knock me

out. I stare down at it and see the time is almost two a.m. I was out for quite a while. No wonder Leo was sleeping.

I rest my head against the lamppost behind me and close my eyes. My right cheek is throbbing now, probably from that boot to the face. That bitch doesn't know what's coming to her. It's personal now. I don't generally enjoy killing women because they're the softer part of our species. But this one? I'm going to soak in every second of this kill when it happens. She's slaughtered dozens of our people over the years and now it's payback time.

The anger in my chest physically hurts. I'm not sure if it's my blood pressure or the way that toxin works, but I feel like I need to keep myself calm or I'll stroke out. I cough hard, jerking and making more blood seep out of the stab wound. It's like she knew right where to stab me so she wouldn't hit any vital organs or blood vessels. If I had to guess, I'd say she was raised in the world of organized crime, or close to it. Prepared for this exact duty. No one expects a female. We don't see them coming.

I don't see Leo coming either, because I pass out again. But when strong hands grip my biceps and start to hoist me up, I let him know I'm not happy about it. I let out a loud shout of pain and protest his movements, but find myself on my feet, bracing my body against the lamp post as Leo's fingers tear my clothing.

"You're right. It's not horrible, but you have to work with me. You are still bleeding and there's a giant puddle down there." He drapes my arm over his shoulder and we start toward the car but I find my right side isn't working so well. It's hard to move my leg like normal. I try, but I lean on him hard and limp.

"Fuck's sake, this is shit." It's hard to breathe, hard to move. Pain shoots down my side and into my chest making me take it slow. One step at a time, we make it to his car and he opens the door with a grunt. I collapse into the passenger seat and he shoves a towel against my side.

“Don’t bleed on my shit,” he snaps, but it’s not like I can help it. He’s draped a blanket over the leather seat but it will be soaked through just from me sitting here. I’m drenched. When he climbs in the driver’s seat and pulls away, he says, “I’m taking you to Dom’s. Brewster is there anyway. We’ll get you stitched up but Dom will have questions.”

“Of course he will.” I cough hard and feel blood soaking the new, clean towel. “It’s nearly three a.m. and I’m bleeding out.”

“You’re not bleeding out, okay... But you’re right. He’s not going to understand why a woman got the better of you.”

“Oh, he’ll understand when I show him the dart. The one that took Dimitri out got left on the sidewalk in our haste. But this one—” I pat my breast pocket “—will prove to anyone how she got the best of me. Brewster can take samples of the toxin and find out what it is.”

I lay my head back and rest while he drives, in and out of consciousness the whole time. In my conscious moments I replay the fight step by step as best as I can remember it. The scent of that perfume, the way she was light on her feet—and light in general. She weighs practically nothing. I swear she used some sort of martial arts on me too. I don’t even remember feeling the dart hit the side of my face.

My hand goes instinctively to the spot on my head right in front of my ear where the dart pierced me. It’s numb. I can’t feel a thing there right now, which means she used a powerful anesthesia on the tip of that dart, similar to the way a mosquito numbs its victim before drawing blood. This shadow killer has it all figured out down to the last detail. I can’t believe I never saw her coming.

“We’re here,” Leo announces, putting the car in park. The sudden jolt from movement to a stopped position makes me lurch forward and the seatbelt holds me in place. I don’t even remember buckling it, which means Leo did that for me too. This drug is so powerful it’s making me forget things. So maybe I would remember her and the entire attack if I hadn’t been shot with her dart.

It's another struggle once Leo gets me out of the car. I'm bigger than him. It's impossible for him to carry me, but I do my best to use my legs and propel myself up Dominic's stairs and inside his house. There's a woman here with towels and a wheelchair, waiting at the door. I don't recognize her, maybe one of Brewster's nurses. He's a vet, not a doctor, but he's got staff to help.

So slumping into the wheelchair, I'm relieved I don't have to walk. She pushes the chair quickly through the house as Leo walks beside me taking the bloody towel and replacing it with a clean one. They chat quietly, but I can't make out what they're saying. My breathing is shallow now. It feels like I'm barely getting enough air, and there's a pressure on my chest that tells me things aren't good. I can hear how fast my heart is beating as the blood thrums past my eardrums.

"Well what do we have here?" Brewster is ready, hands held in front of himself as if he's cradling a baby, but they're clean and gloved. His hair is covered with a blue paper cap, and there's a mask on his face, but I know it's him.

"Stab wound. He needs to be stitched up so the bleeding stops." Leo helps the nurse position the chair next to the dining table of all places. With Dad now occupying one of Dominic's rooms and Matty taking up the room designated for medical needs, I suppose there isn't really another place for this. I get my feet under me and start to rise, and Leo is there to guide my fall as I crash down onto the table. He lifts my legs and rolls me to the side then tears my shirt away.

It's cold, and Brewster's fingers feel like ice. He gives me a few jabs with a needle and then another in the bicep, I'm assuming antibiotics. I try to keep my eyes open and watch him as he works but I'm tired. I do notice when Dominic comes in though. He smells like cigars and whiskey. I feel like he never sleeps. He always looks fresh even at three-thirty a.m.

"He got the best of you?" Dominic stands by the table leaning over me next to Brewster. I can't feel the stitches going in but I feel his hands pressing on my side. I know in just a few

minutes he'll have me sewn shut and clean and I can collapse on Dominic's couch and rest.

"She..." I mutter, wincing as Brewster pushes down hard on my rib cage.

"Mmmm, she..." Dominic sounds curious. "A woman took you out?"

I reach for the dart in my pocket to realize it's not there. Leo tore my shirt off. My brain fog is getting worse. I know it's from the drug. "In my shirt pocket, there's a dart." Talking makes me cough again, and I can't help but wonder if it's from the kick to the face, maybe she clipped my neck too. Or maybe the toxin didn't just make me sleepy. Maybe I am dying.

"Here, Dom." Leo reaches over me, passing the bloody dart with red feathers to my oldest brother. Dominic studies it, then brings it to his nose and smells it. He looks down at me.

"Perfume... Saffron and..." He smells it again and says, "Sage." Then he hands it back to Leo. "We'll run some tests on it, find out what she shot you with."

"We've had it all wrong, Dom. We've been searching for a man. That's why we haven't tracked her down." I cough a bit and close my eyes. "We can draw her out, set a time to meet, put Leo and Sven on the rooftops. We'll get her. She'll go down once for all."

Someone pats my shoulder and Dominic says, "I'll leave that to you and Sven. I have my hands full with Dad right now... Brewster, get him sewn up and look into that dart. We need to know what she dosed him with and we need to know tonight."

I listen to his footsteps retreat and try to stay awake, but it's impossible. Even before Brewster is finished I'm dozing again and dreaming of how I'm going to take L'ombra out. Whatever happens, my revenge has to be swift. This is personal now, and I intend to work fast.

As soon as my body allows me...



## BIANCA

**M**y sites are trained on the head of one of the Gusev brothers who stands in the front window of the bookstore across the street. I lay stretched over the gravel roof peering through the scope of my rifle watching what's happening. I've given Roman his warning, though I hated doing it. But it was necessary. Still, I hope to speak with him tonight. I know his family is hunting me, though they don't know who I am yet, but I need to get through to him. Our baby's life depends on it.

I didn't have to bring my rifle, either, but if I had left without it, Tony would have followed me. I told him I was hunting, and I am. I'm just not planning to kill. I can't. Roman is the father of my child. How could I kill my child's father? What would I tell her when she grows up? How would I raise her without his support? And what would that say about me as a person. Yes, I'm a trained killer, but I can't fathom this. Not at all.

I watch and wait until one by one they leave. I haven't seen the oldest, Dominic. His leadership over the family probably has him busy elsewhere, but the others were here, all three of them and Rome. They had some sort of meeting, maybe about Alexsi and his impending death, or maybe about the hunt for L'ombra. But they're all driving away now, and I need to see him. It's been almost a week and I can't keep putting this conversation off. Not with the way my body is changing.

I pack up the gun and carry it down to the ground floor, stashing it near the dumpster before crossing the street. The



light inside the bookstore is still on, illuminating the windows in front. I can see Rome standing in the center of the store leaning on a bookshelf. I've never been in the building, though I've lain on that rooftop a few times to spy on them. If Tony knew they were almost all in one place tonight, he'd have had me blow the entire thing up, take them all out, but I didn't tell him I was coming. And I didn't know they'd all be here.

The bell jingles as I open the door and walk in. The scent of musty books greets me, making my stomach churn a little. I'm dressed in leggings and a baggy sweater, not my typical show attire that Rome normally sees me in. So when he turns to look at me and seems surprised and confused, I smile and wiggle my fingers at him. Recognition dawns on him and his face relaxes as another man, larger and darker than him, rounds the corner of the shelf.

Dominic.

I swallow hard, not realizing he was even here. He has to have been in the building before the others even arrived. I watched them all come in and leave. They entered and exited alone.

"Can we help you?" he asks, tucking his suit coat behind his weapon and no doubt it's loaded and he will use it on me. It's late, past ten p.m., and the shop closes at six. I have no business here, except to see Rome, but even those words seem to elude me.

"It's okay, Dom. She's with me." Rome waves off his brother's very real concern and turns to take my hand. Dominic, however, gives me a once over. He's curious and suspicious and he fucking should be. I'm the one he is hunting. I'm the dangerous criminal who may take his life very soon. And the way he looks at me says maybe he knows that.

"Hey," I mumble, letting Rome stand between me and his brother. If he knew who I am, would they kill me now?

"Who's your friend?" Dominic lets his coat cover his piece, but he stares at me with a hard glare.

"This, dear brother, is Bianca Moretti." Rome hooks his arm around my waist and pulls me against his side. I'm sore still,

the gash on my skin still healing. I have bruises too, but those are all carefully covered with very good makeup that I've proven will not rub off this time. It's stage makeup, not my normal stuff. I can't afford a slip up, not now that I know they're hunting me.

"The nightclub singer..." Dominic's eyes narrow at me. I have no clue how much they know about L'ombra, except that I've clearly given away the fact that the shadow is a woman. Rome had to have figured that out himself last week.

"Yes, I sing at Flatiron." I try to force an innocent smile but my heart is hammering in my chest. I never intended to see Dominic tonight or face two of them in a fight if things go pear shaped.

"She's the one I told you about... Look, I'll get the intel, and we'll find the... uh. We'll get our guy." Rome is talking in code. The meeting of brothers had to be about me and how to hunt me down. My brain switches out of personal mode into information gathering mode. If they are hunting me I need to know everything they know, so I listen intently.

Dominic pries his eyes away from me and turns to Rome. "The contract must be canceled. Do you understand? We can't have any mess ups. This business depends on it and all four of your brothers are relying on you to follow the instructions and terminate her."

Her... he means me. He's not talking about a rogue employee who did something worthy of being terminated. He's talking about killing me. He's talking about me being a contract killer and Mickey's orders... It's exactly as Soren and Tony said. They are hunting me and I'm hunting them and if they succeed before me, I know what that means.

"I got it, Dom." Rome nods at his brother who seems to hesitate to leave. He follows Dominic to the door and locks up and I sink into a small, padded armchair near the children's books. Rome seems very confident that he can and will follow those orders to "terminate her." It scares me. I never meant to fall in love with him. I can't say that I never meant to lie to

him or trick him, because I absolutely did. But I didn't know I would fall for him.

"Now, how did you find me? I never told you I owned this bookstore." He is completely oblivious. He pulls me to my feet and hugs me against his body and I'm acutely aware of the bulge in my belly as he presses his pelvis against mine. I pray he can't feel it yet, that he only assumes I'm bloated or something.

I try to smile, finding that faking this is harder than I thought it would be. I came here to talk about who I really am and what is happening, but now I'm worried I never can. That he will only ever have the desire to kill me.

"I followed you... I had to see you." Wrapping my arms around his thick shoulders, I relax in his embrace. I'm in a deadly game and I hate it. I can't stay. If I do they'll find me out and kill me, or Mickey will for not following his orders. But I can't leave. If I do, my brothers and Mickey will kill them anyway. I'm in a damn catch twenty and I can't think of a reasonable way out.

"I was thinking of you too. Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow evening. So this is a pleasant surprise." He kisses me in a long, tender, sensual kiss. His teeth drag across my lower lip and I pull away.

"Your brother didn't seem happy to see me." I bat my eyes at him and see his confusion, furrowed brow, drawn lips.

"How did you know he's my brother?"

A jolt of adrenaline shoots through my chest, but I maintain my calm expression. I'm an entertainer, and I'm trained to be in all sorts of situations. My stage face is my money maker while singing and while killing. Sadly, it just means I'm lying to the man I love even more, giving him even more reasons why he should just kill me like his brothers want.

"You look just like him, silly. Unless he's a cousin...?" I toy with the back of his head, scratching through his hairline and he grins at me.

“I’ve never heard that I looked like him, Sven maybe, but not Dominic.” He kisses me again and grinds on me. I feel his dick thickening in his slacks and it makes me want him. It’s not why I came, but I can’t talk to him about why I’m here now, not until I figure out how to make him see I’d never hurt him.

“I’ve never met your brothers, but I’m sure you all resemble each other.” His lips travel across my jawline to my neck, where he nips at my skin.

“If you came a bit earlier, you’d have met them all. They will all love you. I mean, what’s not to love? You’re gorgeous and smart and funny.” Rome’s hands massage and knead my body and I have to hold my breath to keep from wincing when he touches my wound. I can’t let him see that. I didn’t come here for sex, and now I’m risking him finding out exactly how wounded I am. I risk him asking why, putting the pieces together. I have to take charge of this or he will expose me, and then everything will fall apart.

“Well, they can’t have me. Only you can.” I pull away and turn my back on him but he’s there instantly, pushing me over the back of the armchair.

“I can have you?” He’s rough and much stronger than me. I know I normally love this, but he doesn’t understand. He can’t know, so I can’t even explain it.

I yelp in pain, but I know he gets pleasure out of that. It’s our game—me playing submissive vixen while he gets off on dominating me. His fingers wrap around my hip bones, only inches from the cut on my side and I feel his dick grinding against my ass. Any other day I’d love this, but I’m so sore.

“Rome...” I start to protest but he thinks I’m playing his game.

“Yeah... shut up,” he yanks my leggings down. In this corner of the store the light is dimmer, maybe because they were closed hours ago. I pray he doesn’t see the bruising there because I never covered that with makeup yet.

“No, Rome...” I whimper, gripping the arm of the chair as he brings a hand down hard on my left hip. The smacking sound is pleasurable, as is the sting from the assault. I moan and suck in a deep breath. I like that, as long as he can avoid my injuries. I’m surprised he can even move like this with his side jabbed the way I left him.

“You like that? You want me to beat you a little. Maybe tie you up and gag you too...” He smacks me again this time harder, and I wince and whimper.

“God... Rome...” I claw at the soft padding on the chair, torn between begging him for more and begging him to stop. “Shit.”

“Yeah, you’re a good little bitch, aren’t you? You want me to smack you?” The crisp slap on my ass coupled with the stinging makes me shudder.

“Fuck, you know what I like.” The back of the chair pushes into my ribcage. I’m careful not to lean too much farther into it. I don’t want it rubbing against the cut I have or my belly. I’m not sure about sex while pregnant, but I am certain forcing my stomach down on that hard surface wouldn’t be good for the baby. So I resist, pushing back against him, and Rome responds, grabbing my hair and pulling it.

My neck arches backward as I slowly straighten. “Fighting me now? Usually you let me just dominate you.” He breathes hot breath against my cheek. It smells like whiskey and tobacco, like he always does. I pant and gasp for breath and bite my lip. I want him—there’s no doubt about that—I just want it my way, safely.

His teeth sink into my neck and both of his hands reach up under my arms and grab my tits. I’m surprised he hasn’t even questioned why they’re larger. I can tell every day that they’re growing. But he eats this up, kneading them and grinding into me. I grab one of his hands and force it lower to my clit. He swirls his fingers in the moisture and then brings them to my lips so I can suck them clean.

“Fuck me, Rome...” I growl and his hand moves quickly. He smacks my pussy, slapping it so hard it makes me jolt.

“Yeah? You like it?”

“Fuck...” I whimper, gasping as he does it again. His hand comes down on my clit and lips, slapping me hard. I whimper and shake and his other arm holds me up. I lift a leg and rest it on the chair and he does it again, and again. It stings and stimulates me at the same time. My pussy is raw, screaming for him to penetrate me, and he just keeps spanking it. I’m so turned on I could come just from his smacking, but he doesn’t make me suffer such a moderate orgasm.

Rome unzips his fly and pulls his cock out, forcing me down over the chair again as he rubs it against me. My fingers go to my clit instinctively and I rub. I’m tender, almost too tender to touch, but the moment he slides into me and starts fucking me, I am on the edge. His cock fills me and pushes to my back wall and he fucks me hard.

“Shit... oh god,” I moan and rub myself. It’s incredible the way he makes me feel. I wince and whimper and then I forget everything, even his hands as they grip my body right on my bruises and pull me toward him.

I come hard and the convulsions make me forget everything except his cock in me. I wail out the pleasure and ride out the orgasm. His dick explodes, flooding me with hot sticky cum and enjoyment. This is the hottest sex we’ve had in weeks and I’m ready to pass out. My blood pressure has to be through the roof.

He pulls out and I straighten and lean against him. His dick is hard against my ass, but I know he’s satisfied. He kisses my neck as he squeezes my tit again and I feel him draining out of me and down my thigh. My mind is a whirl of thoughts that I can’t express. I can’t tell him I’m the assassin he’s hunting. Can’t tell him I’m having his baby without also confessing I’m hired to kill him. Can’t tell my family about the baby either. I’m damned if I do, and damned if I don’t, and I hate every second of it.

He pulls away and I hear him zip his zipper, so I bend and pull my leggings up, not even attempting to clean the mess. When—and I don’t say if because now that I’ve met Dominic it’s

almost a certainty—he asks me to attend his father’s funeral, Mickey will expect me to kill them. I have to decide what to tell him and how I will do it before then.

If not, Mickey will kill us all.





## ROME

**D**ad lays in bed struggling to breathe and it's hard to watch. One diagnosis has led to another and then another, and after the grim prognosis, we all resigned ourselves to the fact that he needs to be comfortable more than we need him to stay here. The drugs they have him on are heavy and so is my heart. I wish Bianca was here to sit at my side and make me feel more human—not the machine I am.

I hold his hand and look at the thin skin and wrinkles. I can see the blue veins and vessels that snake beneath its surface toward his fingertips. These hands have seen a lifetime of pain and heartache. They've wrought victories and fought and lost difficult battles. They raised four sons, buried two wives, held and let go of fortunes, all in the sixty-nine years they've existed. There is so much wisdom and hope my father can impart to us, and he has.

The rhythmic whir and beep of the machines they have him hooked up to keep me company in the otherwise silent room as I think about how my life should be going right now. Most men are settled down with a woman long before they're my age, but my duty to my family has always come first. It makes me question some choices I've made, and some that were made for me too.

As I sit here next to my dying father, I can't help but think about the path I have chosen in life. Growing up in a mafia family, I never had much of a choice. It was expected of me to follow in my father's footsteps, to continue the family business once he was gone. I was groomed from a young age

to be a killer, to make tough decisions, and to always put the family's interests above my own.

But as I sit here watching my father take his last breaths, I can't help but wonder if it was all worth it. The power, the money, the respect—it all seems so trivial now. All I can think about is the time I wasted, the relationships I ruined, and the people I hurt in the pursuit of this life.

I look down at my hands, calloused and scarred from years of violence and bloodshed. These hands have taken lives, destroyed families, and caused so much pain. But they have also protected my family, upheld our honor, and ensured our survival in a world that is not kind to those like us. I am conflicted, torn between my duty and my conscience.

As I sit there, lost in thought, a nurse walks into the room, interrupting my inner turmoil. She checks my father's vitals and adjusts some of the machines. I watch her as she works, admiring the care and attention she gives to my father. For a moment, I envy her. She gets to save lives, to make a difference in the world. What have I ever done that was truly meaningful?

The nurse smiles at me and leaves the room again and me to my thoughts. I will kill the assassin and defend our family, but after that I want a family. I want a wife who will give me children and I want to raise my children to take my place in this legacy when I'm gone. I'm not getting any younger.

My thoughts are interrupted once again when my father's hand twitches in mine. I look up at him and see his eyes slowly opening. His breathing becomes more labored and I can see the pain etched on his face. I reach for the button to call the nurse, but he grips my hand tighter, stopping me.

“Son,” he whispers, his voice raspy and weak. “I'm glad you're here.”

I squeeze his hand gently, feeling the weight of his words sink in. Despite everything, I am still his son, and he is still my father. His eyes are clouded with pain and regret, and I can see the weight of his own choices bearing down on him.

“Dad,” I say softly. “I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

He takes a deep breath, his chest heaving, and I can tell that he is struggling to get the words out.

“You have to...protect the family,” he says, his voice barely audible. “You have to...”

He trails off, unable to continue. I know what he is trying to say.

His dying wish is that my brothers and I bind together to commit to his dream of seeing our family become the most powerful in New York. We are well on our way. The Italians are floundering, throwing out every last-ditch attempt to get in our way, but we will overcome.

“I know, Dad...”

The machine starts to beep loudly, a long monotone chime piercing the silence. My heart races as I watch the numbers on the monitor start to drop. Brewster rushes in followed by a few nurses. They start to work frantically on my father.

I stand back helplessly, observing their frantic attempts to keep him alive. I don’t think I can take it if he dies right now and my mind is full of ‘what ifs’.

Suddenly, his eyes snap open and he looks right at me with an intensity that leaves me speechless. He knows what’s about to happen—he knows that death is coming for him, but he refuses to accept it without a fight.

Brewster barks out orders and the nurses follow them. Dad coughs and heaves, his body lurching on the table. I watch as his face contorts with pain and his eyes roll back into his head. I can hear the frantic beeping of the heart monitor and the sound of my own heart pounding in my chest.

The chaos in the room seems to slow down as my father gasps for breath. I move closer to him, placing my hand on his shoulder. The warmth of his skin seeps through my fingers, and I can feel the tremors wracking his body. Nurses listen to his breathing sounds through their stethoscopes and shout words I don’t understand, medication doses and vital stats. I

lean in closer, trying to hear what they're saying, but it's all a blur. My thoughts are jumbled, my emotions running high.

As the minutes tick by, his breathing becomes shallow and labored. The beeping of the heart monitor grows weaker, slower. Brewster prepares a needle and injects its contents into my father's IV port. And things calm down. The beeping of the heart monitor slows down to a steady rhythm, and my father's breathing stabilizes. The nurses exchange relieved glances, and Brewster pats me on the back. I can't help but let out a sigh of relief.

Dad's eyes stay fixed on mine, and I know that he's not out of the woods yet. He squeezes my hand weakly, and I can feel the strength draining from his grip.

"Dad," I whisper, my throat tight with emotion. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere." I sit back down in the chair as one of the nurses leaves. Brewster lingers. He knows his place is to make my father comfortable until he dies, and he won't stray far from the room now.

He manages a weak smile, and I can see the love and pride in his eyes. "I know, son," he rasps. "You're strong. You'll carry on our legacy."

I take his hand again and hold it, feeling how weak he seems now. I remember a time as a boy I thought my father was the strongest man I knew. At times I still think that—that it took a man of his stature to rise to the occasion all those times life thought it would defeat him, and only in his aged state will it defeat him. Only because sickness weakened his mortal frame.

"Dad..." I am plagued by things I can't even begin to express now. Things that only the death of a loved one can bring to the surface.

"Son..." he coughs and I fear another fit is coming, but he calms down.

"How did you know Mom was the one?" I watch his face as he relaxes and smiles. He's talked about seeing her again when he passes and though I'm not sure what I believe about the afterlife, I hope for his sake, he's right.

“I knew she was the one...” His chest rattles as he speaks. “When she told me she will kill me if I crossed her.” He tries to laugh, but it turns into a violent coughing fit again, this time complete with Brewster mopping blood off his chest and lips as he recovers his breath. After a few minutes of rasping and sucking air he continues. “I needed a strong woman to match my strong responsibility, and your mother was it.”

I squeeze his hand harder and sigh. That’s exactly who Bianca is to me, the strong woman who matches me toe-to-toe.

“Rome, your father needs to rest.” Brewster purses his lips. “Let’s give him a bit of time to sleep.” The old vet backs away and I take his hint, though it’s difficult knowing this may be the last time I see him alive. I pat his leg as I stand and his eyes flutter shut.

I’m met in the hallway by Sven. The look on his face is not pleasant. I know he’s got bad news, but at least I know it isn’t about Dad this time.

“What is it?” I rub my forehead, and try to push the thought of my dying father out of my mind. It’s going to happen and no one can stop it. All we can do is move on now and keep this family together.

“We lost Trip...”

Trip—a manager at one of our restaurants—I wonder what happened. “How? Why?”

“All I know is that the same sort of dart used to kill Dimitri, to tranquilize you, it was used on him too.” Sven jams his hands into his jeans pockets and shakes his head. “He was moving precious jewels for us, Rome. Millions of dollars of them. We have no connection to this guy in Sri Lanka now. This is really bad timing. The Italians are cutting off our supply.”

“And it seems like L’ombra is leading the charge.” All I can think about is how she got the jump on me. I should have been more careful, vigilant even. She could have killed me on the spot. The question of why she didn’t lingers in my mind too. She had the opportunity to do it, and she keeps taking out

these low-level players in our family. Why not me? Why not last week?

“We have to get ahead of this, Rome. Word is they’re going to try to infiltrate Dad’s funeral. It means we have to take her out before she takes us out.” Sven sounds convinced that the assassin is close enough to know when and where we’ll have the wake. Which means she’s closer than I think too.

“You think an assassin known for being a distance killer is going to try to kill all of us at once? We have no record of her ever using a bomb. That would be the only way.” I wrack my brain, thinking of all the stories we’ve heard of L’ombra, all the known instances of her murdering one of our own.

“You’re certain it’s a woman? And what if she’s not working alone? She’s employed by the Italian don, for Christ’s sake.”

We walk toward the front door, deep in thought. I’m absolutely positive the assassin is a woman. There is no doubt in my mind, especially given the events and the way they’ve unfolded. “Sven, the Shadow is a woman. I know it in my gut. The perfume, killing at a distance, drugging me to give me some cryptic warning rather than just killing me... It makes sense.”

“So how do we catch her?” He turns and stops and I stop with him, facing him. All of us have a bit too much emotion invested into this now. We’re taking out our anger over our father’s sickness on anyone and anything that moves.

“I set a trap.” I run my tongue over my teeth and stare up the hallway toward the room where my father lays dying. “We put out a notice that I want to speak with her. Then we plant snipers, you and Leo, on rooftops. We cast a net out so there is no escape, and when she shows, we take her out. No mercy.”

“You think this will work?” he asks, and I detect a hint of doubt in his tone. I’m the youngest, and maybe I’m the least experienced, but I know what will work. I nod my head.

“Yes. I think so. If she wanted to kill me, she’d have done it the other night. Use me as a target. If she takes my life, the rest

of you are safe at least. And you and Leo will avenge me. I know that.”

Turning, I start toward the door again and Sven says, “And about Trip? How do we replace him? Dominic is in so deep right now he’s too busy to handle matters.”

Sven is Dom’s right-hand man. I don’t have answers for his problem, but I know he’s only trying to do due diligence by talking to everyone. He’s probably already had this conversation with the others. “You’ll figure it out, even if you have to fly to Sri Lanka yourself.”

I open the door and step into the crisp evening air and take a deep breath. The smell of death lingers in Dominic’s house. At least now, Matty is on his feet again and the man responsible for his attack is breathing his last breaths too—or hers rather. L’ombra might be responsible for shooting Matty too, though now that we know her MO and the fact that she’s not a man as we suspected, I have doubts about that too. Only time will tell.

One thing I know is, I will avenge Matty. I will take down the assassin. And I will make a change in my life because I will bring Bianca into this family and make her mine for real.

I just have to kill a killer first.





## BIANCA

**T**he crowd is hot tonight. It's been a while—a few weeks—since Rome came to the Flatiron. I heard from Tony that the guys threw him out and told him to stay out. They're off duty tonight, though. It's like Rome watches this place to see when he can weasel his way in. I was hoping for an evening without drama. I have enough on my mind. I don't need him coming in here and riling people up simply so he can get his rocks off.

The stage lights are blistering, making me sweat. I know if I sweat too much the makeup I use to disguise my tattoos will only melt off with the perspiration and I'll be exposed, so I meander the crowd, careful to not let anyone touch. They can always look, but Soren has rules about who can touch, when and where.

As I make my way around the room, I can feel Rome's eyes following me. He's sitting at the bar, nursing a drink, but his gaze is fixed on me. I try to ignore him and focus on my job, but it's difficult. I know what he wants. He wants to provoke me, to make me lose my cool and get aroused for him. But I won't give him the satisfaction.

Instead, I make my way back toward a group of men whistling and howling. They have cash in hand, ready to tip me well. My voice is strong and clear, and I can feel the audience responding to me. They're caught up in the moment, lost in the music, and I am their guide. They're a rowdy bunch, but they always tip well and don't get handsy. I start to sing "Fever", a

classic I know will get them going. The band starts to play and I close my eyes, letting the music carry me away.

But Rome is still there, watching me. I can feel his presence like a weight on my shoulders. I try to push him out of my mind, but it's no use. He's like a virus, infecting everything he touches. I try to keep my composure, but I can feel my body betraying me. I swallow hard and step away from the men, collecting my tips, trying to put some distance between us. But Rome is persistent. His eyes follow me around the dining room, never leaving mine.

I finish singing my set and make my way back to the dressing room. The room is dimly lit with a few flickering bulbs, barely enough to see my reflection in the mirror. I let out a long sigh, relieved to be back in my safe space. I peel off the layers of clothing, taking care not to smudge my makeup. I slip into a silk robe and sit at the vanity, staring at my reflection.

Normally I'd be inviting him back, asking him to bend me over this table and fuck me, but tonight I need space. The pressure is on. There is too much heat on me to pull the trigger.

I stare at myself in the mirror, trying to shake off the feeling of Rome's gaze still on me. My mind is racing, trying to come up with a plan to get out of this mess. I know I can't keep working for Mickey. The guilt over being tasked with killing the Bratva leaders is eating me alive. But I also know I can't just walk away. Mickey won't let me go that easily.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I was never supposed to get into this life. I was supposed to be a singer, a performer, not a killer. But somehow, I got sucked in. And now, I don't know how to get out.

I hear a knock on the door and my heart skips a beat. I wasn't expecting anyone. I quickly tie the robe tighter around my waist and make my way to the door. I peek through the peephole and see Ben standing on the other side with a face white as a sheet.

“What?” I snap, irritated that he’s interrupting my break. He should be managing the stage, not pestering me. It is, after all, his job.

“It’s ... well... It’s that man. He’s asking about you. He’s causing a scene.” Ben trembles, his voice shaky.

My heart drops as soon as I hear those words. I know exactly who he’s talking about. Rome. I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “What did you tell him?” I ask, my voice surprisingly calm.

“I told him you were busy, but he’s not taking no for an answer,” Ben replies, wringing his hands nervously.

I curse under my breath and run a hand through my hair. I don’t have time for this. Rome showing up here could blow things up with Tony and Soren, and then I’ll really be in trouble. I take a deep breath and steel myself. “I’ll take care of it,” I say, and push past Ben to make my way to the stage.

“Uh, he said to send you to the alley. The guys tossed him already.” Ben’s fidgeting is ridiculous. I roll my eyes at him and make a one-eighty and head toward the alley.

“Give me ten minutes of privacy please. If I’m not back in fifteen, send the guys.”

I nod at Ben, giving him a tight-lipped smile, and make my way outside. The cool night air hits me like a slap in the face, but I don’t let it faze me. I’m used to the cold, the darkness, the violence. It’s all part of the job.

I see Rome leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. He looks up when he sees me and grins, his eyes flashing with something that makes my body ache for him. The dim light overhead casts dark shadows down his face; he looks like the grim reaper, but he’s so magnetic I have to force myself not to touch him, not to let his mysterious ways infect me yet again. I need to think clearly.

“Well, well, well. Look who decided to show up,” he drawls, taking another drag of his cigarette. “I was starting to think you were avoiding me, sweetheart.”

I clench my fists at my sides, trying to keep my composure. This is just another part of the game—his game.

“What do you want, Rome?” I ask, my voice steady.

He takes another drag of his cigarette and blows the smoke out in a lazy plume. “I want you, baby. You know that.” He steps closer to me, his hand reaching out to brush a strand of hair away from my face.

I step back, out of his reach. “Rome, you know I can’t do this. I have a job to do.” My protests will only incite more arousal from him, but I have to get space between us. I blame myself for teaching him that I like to keep him at arm’s length until he takes what he wants.

He chuckles, the sound low and dangerous. “I know you have a job to do. And so do I.” He steps closer again, his hand now resting on my hip. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun in the meantime, does it?”

I feel my resolve slipping, his touch sending shivers down my spine. I can’t deny the pull he has over me, the way he makes me feel alive in a world that’s slowly killing me. But I can’t let myself get distracted. Not now.

“Rome...” I back against the building and cross my arms over my chest. “This isn’t a game. I can’t do this tonight.”

Rome leans in closer, his lips brushing against my ear. “Who said anything about a game?” His voice is low and rough, sending a shiver down my spine. “I know you want this just as much as I do.”

I try to push him away, but his grip on my hips tightens. His lips find mine, and I can’t help but respond to the rough passion of his kiss. His tongue slides against mine, and I feel my body melting into him as he parts my silky robe and finds my panty line.

“I know you want this, baby,” he says, his voice low and rough. “You can tell me you don’t, but your body tells me otherwise...” He traces a finger along my panties, down to the space between my thighs and I gasp, my grip on his shoulders tightening. “You’re so wet for me...”

I can't deny it any more. I am so wet for him, and I want nothing more than to give in to his touch.

Rome pushes his knee between my legs and grinds it slowly against my aching pussy. I feel my juices soak my panties, and I want nothing more than to let him have me right here, right now.

"Please..." I whisper, my voice just loud enough for him to hear.

"Please what?" he breathes into my ear. "Tell me what you want."

I take a deep breath, trying to regain control of my scattered thoughts. "I want—" I pause as he grinds his knee against me. My body is on fire for him, and I reach out for something to steady myself. My hands find the wall, and I lean against it, trying to catch my breath. "Oh my god..." I gasp, as his fingers slide beneath my panties and between my wet folds, parting my already soaking wet lips.

"I want you to fuck me," I say as he slides a finger inside me, my words coming out breathy and low. "Please, Rome. I need it..."

Rome moans loudly as his finger slides in and out of my pussy. I press myself against him, my mind completely clouded with lust. "You need it?" he asks, his voice deep and rough. "You need me to fuck you?"

I nod, gasping as he slides another finger into me. "Yes..."

"Say it, baby," he growls, his mouth finding my neck. "I want to hear you say it."

Rome's fingers curl up inside me, and his thumb finds my clit. I let out a low moan as he circles it with his thumb. "Please fuck me, Rome," I whisper, my voice desperate and broken. "Please..."

"Fuck, baby," he grunts, his fingers working their magic. He kisses my neck, and his stubble scratches against my skin. I hear his belt buckle, and then his zipper, and then he's there, thick cock grinding against my soggy undergarment.

“Rome, god...” I try pushing him away because this is fucking insane. The more times we fuck, the more I want to fuck. And the more I fall for him. But I fucking can’t fall for him. “Rome, stop...” I protest, despite how badly I want him, but he ignores me, guiding his hard dick between my thighs and replacing his fingers with its girth.

He thrusts and pushes me against the brick wall. I feel the cold bricks against my back, and his hands are on my ass, his fingers digging into my flesh. “Rome...” I gasp, feeling him push against me. He’s so big, I’m overwhelmed, and I need more. “Please...” I push back against him, and I feel him stretch me. I lean my head against the wall and close my eyes as he fills me up. “Oh my god, Rome,” I whisper, my voice barely audible. I feel full and stretched and so fucking incredibly good.

He pumps into me, and I can feel him grow even bigger. “Oh my god, you’re so tight,” he groans.

“Oh fuck, I’m going to—” My words are choked out by the convulsions of orgasm that claim my body. Here in the alley, squeezed against the bricks, he makes me come hard. My body twitches and spasms. I claw at his sides and whimper.

I feel him growl deeply, and he pushes into me one last time, filling my pussy up with his cum. He pants against my neck, his fingers digging into my hips as he fills me up with his seed. He takes a deep breath, pressing his forehead against my shoulder.

He gasps as he pulls out of me. “Fuck...” I hear him whisper, his voice still full of lust. I look up at him and try to say something, but I can’t. I stand there, leaning against the wall, my eyes half-lidded. All concept of time has escaped me. He’s done it again, causing me to come undone. He has that power over me, and it’s one I’m not proud of.

When the door latch clicks and it swings open, Rome steps back, moving to the shadow where he tucks his still hard cock back into his slacks. I expect Ben. I expect some sort of warning that the guys are coming or that it’s time for my show

to start. But it's not Ben, and it's not Tony. It's some muscle Mickey hired to keep the riff raff away.

"What the fuck is going on out here?" Two of them walk out of the door and into the light and I step between them and Rome, but one pushes me aside, forcing me into the back of the club and shutting the door.

I pound on the door for a second but it's no use. One of them is leaning on it and I'm safely inside where I can't see what's happening. It's not Rome I fear for; it's them. He's a trained killer just like me, and he will fuck them up. The problem is it will only cause things for me to get worse and he doesn't even know it. If only he'd just listened to me and left when I told him I couldn't tonight. He has no clue how close Soren and Mickey are to taking this job away from me and doing it themselves.

"You ready?" Ben asks, startling me. I never saw him coming.

"Uh—" I glance at the door "—yeah." I turn my back and leave Rome to defend himself and follow Ben back to the dressing room, Rome's cum still dripping down my thigh. That man has a way of making my pussy melt for him and I hate it. The problem is, I also love it.

And that's a very bad problem to have right now.





## ROME

I step out of the shadows, watching Bianca be tucked inside the club as if she were a helpless victim these men are protecting. It isn't the way I wanted it to go, but I have no choice. I took a chance coming here after being thrown out and she did try to warn me.

"I thought they got rid of you a few weeks ago. You ain't supposed to be around here, boy." The bigger of the two men steps toward me menacingly. He carries a large knife with a straight handle in his right hand, waving it as if he were spreading icing on a cake.

I fold my hands in front of me and watch him. It's humorous when guys like him try to push guys like me around. He's a flea on a dog with no place to go, and his buddy who leans against the club door keeping Bianca inside looks like a pit bull. I remain calm though, watching the man advance. Part of winning a fight is planning your moves, keeping the advantage, the element of surprise. They think they got the drop on me, but I figured something like this may happen eventually.

"Your buddy looks constipated." I nod at the man leaning on the building, but Macho Man moving toward me doesn't even glance that way.

"You should have learned your lesson the first time. Men like you don't belong around here." He waves the knife again, now only a few paces from me, then he stops.

“I’m just a normal guy, having a normal conversation in an alley. What do you mean ‘guys like me?’” I’m trying to ruffle his feathers, get him to make the first move and make a mistake. The light is dim here but I can tell this guy is only in his twenties. He’s built, probably spends hours a day in the gym, but wisdom and experience outweigh muscle and speed.

“The kind that bangs our hookers in the back alley.” He takes another step toward me, but I back up a step to maintain my distance. He stops and grins, pointing the knife at me. “Don’t you fucking back away from me.”

“That’s quite an insult for Ms. Moretti. Would her brothers let you say that about her?” I bide my time, watching his face contort. He’s going to make a move. I can tell. “I don’t want you to spend the rest of the night in the emergency room.”

“I ain’t scared of the Moretti brothers.” He takes a step closer and swings the knife in a wide arc. He’s trying to intimidate me, and he’s good at his job.

“I think you are.” I move quickly, grabbing his wrist and twisting it. The knife falls and I kick it away. I twist his wrist further until the snapping of bones can be heard, and he screams. I let go and he crumples to the ground, clutching his wrist. He’s a whimpering sniveling mess of flesh and bone, rolling to the side, cradling his arm.

His buddy, Pit Bull, comes charging at me too, also with a knife. Have these idiots never heard of a gun? I shake my head and step around the first guy, ready to defend myself against the second. He’s much more experienced than Macho Man. His face is calm and his eyes are narrowed. The first guy is crying and moaning and Pit Bull doesn’t care. He’s looking for blood and he’s coming for it. I smile at him and he stops, confused.

I grab his wrist and swing him around, throwing him into the side of the building. The sound of air rushing from his lungs is satisfying. But he comes back at me with fists swinging, knife firmly grasped in one of them. It clips me on the side, only inches from where the assassin got me last week, but I don’t have time to cry out in pain. He’s quick and light on his feet,

and Macho Man over there is getting back up. He's injured, but two on one is hardly a fair fight.

I manage to knock the knife out of his hand, leaving him with his fists. He swings and I dodge, throwing a punch of my own that doubles him over. I get his knife, then I kick him in the ribs and he groans. But he's not done. I throw the knife away; it's not as useful as my fists anyway. I'm the one who's going to hurt him. My fists are going to make him see stars. I'm going to make him feel pain until he begs for me to stop, until he's so drenched in his own blood that he can't see.

I kick him in the thigh and he stumbles backward. I'm on him, punching and kicking and hitting, until he can't take anymore. His eyes flutter closed, and I think he's going to pass out. The knife is next to him on the ground. He slowly reaches for it, and I kick it away. He's going to keep coming at me, I know it. I know because I would keep coming at me. I would never give up until I either got to me or I was dead. So I land one more hard punch to his face and his eyes shut; his head drops to the ground with a sickening thud.

But I'm not done yet. Pit Bull is down, but Macho man has found his knife and wobbles my direction. All that good fucking to relax, and they ruin it so quickly afterward. That pisses me off.

"You think you're tough?" I ask him, kicking his knife away again. "You think you can attack me and get away with it?" I take a step back, my fists clenched, my body ready for another attack. "You think you can fuck with me?" Why do they even care that I'm fucking their singer. She's nothing but a money maker to them. What she does in her personal time is her private business, unless her brothers hired these idiots to keep me away. Unless they know who I am and they have a problem with that. Is that why they said I was the sort of guy who shouldn't be here?

Macho Man runs at me, swinging wildly. I try to block his punches, but one connects to my face. I can feel my busted lip throbbing as I throw my own punch and kick him in the stomach, sending him to the ground. He slams into the dumpster and drops his knife, and I stand over him, waiting.

His eyes are closed. I can see he's not getting back up. He's done fighting for the night. I take a step back and kick him in the ribs, hard. He groans, but he doesn't move.

These fuckers have no clue who they're dealing with. If I was as petty as the Italians, I'd slaughter these two in cold blood right now. But I'm not, and there's a good reason. I stare down at them and button my jacket, then wipe the blood from my lower lip. It stings, but it's a good sting, because it proves I'm standing here alive and they are out cold. I'd like to go in and tell Bianca I'm leaving, that I need to see her again soon, because I need to speak to her. Instead, I head up the alley toward my car.

As I walk away I catch a faint hint of the perfume... that saffron and sage. It feels like it's coming from me, like I'm doused in it or something. I lift my tie and sniff it. I'm right; the light scent is on me somehow, but how? Those men never got close enough to me to rub off on me like that, and even so, why would they smell like women's perfume?

I sink behind my steering wheel and stare up at the club's marquee with Bianca's name in giant, red, flashing lights. Was she wearing this perfume? I've never noticed her smelling like this before, but there is no mistaking it. I sniff my tie again and confirm to myself it is, in fact, the same perfume used on those darts. The smell is unmistakable. I've never smelled anything like it other than on those darts. So how did Bianca get this perfume?

I start the car and head for Dominic's house. After the beating I gave those assholes, they'll think twice about coming at me again. Or maybe they'll bring their guns next time. Seems like every one of the men who work at that club know my face and now they know why I come around. Bianca will have to explain that on her end without my help, but with the secret out of the bag, maybe she'll get the point that I want what we have to be more than just a secret fling in her dressing room.

The house is dark when I pull up. It's late. Everyone is sleeping, but Dom gave each of us a key so we could come in and out and sit with Dad in his final days. With our detective friends using their fancy computer algorithms to input our new

information about our target, there isn't much I can do but wait. The intel shows that we need to watch that club particularly, and that narrows down the suspect pool substantially. It's a gentlemen's club, so most of the people who go in and out are men. They'll find out which of the ladies is the assassin.

As I slink through Dom's house in the dark, I think about things rationally. It makes sense that Bianca smells like that perfume. She must work with the assassin hand in hand, maybe even shares some of the same costumes or makeup. I've never smelled that perfume on her before, though, and she has no tattoos, and even though those two facts are hard evidence in her favor, my gut feels tight. I begin to doubt all my senses when I sit down next to Dad's bed and listen to the beep, whir, click of his machines.

The room smells sterile, like disinfectant and medicine. I bring my stench of tobacco and sweat. Dad would probably appreciate the hints of cherry and apple from the cigar I smoked earlier this evening while waiting for Bianca to finish her set. That thought makes me wonder again why she turned me away. Why I was sitting in the audience and she never came to sing at my table. Why her normal pattern of sending the stage manager to get me was different this evening. He tried to send me away until I made a scene and they tossed me. I knew she'd come around back.

Dad mumbles something in his sleep, and I straighten, trying to understand him, but it's no use. How can anyone understand the ramblings of a dying old man who is so drugged he can hardly wake up? I think I make out the word duty and honor, but all that does is frustrate me. I have a duty to take care of my family and honor our alliances, but all I can think about is the assassin and my Bianca. And now, I fear I may have been deceived this entire time—maybe not on purpose, but I think she knows something.

There is no way a woman as smart as Bianca doesn't know her coworkers. I never came out and told her I was hunting L'ombra or that I was so high up in the Bratva, but she had to have figured that out at some point. My father's name is in the

news all the time as the press keeps tabs on the decaying physical health of the city's most powerful leader of organized crime. Bianca works with a trained killer who targets my family. She has to know that, and she's kept it a secret.

“And now I'm in so deep with her it will hurt if I have to put her to the mats to figure it out. Fuck's sake...” I stare up at my father as his face twitches and contorts. He's dreaming something, probably one of his exploits from back in the day when he was young and strong like me. “How would you handle this, Dad? When you suspect the woman you love of having knowledge of a trained killer that she didn't reveal to you?”

Scrubbing a hand down over my face and scratching my beard, I sigh heavily. I'm torturing myself. There is every possibility that Bianca knows nothing. That she's only in that club to do her singing and make her money, build her fame. It's more likely that the assassin has everyone fooled and works under deep cover there so they don't have their identity exposed.

I'm deep in thought when I hear Dad begin wheezing and coughing, just as he did the other day when I was here. The machines begin to alarm and I rise to stand at his bedside. Within seconds, Brewster and a nurse are there, checking things, purging his IV, giving him a shot of something. His coughing fit is bad, bringing up blood again that soaks his blanket and the front of his gown. The vet and his nurse exchanged hushed words, but I get the feeling they're not hopeful about Dad's episode.

When they calm him, Brewster pats my arm and gives me a discouraged look. “Try to sleep, Rome. Tomorrow could be a difficult day.” They don't have to explain what they mean by that as they leave the room and I am left alone with him in darkness again. He has a day, maybe only hours left.

I hover by his bedside as he coughs again and splutters out a few words. “Honor.... Family... faith....”

“Shhh, Dad, don't talk.” I know he's trying to communicate something but each word brings more coughing and it makes

him hurt worse, and there is nothing worse than watching him cough up blood and gasp for air.

He calms, but there is a deep rattle in his chest now. He wheezes each breath in and out. It even smells different in here, like the decades of smoking he's done over his lifetime are creating a cloud of death in the room to accept his soul and carry him to the other side. I sit back down but I keep his hand in mine. He's right. I have to honor my family and my faith. We all do. Nothing in this life will ever be as important as that.

I just have to decide who my family is now, because Bianca is more than a fling. She just has to decide to be mine as much as I want her to be.





# BIANCA

**T**he rest of this entire night has been nothing but shit. I did my shows. I had a shower, and now, right when I am about to go home and soak in a hot bath to relax, Soren and Mickey are here. They aren't happy either. Soren's sour expression is trained on me. He dragged me into this mess—the family, the crime, being an assassin. He trained me to do this, taught me everything I know and even how to disguise myself. He could do this job, but no one will suspect a woman, so he put me here.

And now he wants payback, and so does Mickey.

I sit on the seat next to the vanity with my arms crossed. The hooded sweatshirt and black jeans that I wear is my signature look, the way I dress when I'm out to hunt, except the beasts Mickey wants me to hunt are all safely tucked away inside their guarded fortress for the night. I've done my research. I can tell him exactly where they are, what they're doing and who they're with almost every second of the day. I'm not failing my mission for lack of ability. I'm choosing to abstain from killing them and I think it's become obvious to everyone now. Especially after those idiots chased Rome off earlier tonight.

Mickey stares at me with haunting, hollow eyes. Black as death and empty as the grave, they search my expression, then my body. I'm clothed fully, but it feels like he can see through me, right to the lies I've hidden from him for months now, and it makes me feel naked.

“What do we do with someone who defies an order, Soren?” Mickey pulls his gun out, turning it over in his hand. Then he retrieves his silencer from his pocket and lines it up to the barrel, twisting it into place.

“They die.” Soren looks away from me. I see the hint of pain in his eyes, but I know he’s loyal to a fault. He will literally stand there with his hands clasped in front of himself watching Mickey gun me down in cold blood and never say a word. I have no excuse. No way to explain my hesitation or reluctance.

“It’s a shame the next time all your beloved fans will see you is in a casket. You promised you would do the job and you’ve failed.” Mickey walks toward me and I feel my palms sweating. I know he won’t kill me right here. There’s too much to clean up. He’ll take me to some other place where things can be hosed off and my body can be tossed. This is just a threat, but it still has my stomach churning and my pulse racing.

I keep my eyes fixed on the wall, near the light switch. It’s my focal point, supposed to keep me grounded in the moment so my anger or anxiety doesn’t get the better of me. But when the cool metal of Mickey’s gun presses under my chin and directs my face to look up at him, I have no choice but to let my gaze follow.

“You’ve been hiding things. You’ve been lying to me. You have been procrastinating.” Mickey’s tone is that of a father, caring and patient. But the man is anything but that. I’ve seen him slit a man’s throat for not putting ice in his soft drink. “Fucking the enemy is one thing.” His nose scrunches up and he shrugs. “I’ve been known to fuck a good pussy now and then. But you’re getting into this too deep.”

I don’t dare protest, not a word, not even a peep of a sound. I’d love it if Soren did. If he stood up for me and defended his little sister, but I know if he made a sound there would be a bullet in his head in a split second. So I keep my lips pressed into a firm line and take it like a good girl, though the damn hormones raging through my body make me on edge, ready to bawl at any second.

“Is that why you won’t do it? You’ve let your feelings get in the way? You fell in love with that piece of shit? How’d he get in your head like that? Is he hung like a horse or something?” Mickey eyes me, gun still holding my chin up. “You know, we have plenty of well-endowed men in the family, Bianca.”

I avert my eye but only manage to catch Soren’s expression. I can tell he isn’t pleased with me, but I can see how much he wants to intervene. He’s restraining himself now, which makes me feel a bit more comforted than I was a few seconds ago, but there is still nothing he can do. If he takes action and stops Mickey, he’ll be dead. Whether by Mickey’s gun or one of Mickey’s brother’s, he’ll die and then I will too.

“Do you need to be reminded that people who cross me die?” He forces me to look back at him and I bite my cheek.

“No, sir.” My words are blunt and short. He should just kill me now and save himself the time because I can’t hurt Roman. I know my end. I have no choice but to warn Rome and his brothers and then run.

“Hmm, well it appears to me that you’ve forgotten your job and your loyalty. You are sworn to me, Ms. Moretti. You and your brothers.” He raises the gun and points it at Soren, and my pulse quickens again, only this time, it’s real fear. He can do whatever he wants to me. I can live with that, but Soren doesn’t deserve this.

“Sir...” I protest, but Mickey chambers a round and I panic. “Soren didn’t do this. This is on me. He did his job.”

“If he did his job, your man would be dead. You would be in compliance with my orders and my problem with the Russians would be over.” He raises the gun on aim, pointing it at Soren’s head. My brother doesn’t flinch at all. He stares straight ahead at my mirror. I know he can see me and himself in it. I know he’s probably regretting the day he brought me into this with him. He probably thinks I’m emotionally weak or incapable of doing this job.

That’s wrong. It’s all wrong. I have done this job since the day they gave me my first target and I’ve been excellent at it. I

never thought I'd fall for Rome or end up pregnant with his child.

"Please, Mickey, I'll do it." I blurt out the words without thinking. I've made this promise a million times, swearing to murder Roman and his four brothers. But this time he doesn't believe me. He doesn't lower his weapon. He doesn't even smirk, or glance at me. I'm not changing his mind. "Please," I say again, firmly. I begin to stand up and Mickey fires the gun.

The sound is muffled but loud enough to startle me. I gasp and cover my mouth, but the bullet strikes the wall beyond Soren and bits of plaster puff out into the air. Soren flinches too. I watch his eyes blink and his shoulders shake. He takes a deep breath and swallows hard, but doesn't turn to look at me or Mickey.

"You see, Bianca, I'm not a man to fuck with." Mickey turns back to me, bringing his weapon around to point it at my chest. He draws a line down the front of my hoodie, parting it. I'm wearing a V-neck t-shirt that hangs loosely. The tip of his silencer traces the neckline then pulls it away and he looks down at my tits, after which he drags the metal across my breastbone upward to force my chin to angle toward him again.

I'd kill him right now if I didn't know better. He probably has five men outside waiting to burst in here and take me and Soren out if anything even sounds off. And even if he didn't, they'd hunt me and my brothers the rest of our lives. We'd never live in peace. I have to sit here and take this for the moment, and it takes every ounce of humility in my soul to do so.

"You're off the job." His eyes flash with rage but his face remains stoic, and those two things along with his words make my heart sink. I can't be off the job. If I'm off the job it means the hit will fall to someone else's hands and those hands will take the life of my child's father.

"No..." I whisper, but Mickey continues.

"Soren, you are to finish this. And for good measure, you can let your sister watch when you gut that pig she's been sleeping

with.” Mickey scowls at me, the first hint of frustration or anger that has crossed his face since he walked in. “Because we have standards, and anyone who works for me will respect me.”

“No...” I say again, this time louder and it earns me a hard back hand. Mickey isn’t playing around. I whimper and cover my cheek and he backs away. I can’t look him in the eye again, not with the way I’m feeling. “I’ll do it.” I grit my teeth and hold my face, and watch him as he twists the silencer off the end of his gun and pockets it, then holsters his gun on his hip.

“You said that before, Bianca. I don’t believe a word you’re saying.”

I shoot to my feet, and square off with him, hands fisted at my side. In my periphery I see Soren turn as if to defend one of us—I’m not sure which. “I’ll do it myself. You hired me to do this fucking job, then stay the fuck out of my way and let me do it.”

Mickey’s chin rises slowly. He looks down his nose at me and purses his lips. He doesn’t even reach for his gun again. He calmly buttons his coat and I watch his nostrils flare as he narrows his eyes. His tongue glides along his teeth beneath his lip and he takes a deep breath and lets his chest relax.

“Two days. If they aren’t dead in two days, I will do the hit myself and you will die with them.” His jaw is set, his expression firm.

“I understand.”

Two days. I’ve bought Rome two days at the most. I watch as Mickey turns and exits the room, leaving me alone with Soren. The silence is deafening, and I can feel Soren’s eyes on me, but I can’t bring myself to look at him. I’m too ashamed of what just happened.

“Bianca,” Soren finally speaks up, breaking the silence, “what the hell was that?”

I let out a sigh and slump back down into my chair. “I don’t know,” I admit, “I just couldn’t take it anymore. The constant

threats and the way he looks at me like I'm just some disposable pawn in his game. I'm so sick of it."

Soren nods, his expression softening. "I get it," he says, "but you can't let your emotions get the best of you. That's not how we operate."

I know he's right, but I can't help the way I feel. I've been working for Mickey for years and it's been nothing but fear and intimidation. But Soren's words hit me like a ton of bricks. He's right, I can't let my emotions get in the way of the job. I take a deep breath and look up at him. "I know," I say, "I'll get it together. I just need to figure out a plan."

He moves toward the door as if on autopilot. For him this is just another day. Roman Gusev is just another hit. But to me it's a life altering decision, and no one even knows. As Soren leaves the room, I sit there for a few moments, letting his words sink in. I know that I need to get my emotions in check, but it's easier said than done. I've spent years working for Mickey, doing his dirty work, and it's taken a toll on me. But I can't let that show, not now.

I take a deep breath and stand up, steadying myself. I know what I need to do. I need to focus on the job at hand, warn Rome, and then figure out my next move. I walk over to the window and look out at the city below. The sun is setting, casting a warm glow over the streets. It's a beautiful sight, but it may be the last time I get to see it, at least from this dressing room.

I turn back to the room and start to gather my things. I check my gun, making sure it's loaded and ready. I take a deep breath and head out the door. The club is bustling with activity as I make my way through the crowd. The bass from the music is vibrating through my body, but I try to keep my mind focused on the task at hand.

I can't defy Mickey, but I can give Rome a head start. And I can't tell Rome about the baby either, or he'll hunt me down when I run. The best I can do is give Rome's family a chance to prepare and leave no trail when I vanish. It's a cruel twist of fate that the man I'm meant to kill is also the father of my

child. I feel a pang of guilt and regret wash over me, but I push it aside as I head into the night and turn toward the subway.

The subway car is filled with people, but I keep to myself, lost in thought. I can't believe that I'm pregnant with Rome's child. The thought of him never seeing our baby fills me with sadness. But I have to be strong, for both of us. As the subway car lurches forward, I feel a wave of nausea wash over me. Maybe it's the pregnancy, or maybe it's the fear that's been building inside me for years. Either way, I can't let it get the best of me now. I need to focus, to stay sharp.

I get off at my stop and make my way through the dimly lit streets. The air is thick with the scent of garbage and cigarettes. I pull my hoodie tighter around me, trying to ward off the chill. I have two days to warn Rome and leave the city, and that's exactly what I have to do.

If I don't, we all die, including my unborn baby.





## ROME

I t's been twenty-four hours since those goons in the alley chased me off. I can't get the scent of that perfume out of my nostrils. I keep tossing it around in my head but nothing makes sense. I sit behind the counter in the bookstore watching footage from the other night when she interrupted my meeting with Dominic. Right down to the minute inflections on her face, I'm watching—studying her for any clue that might help me. My heart refuses to believe Bianca could know anything about the assassin, but my mind urges me to be cautious.

I take a deep breath and try to push the thoughts out of my mind. The bookstore is empty, and I'm grateful for the peace and quiet. I review the footage again, this time focusing on the moment Bianca walked in. Her eyes were intense, her posture rigid. She seemed almost afraid. Suddenly, it hits me: maybe she wasn't trying to protect me from Dominic's goons, but instead was trying to protect herself from something else. Maybe she has someone breathing down her neck too, someone who scares her.

The musty smell of old books lingers in the air, a scent that moves into my nose and down into my lungs, but it doesn't replace the scent of saffron and sage, implanted on my memory so deeply I'll never forget. It's the scent of death, the smell of murder. A telephone rings somewhere in the store, but I ignore it, focusing on the screen.

We had hot sex. It was incredible, but rather than staying to talk to me, when it was over she rushed out. She'd come for a

purpose, so why didn't she stay? Why leave so quickly like that? "Why did you come here that night?" I whisper into the darkness of the store.

Dom will meet me here soon. I have to tell him my suspicions, even if he orders me to kill her. I won't—not unless I have proof that she is L'ombra, that she shot my brother Matty. My father is right; I must honor my family—my blood. Which means if my heart is wrong and Bianca is the killer we are hunting, my heart has taken a double edged sword and run itself through. Because to kill her will mean I kill a part of my soul.

A noise snaps me out of my thoughts. I straighten, knowing I'm here alone with only one gun and only one clip of nine rounds. I think to call out but Dominic would announce himself. Besides he'd use the front door and the bell would ring. This noise is different, a shuffling coming from the back room. I reach for the gun hidden in my waistband, praying that I won't have to use it.

I rise and slowly make my way toward the back room. The darkness envelops me, and I can barely see anything in front of me. I stop for a moment and listen, trying to determine if the shuffling noise is getting closer.

"Who's there?" I call out, but no one answers, and I realize that whoever is there is trying to be as quiet as possible. I grip my gun tighter and take a deep breath continuing forward. It may or may not be as simple as a homeless person looking for a warm place to sleep tonight; it wouldn't be the first time that happened. But given how silent this person is, I'd wager it's L'ombra come back to finish what she started on the street.

As I approach the back room, the shuffling noise becomes louder, and I can hear someone breathing. I hold my breath, waiting for them to make their move. Suddenly, a figure emerges from the darkness, and I raise my gun, ready to shoot. The figure freezes mid-step, hands raised in surrender. It's a woman, and she's wearing a black hoodie and dark jeans. I can't see her face, but I recognize the way she moves. It's L'ombra. And the scent of her perfume invades my sinuses again; there is no mistaking her.

“What do you want?” I ask, my voice low and steady. I could shoot her now, get it over with, but I’d never forgive myself if I shot and killed Bianca without a fair fight. Without hearing from her lips why she’d try to kill my brother, why she’d kill so many of my men.

“I need your help,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. She speaks in a harsh tone too, as if she’s disguising her voice. As I step forward, she steps away, keeping her face in the darkness, hair tucked into her hoodie. There is no way for me to tell who this woman is except the outfit and the perfume.

I lower my gun slightly, but I’m still cautious. “Why should I help you?”

“Because if you don’t, we’ll both be dead by morning.” I don’t like the sound of that. I motion for her to come closer, keeping my gun trained on her the entire time, but she steps behind a shelf, vanishing from view. This is some twisted game, a way for her to manipulate me into letting my guard down but it won’t work.

“Who’s after you?” I ask.

“You... They’re after you.” Her voice has a warm tone to it, melodic even. But it’s not her natural voice. She is purposely speaking at a much lower pitch, as if she were a man. It’s not a good sign. In fact, it’s a red flag. Why would L’ombra need to disguise her voice? We know she’s a woman.

I step forward, creeping slowly toward the end of the row of shelves with my gun still pointed in front of me. “Show me your face,” I demand. Everything within me screams to know who this woman is, to prove that it isn’t Bianca, that she isn’t the one I’m hunting. I near the end of the shelf and turn the corner to clear my path and something comes down on my arm hard. My gun fires, discharging a round into the wall, and then I drop it.

“What the hell!” I wince and grab my arm, seeing a metal pipe in her hand. She tosses it and rushes back into the darkness, and in the split second it takes her to conceal herself somewhere within this store, I hear her gun chamber a round. I

clamber for my weapon, now ready to fight. “Come out here and show yourself.”

Searching the floor, I find my gun and stand up, pressing myself against a wall.

“You have to stop now! They are going to kill you. I’m here to warn you that you and your brothers are all in danger.” The way she talks makes it impossible to discern who she is. I can barely understand her. I creep down the next row and move closer to where I hear heavy breathing.

“Why would you warn me? You’re L’ombra. You’re the assassin they hired.” I roll my foot from heel to toe, then put the next one down and do the same. This place is an echo chamber, magnifying every sound. Her breathing is so heavy it’s giving her away but she’s not moving, not trying to get away. But she doesn’t speak again either, so I continue toward the end of the row.

It’s so dark in here I can’t see a damn thing. I have to rely solely on my sense of hearing but with the way sounds bounce around between the metal shelves and the hard cement floor, I feel turned around. I squint, trying to get my eyes to adjust and focus, but I’ve been staring at that damn computer screen for hours now. It might take another ten minutes for my vision to adjust and I don’t have that time. I know that the instant I round the end of the shelving unit and feel the cool steel of a gun barrel pointed at my temple.

“Drop the gun, Rome.”

My heart sinks the instant she speaks. I recognize the voice and it makes me pause a moment too long. She pushes her gun harder into my temple and raises her other hand to take my gun right from my grip. “Let go,” she orders and I have no choice but to comply. L’ombra is a cold-blooded killer—one I won’t test. I’ve seen her in action; she has no mercy, except perhaps with me. Which is why I straighten and raise both hands in surrender.

“What do you want?”

She lifts her hand slowly, pulling back her hood to reveal her face in the dim light that streams through the small window just above her head. It's not much, but I can see the curve of her nose, the plumpness of her lips, and the thick waves of her hair that are almost imperceptible in the blackness they fade into.

“Mickey will kill you, Rome.” Her voice is no longer disguised at all, and neither is the emotion in it. It's hurting her to do this, but I don't doubt for a second she will pull that trigger if I scare her.

“Why, Bianca? Why lead me on? Why this...?” I start to turn my head to look at her but she nudges the gun and I purse my lips, keeping my eyes fixed on the window. “Why did you shoot my brother?”

She snuffles and I know she's crying. Fuck, this is so messed up. We've been hunting each other? They hired her to kill me?

“I didn't shoot your brother, but I know who did.” She clears her throat and continues. “You have seen my work. I don't use guns at all.”

“Then what's this?” Waving my hand I gesture at the gun she has pointed at me.

“This is your only warning. I have to leave town because I have to get away from them. But don't think for a second they won't still come after you. They plan to take your entire family out, maybe even at your father's funeral.”

The bell chimes and I hear, “Rome... I'm here. We have to talk.”

“Bianca—” I start but she cuts me off.

“Goodbye, Rome. I have to go.”

Before I can react the butt of the gun comes down hard on my head and I wince in pain, dropping to my knees before falling forward as the room goes black again. I don't know how long I lie there but Dominic awakens me with a hard slap to the face. It takes me a few seconds to realize where I am and what happened. The lights are on; he has my gun in hand. His concern is only evident in the scowl of disapproval on his face.

“What the hell happened?” He backs away and I sit up slowly, rubbing my head. She left a nice-sized lump on the top of my head that will hurt for a few days. Fuck if I’m not enraged to know I’ve been blindsided by her, deceived this entire fucking time.

“She was here...” I stand and reach for my gun but Dominic glares at me and takes a step back.

“It’s that woman you’ve been seeing, isn’t it? Dad told me he was suspicious of her, but I thought you’d be more careful.” Dom is pissed. He thrusts my gun into my gut and walks past me. “We’ve been on this for months, Rome. How could you not see past all her lies?”

“You don’t know that it’s her.” I put my safety on then holster my gun and follow him. I can’t just out her or he’ll go straight to wherever he thinks she is, and when he finds her he will kill her himself. I can’t let that happen. Not until I talk with her and find out what the fuck is going on. “And the assassin didn’t shoot Matty, but she knows who did. I can find out.”

Dominic stops by the front counter and spins around to stare at me. “We’ve lost dozens of men to this assassin, and you think the fact that she didn’t shoot our brother means something? Your orders were to kill her. So help me, Rome, if you’ve known it was that singer this whole time and you said nothing, you’ll—”

“I don’t know anything for certain except that she didn’t shoot Matty, but she knows who did.” I square my shoulders and lean in, nose to nose. “And I will handle this. Do you understand?”

I watch his nostrils flare and his eyes bore into mine. As the leader of this family his responsibility is great, but I’m not just a pawn in his game. I know how to handle myself, and though I may have made a mistake about Bianca, I will kill her if I need to. He knows I will.

“You know I had complete faith in you.”

“And now?” I ask, feeling defensive. I was up against a trained killer. It wasn’t like I shirked my responsibility.

“Just don’t fuck this up. You get her, and you bring her in now, or I will hunt her down and kill her myself. And don’t try to pretend it’s not the Moretti girl. Akers figured it out already; you should have weeks ago.” He shakes his head and walks away and I’m left there rubbing the lump on my head.

Why would Bianca come all this way to warn me that the Italians were after us unless she thought there was an immediate threat against us? They hired her to kill us all, so why buddy up to me? Was that her plan all along? She intended to seduce me until she got close to my family, then what, poison us all?

I grit my teeth and sink into the chair behind the counter while I nurse my wound and my pride. I let her get to my cock, and that blinded me to anything she might be doing wrong. And now what? I know how the Italians work. She can’t just not do her job. If she’s hired to kill me and knows about this threat, she’ll be the first to die when the job isn’t complete. So why didn’t she pull the trigger?

The longer I sit in this chair questioning things, the more enraged I become. She tricked me and lied to me the whole time. Her pussy distracted me from the hunt, just like Dominic said. Leo was right; I should have been focusing on facts, but I let my sex drive, my ego, and eventually my feelings get in the way. Well, not tonight.

I am going to hunt her down and take what’s mine—a pound of flesh for every life she stole from my family, even if she didn’t kill Matty.

But first I need to see my father. Dominic didn’t just come here to talk about the assassin. He had news about Dad. I heard it in his voice when he called out my name and scared Bianca off.

I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone, put on silent earlier when I needed to focus on the security footage. There are three texts, one from each of my brothers. Dad is dying and they have given him only hours, maybe less. He could be dead before I get to Dom’s house to say goodbye.

I’m coming for her, but family comes first.

Then bloodshed...





## BIANCA

I sneak out of that bookstore the way I came in, through an open window in the back leading to the alley. Then I stick to the shadows—which is how I got the name L'ombra to begin with—as I head back to my car. The deed is done. Rome has his warning and he knows who I am. The weight of that knowledge makes me feel heavy, clumsy. My eyes are blurry from tears, but I don't allow myself the luxury of stopping to dump the emotion. That will come later, when I'm far away from here.

I couldn't do it anyway—and I tried. I had the gun to his head and the trigger firmly beneath my finger, but I just couldn't do it. My child needs a father, even if he or she doesn't get to meet him for ten years. Rome will protect himself and his family and if my brothers get caught in the crossfire, that is on them. It would destroy me, but I can't stay in this city knowing the way Mickey feels and how he plans to handle his business.

So I climb into my car and pull into traffic. The city seems to be as despondent as I am. The buildings look tired, the people exhausted. I can feel their weight on my shoulders as I navigate the streets, trying to get as far away from here as possible. I don't know where I'll go yet, but I know I can't stay in this city any longer. Not with the weight of my unborn child's future on my shoulders.

As I drive, I think of all the mistakes I've made in my life. All the times I've let my emotions get the best of me. But this time, I had to do what was best for my child. Even if it meant sparing the life of a man who may at some point in the future

kill my brothers. The thought makes me angry, and I hit the steering wheel with my palm. The sound echoes in the car, but it doesn't relieve any of my frustration. I need to focus on the road, on getting home to pack.

Home. The word has lost its meaning for me. I have no home, not really. I've been on the hunt for so long, never staying in one place for too long, always looking over my shoulder. It's the life of organized crime and being a trained killer. But now, with a child on the way, I need to find a place to call home. A place where we can be safe.

As I drive, I think of my options. I could go back to Upstate New York, where my cousins live. But that would be dangerous. If Mickey finds out where I am, he'll come after me, and my family will be caught in the crossfire. I could go to Europe, but that would be too far away. And with a baby on the way, I need the familiarity of any of my family who will still accept me. And Rome... I need him close, even if he can't be with me.

The only option I have left is to go to Chicago. My uncle, Vito, still has connections there. He could help me start over. It's a risk, of course. Going to a city where I don't know anyone except for my uncle and his men. But I don't have a choice.

I turn toward home now with the intention of taking as much of my stuff as possible. I'll call Vito on the road and talk to him. I haven't spoken to him in years, not since Soren dragged me into this mess, but he's family. Family is everything in this world.

When I round the corner, I see immediately that Soren's car is parked out front. I pull behind another parked car and try to watch what happens. My brothers stand on my front porch talking. I can't make out what they're saying, but the tension in the air is palpable. My heart races as I wonder what they're doing here. Did they find out about what I did? Are they here to confront me? I take a deep breath and force myself to calm down. Panicking won't do me any good. I need to be smart and think on my feet.

The security cameras I installed in my place have the ability to record sound too, and I have a remote interface so I can access the footage through my phone. I pull out my phone and quickly access the security camera feed. I can hear everything now, and it's worse than I thought. Soren is yelling at my brothers, telling them I am in love with Roman Gusev, that I'm failing at my job. My heart sinks, and I feel like I'm about to be sick.

I can't believe Soren would stoop so low. He knows how much this job means to me, and he knows how much I've sacrificed for the family. But the worst part is that he's right. I am in love with Roman, and I'm failing at my job. It's because I can't focus on anything else but him.

I watch as my brothers try to reason with Soren, but he's not having it. He's convinced that I'm a liability to the family and that I need to be dealt with. I can feel the panic rising in my chest, and I know I need to get out of here before they come looking for me.

But I can't leave town until I've gotten my things from my place. That isn't happening right now, so I just need a place to lie low while I wait for them to leave my house. I pull out and use the neighbor's driveway to turn around so I don't have to drive right past the house where they stand shouting at each other. The only place I can go now is the nightclub, but even there I won't be safe if they see my car is nearby.

It's dark and raining. The wipers on my car hardly keep the window clear, so I can barely see. I park my car a few blocks away from the nightclub and take a deep breath. The rain is coming down in sheets, making it difficult to see more than a few feet ahead. I know I have to be careful not to be seen by anyone who might know me. I put my hood up and pull the strings tight, covering my face as much as possible.

I walk briskly through the rain, my heart pounding in my chest. I can hear the music from the nightclub before I even get there. It's a thumping beat that seems to pulse through my entire body. I can feel it in my bones. When I reach the entrance, I hesitate for a moment, wondering if this is really the best place to hide out. It's not like I'm exactly

inconspicuous here, but it's the only place I know where I get out of the rain while I wait. I take another deep breath and walk past the front. I need to stay out of sight completely. I'll go in the back.

The back entrance is isolated, but I'm grateful for it. I slip inside and make my way through the dark hallways, trying to ignore the sound of the music pounding in my ears. My heart is racing and I can barely hear myself think, but I keep moving forward until I get to my dressing room. I close the door behind me and lean against it, letting out a deep sigh of relief.

For a moment, I just stand there dripping, trying to catch my breath and calm my nerves. My mind is racing, and I can't help but wonder what's going to happen to me now. I'm alone, pregnant, and on the run from my own family. I can't go to the police because they're all in Mickey's pocket. I have nowhere to turn.

As I stand there in the darkness, I feel a sudden surge of anger. How could they do this to me? How could Soren think that I'm a liability to this criminal enterprise just because I'm in love? I grit my teeth and ball up my fists. How could my own blood turn on me like that?

It's cold and I'm soaked. There is nothing for me to wear here except my stage clothes and I can't exactly skip town wearing a ball gown. I start pacing back and forth, trying to come up with a plan, but my thoughts are interrupted by a knock on the door. I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest. Who could it be?

"Hello?" a man's voice calls out. "Is anyone in there?"

I recognize the voice immediately. It's one of the bouncers who attacked Rome the other night, but I can't remember his name. I take a deep breath and try to compose myself before I open the door.

"Hey," I say, trying to sound casual. "What's up?" He towers over me, large broad shoulders squaring as he takes me in. I'm not supposed to be here tonight. It's not my night. He's going to call Ben and they'll question everything.

The bouncer looks at me suspiciously, his eyes lingering on my hooded face and wet clothes. “Are you okay?” he asks. “You look like you’ve been through hell.”

I force a smile. “I’m fine. Just had a bit of a rough night. I need to get dressed for my set.” I lie—of course I lie. I have no set tonight at all, but he can’t know that.

The bouncer nods, still eyeing me warily. “Alright, well, let me know if you need anything.”

I watch him leave, my heart pounding in my chest. If my brothers or Mickey show up here I’m fucked. I just need an hour or so, some time to think and plan, and a way to distract them. I sink into the vanity chair and open my phone to view the security cam footage. Tony sits on the front step waiting for me. The others are gone. I don’t know if he is for me or against me, but with his back to the camera I can’t tell.

If he leaves I can go home. If not, I’m stuck here, unless I sneak in the back door there too, which isn’t likely considering I have neighbors on all sides. It’s quite possible I will be forced to leave town without even a bag of clothes. I feel like a vagabond.

I hear a knock on the door again. This time, it’s a different voice. “Hey, Bianca,” Ben calls out. “Can we talk?”

The bouncer had to have told him I was here. I don’t want to fuck with this. “I’m busy right now,” I call out, hoping he’ll just leave me alone.

“Come on,” he says, his voice growing impatient. “Open the door. We both know you don’t have a show tonight.”

If I push him away, he will tell Soren for sure. That’s the last thing I need right now.

I take a deep breath and stand up, trying to steady my shaking legs. I know I have to face him, so I walk over to the door and open it. Ben stands there, his arms crossed over his broad chest, his face set in a scowl. “What’s going on, Bianca?” he demands. “Why are you here?”

I try to keep my voice calm. “I just needed some time to think,” I say. “I had a rough night, that’s all.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re lying,” he says flatly. “I know you, Bianca. You’re up to something.”

I don’t know what to say. I can feel the panic rising in my chest, and I know I have to get out of here before he starts asking more questions. “I have to go,” I say, stepping back from the door.

But Ben blocks my way. “Not so fast. You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what’s really going on.” His voice is low, and I can see the anger simmering beneath the surface.

I can’t let him see how scared I am. I take a step closer to him, my voice steady. “I’m pregnant... Okay? I just found out. I’m freaking out about it. I need a place to think.”

Ben looks at me with surprise written all over his face. “Pregnant?” he repeats. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“I just found out,” I repeat. “I’m sorry.”

He studies me for a moment longer before stepping aside. He shakes his head and glances over his shoulder. He has no clue what my future holds and I hate leaving him in a bad place, but lying is the only way to keep my child safe now. “So, what are you going to do?” he asks me.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I’m scared, Ben. You know how my brothers are.” He does... He knows exactly how. My brothers are, but just not how I am. That is my secret.

“Alright... Take the time you need.”

“Ben... Don’t tell anyone I’m here. Especially not Soren or Micah. Okay?” I plead with him to keep my confidence and he scowls at me but agrees.

“Yeah, alright. But don’t stick around here. I don’t need no scene tonight.” As he retreats and shuts the door I breathe out a sigh of relief. At least I have this place that is warm and dry to try to unwind a bit and make a plan.

I peel off my hoodie and jeans, dump them into the hamper, and head for the showers to warm up. If after the shower, Tony is still on my doorstep, I will have to put on one of these damn dresses and leave town anyway. Hopefully, he is gone and I

can just sneak home long enough to get some clothes and my stash of cash and fake IDs for the road. I may need them.

For now, I will warm up and try not to overthink. I'm worried about Rome, but he's a big boy. Hopefully with my warning he is on his toes now and won't be caught off guard by Mickey's new hitmen, because I know he will need more than one to do the same job I could have done alone.





# ROME

I drive to Dominic's house, mesmerized by the moon rising above the horizon and casting a golden hue around me.

The surreal feeling overwhelms me as I drive toward my father's deathbed, like I'm caught in a dream. He's really dying now. It's time to say goodbye. No more watching him suffer and be in pain.

I park the car and take a deep breath before walking up to the door. I pause for a moment, feeling the weight of what's about to happen pressing down on my chest. The change of leadership already happened. Dominic took over months ago, but this makes it all the more real. We are on our own now, leading our family and our business how we decide. I can't fathom him not being here anymore.

I knock softly and enter. The house has an eerie silence to it. My footsteps echo down the hallway as I approach the room where my brothers are gathered. They've been waiting for me, but I had to clear my head. When I enter, Dad is lying in his bed, eyes closed and breathing shallowly. His skin is pale and almost translucent, like a ghostly figure from beyond this world.

The room is still and silent apart from the sound of his labored breathing. I approach slowly, my heart heavy with emotion, as if it might burst open at any moment. I reach out to touch him one last time. He looks so peaceful now, like he's finally found some solace after all these years of pain and suffering.

I take a step back and look around the room. My brothers are all there, standing in solidarity, tears clouding a few of their

eyes. Ambivalence reverberates through me as I realize how much Dad meant to us all. In his last moments, we are here together as a family, remembering him and honoring his life. It's painful and yet somehow cathartic to know death comes as the end to all of our suffering, a divine gateway to a better ending that none of us can see, but all of us believe in.

"He's fading..." Brewster checks on the machines as my brothers hover closer than they have in weeks. I should be out hunting Bianca down, but I would never miss Dad's final moments for that.

Dominic steps forward and speaks softly. "Dad, it's time for us to say goodbye. We'll always remember you and the legacy you created here. Your strength and courage will live on in each of us." He takes an uncharacteristically shaky breath before continuing, "We love you and we'll miss you." His pain is felt by us all.

I stand there, feeling my throat tighten as I fight back anger at death itself. Dad was our leader for so many years and now he's leaving us. I watch my brothers say their final goodbyes to our father, I can't help but feel a sense of emptiness. I know that our lives will never be the same again, but I also know that our father's legacy will live on through us and the business that he built from the ground up.

I take a step closer to my father's bedside, reaching out to hold his frail and bony hand. His skin is cold to the touch, a reminder that death is imminent. I close my eyes, trying to imagine what he must be feeling in these final moments, wondering if he's scared or if he's at peace with what's to come. The whir and click of the machines are a strange comfort, but in moments Brewster will shut them off and his suffering will be over.

"It's time, boys." The old vet reaches for the machines and my brothers step aside. Dominic nods his consent and I take a step back from Dad's bedside.

As the machines beep their final warning, Brewster shuts them off one by one. The silence in the room is deafening as we

wait for Dad's final breath. It feels like an eternity before we hear the last raspy exhale leave his body, signaling his passing.

My heart feels like it's been ripped from my chest as I watch my father slip away from this world. I'm not sure how long we stand there in silence before Brewster finally speaks up. "I'm sorry for your loss. Your father was a fighter to the very end."

I nod, barely able to speak through the lump in my throat. "Thank you, Brewster. We appreciate everything you've done for us."

My brothers and I stand there for a few moments longer, each lost in our own thoughts and grief. It's only when the nurse comes in to prepare Dad's body for the funeral home that we finally start to move.

As we make our way out of the room, I can feel Dominic's gaze on me. We both know that there's something that needs to be discussed. I follow him as he leads me to a private corner of his home. "Rome, we need to talk about," Dominic starts, his voice low. He's only going to hound me about Bianca again and this time, he is the only leader I have. There is no higher authority I can speak with to appeal his decision.

"Dom, I—"

"Bring her in, Rome."

"Dominic, I understand that you have a job to do, but you don't understand the situation at all. I know she didn't shoot Matty." As if Dad dying wasn't enough, after the day I've had, and knowing what I have to do, I don't need this lecture too. They want an assassin dead, not the woman who belongs to me, and I can't reconcile how they are one in the same.

"She killed at least thirty men. That should be enough for you to understand she's a threat."

"Not to me," I snarl, watching him out of the corner of my eye. I know she'll never kill me or hurt me more than she has. That was a warning, and from L'ombra it was a gentle nudge. She's had a thousand opportunities to take me out and she hasn't. Likely, she was tasked with taking out the entire family, and that, too, has gone undone. Which means she has a

reason, because any assassin trained and paid to do a job that they don't complete does so for good reason, especially when the head of the Italian mob is the one pulling strings.

“Rome—”

“She warned me, Dom.” I look him square in the eye with determination. “She wasn't here to kill me. If she was, she'd have pulled the trigger on me and probably on you too.” I take a deep breath and strengthen my resolve. I won't kill her or even bring her in until I've spoken to her. “She gave me a warning that they are out for all of us, that we should watch Dad's funeral. There's a chance they will make an attempt that day.”

Dominic's eyes narrow and seem to grow darker, blackness swirling in them. He knows I'm right. If Bianca warned us about their plot, she isn't an immediate threat, but Mickey Giordano is—a huge one with a huge budget. We can cut the head off the snake a million times but until we root it out and find where it gains its strength, a new head will always grow back.

“I have to speak to her, find out what she knows.” I button my suit coat and turn to go but Dominic stops me.

“Bring her in, Rome.” He punctuates his words, pausing after each of them to make sure I understand.

“I'll bring her in, but you're not laying a finger on her, not until I've had my questions answered.” I stand with my back to him, jaw set. I'm the only one who could bring her in. She is literally a shadow. Now that we know who she is, she will vanish into the darkness, or disappear in the first morning light. She is aptly named; that much is certain. No one else will ever find her again.

A clap of thunder rumbles the house and the skies open up again for the second time tonight. It's like the angels weep for my family, or perhaps they're rejoicing in joy that Dad has come home. The weather matches our somber mood as I walk away from Dominic, not even responding to his orders.

I return to my car after the brief stint here to say goodbye. There isn't much point in sticking around for anything. The nurses and Brewster will handle Dad's body. The arrangements for Dad's burial have been made already. We knew this was coming. And my brothers will all head home to their respective houses to grieve or drink, or whatever it is they'll do, but I have a target to find and question.

It's raining so hard the streets are flooding. I drive through a few inches of rain, which makes me slow down. New York is awful at times with flash flooding and the sewers getting inundated, so I take my time. I roll past the few clubs I know Bianca frequents hoping she hasn't hidden out at the Flatiron where my presence is banned, but there is no sign of her, so I head across town. I find her car parked a few blocks away and shake my head. She knows they've kicked me out of this place more than once. It's likely the reason she's chosen to hide here.

I try to wait the rain out, but after checking the radar on my phone and realizing this isn't going to let up any time soon, I decide to head in even though it means I'll be soaked. I bypass the front door on purpose. I'd get about five steps into the place before they came charging at me with guns blazing this time. I've roughed up enough of their muscle to know I don't play nice.

The back door is where I'm headed, though I'm under no illusion that it's unlocked. I have to bang on it for ten straight minutes in order to garner any attention. A stout man with a full mustache opens the door and scowls into the darkness and I put my foot in the door to make sure he can't shut me out.

"I'm looking for Bianca." I try not to sound intimidating, but I'm shivering and soaked. I'm frustrated and I just want to get this over with so I can sleep tonight. Whether she confesses to plotting against my family or denies everything, I know I can't kill her. My heart would never let me do that unless she pushed me to it. It was shocking to hear her voice earlier in the bookstore. Shook me to my core.

"She ain't here, buddy." The man tries to slam the door but it catches on my boot.

“I need to see her. I know she’s here. I parked right by her car.” I try to pry it open but the man is too strong.

“I said she ain’t here. Now get lost before I call the cops.”

I’m not one to back down, so I keep pushing. “Look, I just need to talk to her. Please, it’s important.” This being polite shit is for the birds. If he doesn’t just show me in, we are going to go to the mats.

He grunts and shakes his head. “I ain’t lettin’ no wet rat into my house. Now scram before I call the cops.”

He tries to slam the door again, but my foot still blocks it. I yank the door open, nearly pulling him off his feet into the rain. His shoulder connects to my gut as I push past him, but I shove him down. I don’t feel even a bit of remorse. This piece of trash stands between me and my target.

“I’m not going to hurt her. I just need to talk to her.” I can see his face turn pale. He realizes just how out of his league he is and I’m not going to show him any mercy. He knows I’ll break his arms if he comes at me.

“She ain’t here. I swear.” he says through clenched teeth. He rises with fists ready, but I’m ready too.

“Get out of my way,” I order, bracing myself as he takes a swing. I dodge his punch with ease and throw a solid blow to his stomach. He doubles over, gasping for air, and I take the opportunity to grab him by the collar and drag him out of the way. He falls to the ground, groaning in pain, but I don’t look back. I have a job to do.

I make my way through the dimly lit hallway, my heart pounding in my chest. I can hear the muffled sounds of voices coming from one of the rooms. I approach the door and press my ear against it, trying to make out what they’re saying. It’s not Bianca; it’s a man and a woman with a nasally voice. So I move on toward her dressing room.

The idiot comes up from behind me and knocks the back of my knee, almost taking me to the ground before his arm shoots around my neck and puts me in a choke hold. I struggle, my vision starting to blur as I try to break free. But he’s too strong.

I can feel myself starting to lose consciousness and know if I don't do something I'm done. He'll call his bouncers back here and that will be the end of me. I dig deep and muster every ounce of strength I have, pulling hard as I lurch forward.

The man's body rolls over my shoulder and slams into the floor in front of me. His eyes are wide, a gush of air escaping his mouth. I pull him up by the collar, my knuckles becoming white as I curl my fingers into a fist. He stares up at me, pleading with his eyes, but I don't hear anything. All I see is the red mist of fury covering my vision.

"You gonna try and stop me now?" I growl in his face, making him flinch. "You're going to force me to hurt you."

I see the fear in his eyes and let go, his lanky form hitting the floor with a thud. One hard punch is all it takes and the man is out cold. There's nowhere to put him but I'm not interested in covering up a crime. I came for Bianca, and I won't leave until I have her. I turn back toward her room and see the door is slightly ajar.

I need a drink so bad, but if I had stopped to do that, this man would be dead and maybe Bianca too. I straighten my jacket and step over the guy's body, then head toward the dressing room. I've walked down this hallway a dozen times, each of them with a different feeling in my chest. Tonight I don't feel excited or aroused to be rendezvousing with her. I don't feel a need to see her face or hear her tinkling laughter. Tonight I need the truth, and I need to know who she is.

Standing outside the door, I listen for a moment to see if I can hear any movement. There is nothing but the sound of running water. She's in there, just a few feet away from my grasp, the assassin I've been hunting for months. If I had only known who she was in the beginning none of this would have happened. Then again, I wouldn't know the threat to my family was so real. I'd be believing that having her dead meant we were safe, when in reality, I know now, we'll never be safe, so long as Mickey is hunting us.

I push the door open and walk in. If she can't give me information on how to kill Mickey, Dominic will kill her. So I



pray to God she's willing to talk.



## BIANCA

**T**he hot water is relaxing, warming my bones. Though, I'm going to have to walk back to my car in a slinky dress and get soaked again if the rains don't let up. I've already scrubbed myself clean, but I can't bear to pull myself away from the heat of the shower. The water hitting my skin is therapy, distracting my nervous system from the world-shattering truth. I am skipping town tonight and leaving behind everything I know.

My shoulders sink and I turn my face to the flow, rinsing myself. If only this water could wash away my guilt. Guilt over how many people I've killed, guilt over hiding my truth from the only man I've ever loved, guilt over leaving town knowing I'm carrying his unborn child and he may never meet them. But nothing washes a conscience the way hot water and soap can wash away blood from your skin.

I look down at the scab on my side. The stitches should be cut out by a professional but I'll wait another week and snip them myself. It will leave a scar, maybe the only visible reminder that Roman touched me. I'll have his baby and I'll look into those eyes every day the rest of my life but I won't have him. That thought makes the confined space of the shower stall unbearable. I turn the water off and step out, reaching for the towel.

It feels cooler in here than it did, though maybe it's because I was just in scorching water. I shiver as I dry off and wind my hair into another towel, piling it on top of my head. I select a soft white robe from the hook on the back of the door and look

at my face in the mirror. My mascara has runs, not fully washed away. I don't even feel like wiping them away. I'll just cry again and make it worse.

There is no sense in prolonging the inevitable. I head out of the shower and into my dressing room and freeze in place as the room comes into view. Rome sits at my vanity relaxed back in the chair. A stream of smoke winds toward the ceiling from his cigarette, and he puffs out a large breath. He says nothing, just watches as I stare at him. My heart feels like a jackhammer. I've done my confessing to him; there's nothing left to say because I can't tell him I'm carrying his child. It will only make things worse.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, folding my arms over my chest. I tuck my hands safely beneath my armpits, but the shivering grows worse. Now, it's not due to cold but because of fear. In a one-to-one match, Rome will slaughter me, and I have no way to defend myself, no gun, no darts, no heart even.

"We need to talk." He stands, dropping his cigarette to the tile floor and snuffing it with the toe of his boot. I've seen the damage done to a few of our bouncers. He's a strong man. Not many men could take out two bouncers at a time. I take a step backward, my toes curling on the cold floor.

"About?"

"Oh, I think you know what about..." His eyes narrow on me and he takes a step closer.

I warned him about the threat to his life. He should be grateful to me, not angry. Why is he here? What is he trying to prove?  
"Rome, I..."

"You knew who I was from the beginning?" he asks, still advancing. Each step he takes chills me further. I'm hugging myself out of a need for reassurance and safety now. I may be a trained killer but I'm not too stupid to know when my time has come. He's come for me, and my gut says he's not going to have the same pity on me that I had on him.

"Rome, I... Please..." I take another step backward and find my back against a wall. There is nowhere to go in this place.

He's been here enough times he knows where to hide, how to escape, and even where I keep my bottle of liquor.

"Answer me!" he shouts and I jump. I'm shaking, terrified of what he may do.

"Yes, I knew. I was hired to kill you and your brothers." Trembling, I reach a hand for him, longing to feel the firmness of his chest beneath my fingertips, but he smacks it away, and then he takes a swing, slamming his fist into the wall next to my head.

"Rome, please!" I yelp, clamping my eyes shut. "Ben will hear you."

"You mean the guy I knocked out? He's sleeping peacefully in the hallway. We have plenty of privacy." Rome leans closer and I can smell the stench of tobacco on his breath. "You have some explaining to do, Bianca."

I open my eyes and meet his gaze. There's there, but also a hint of hurt. He's hurt that I would betray him like this, but I had no choice. It was either him or me. And I chose myself. I'm not proud of it, but it's the truth.

"I was ordered, Rome. The men I work for... I couldn't say no."

He scoffs and takes a step back. "You couldn't say no? You could've come to me, Bianca. I would've helped you. I would've done anything for you."

I shake my head. "You don't understand, Rome. Mickey would kill me and force my brothers to watch. I had no choice." I tremble as he pulls his hand out of the plaster and it crumbles onto my shoulder, dusting the robe in a fine powder.

Rome's eyes flicker with something almost unreadable. He steps closer, his hand reaching out to brush the plaster dust off my shoulder. I flinch at his touch, but he doesn't pull away.

"What do you want me to do, Bianca?" he asks in a low voice. "Do you want me to forgive you? Do you want me to forget what you've done? That you hid the fact that you're an assassin hired to kill me? Is that what? You think we can just

be friends now or something because you warned me instead of killing me?”

“I don’t know,” I plead, my voice breaking. “I just want you to understand. I didn’t have a choice.” Tears well up in my eyes and I watch his hand shift to his hip. I know he carries a weapon; it’s always there. Fear spikes through my chest and I don’t think—I react. I bring my knee up hard into his groin and he grunts and doubles over.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper, trying to dart away from him, but he grabs my arm in a tight grip. “You’re sorry?” he growls, his voice low and menacing. “You just kneed me in the balls and now you’re apologizing?”

I try to pull away, but his grip only tightens. “Let me go, Rome,” I plead, the fear in my voice evident. “Please.”

He doesn’t let go. Instead, he pulls me closer to him, his face inches from mine. “You think you can just hurt me and everything will be okay?” he snarls, his breath hot on my face. “You think you can betray me and then just say sorry?”

I shake my head, tears streaming down my face. “No, I don’t,” I whisper. “I just... I don’t know what to do, Rome. I’m scared.” I’m sobbing now, blinking hard to clear my vision. The only thing I can think is that he’s going to kill me.

He wheezes and sucks in breath as he tries to stand and I fight to get free. My fingernails claw at his wrist and I scream for help, but with the thumping of the music, no one will even hear me. “Please, Rome...” I free my wrist, but he crawls over me and grabs my neck in one firm grip. His fingers curl around it tightly, cutting off my ability to breathe and he smacks me hard. I grab his wrist in both hands and he shouts at me.

“You’re lucky I don’t kill you right now,” he snarls, his voice low and menacing.

I gasp for air as Rome tightens his grip around my neck, my vision starting to blur. Panic courses through my veins as I struggle to free myself, clawing at his hand with my nails. His

grip only tightens, and I feel lightheaded as my lungs scream for air.

“Please...” I sputter out. “I’m pregnant.” My words are breathy, barely audible, but his grip releases instantly. His hand lingers on my neck, but he’s not squeezing, and I greedily suck in air as if I haven’t ever tasted it before.

“You’re what?” Rome stands up, his hand pressed against his stomach. He looks at me with a mix of anger and something else, something I can’t quite place. I lie there trembling and crying then curl into a ball on my side and pray he just leaves. He could have killed me—and his own child.

“How did this happen?” he asks, his voice calmer now. I sit up and wipe my eyes. Rome is watching me, his expression unreadable.

“I... I don’t know,” I whisper, my voice cracking. It isn’t the reaction I thought he’d have, but at least he’s not trying to hurt me now. I wipe my eyes and sit up, watching him pace.

Rome looks down at his feet and his face goes pale. “It’s mine, isn’t it?” he asks.

“Of course it is,” I say, my voice small. “How could you think it isn’t?”

He scoffs and runs his hand through his hair. He takes a step towards me and I flinch, but he stops himself and takes a deep breath. “You were hired to kill me.”

“But I didn’t,” I protest, forcing myself off the floor. My cheek stings where he smacked me and I rub the sore spot on my neck from his hand. It doesn’t matter that he knows now. It can’t change the outcome anyway. I blew my cover and confessed to Mickey’s plans. I have to leave town or he will kill me now.

“But someone came after my brother.”

“I swear it wasn’t me, Rome. Matvey was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He just copped a stray from some douche bag. I swear it.” I reach for him but he jerks away.

“You know Dominic will never accept that. You killed at least thirty of our men. You killed Dimitri right in front of me.” His eyes flash with rage, fists curled into tight balls at his sides. I had no choice, and he doesn’t see it.

“They would kill me, Rome. Or Soren or Tony....” I want to take it all back, to go back and undo everything, but I can’t.

“So you killed Dimitri in front of me?”

“With a dart meant for you. I purposely missed...” My heart sinks. He’ll never believe me.

Rome stares at me for a long moment, his eyes locked onto mine. I can see the conflict playing out behind them, the struggle between anger and the desire to believe me. Finally, he takes a deep breath and turns away from me, pacing back and forth across the room.

“I need some time to think,” he says, his voice strained. “But we’re not done here. You’re going to have to answer for what you did.”

I flinch at his words, knowing that he’s right. I’ll have to pay for what I’ve done, one way or another. But I can’t help feeling a sense of relief that he’s not going to kill me on the spot.

“I have to leave town, Rome. Mickey will come after me. It’s not safe here, especially when my brothers learn I’m pregnant with your child.” I bite my lip and he stops and turns to face me. It’s no longer anger in his eye but a thirst. His shoulders square and his nostrils widen.

“No one will lay a hand on you.”

“The will. They will come for me and kill me, just like I was supposed to kill you. I have to leave.”

Rome moves toward me quickly, grabbing me by the elbows and pulling me against his body. It’s a startling move but I’m not surprised. He has already claimed possession of me; how much more now that I am carrying his child?

“Then you’ll work for me now. You join my family and I will protect you?” There is an intensity in his gaze I can’t avoid.



“And your brothers?” I ask, feeling my shackles of fear start to loosen their grip.

“They do what I say. No one touches you...” I can feel his breath on my lips as he leans in, his eyes never leaving mine. My heart races as I realize what he’s offering me. Protection, safety, and a chance to be with him. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted, but I know it comes with a price.

“What do you want from me?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Rome’s grip on my arms tightens as he pulls me even closer, his lips hovering over mine. “Everything,” he says, his voice low and dangerous. “I want you to be mine, body and soul. I want you to bear my children, and I want you to obey me. Always.”

I know what he means by obey. He wants me to be his loyal servant, to do whatever he asks of me. But I also know that I have no choice. If I want to survive, if I want my child to survive, I have to accept his offer.

“Okay,” I say, my voice trembling with fear and excitement. Rome’s eyes light up with a fierce intensity and he pulls me in for a deep kiss. His lips are rough and demanding as he claims me completely. I feel his hands exploring my body, possessive and hungry.

His strength surprises me as he lifts me and carries me toward the vanity. I squirm in his arms, suddenly feeling vulnerable and exposed. He sets me down on my feet, but only so he can untie my robe and pull it over my shoulders. It falls to the ground and he lowers himself onto the chair behind him, then presses his lips to my stomach.

“It’s true?” he asks, touching my skin lightly just below my navel.

“Yes, it’s true,” I assure him, moving closer. He leans back in the chair and I straddle him, feeling all the weight of the past few weeks of torment melting away. The secret is out and nothing I’ve feared has been true, at least not about Rome. “God, Rome, I thought you’d hate me.”

“Why would I hate you?” he asks, pulling my hips so my body sits snugly against his. My pussy aches for him. He kisses my chest softly, then finds a nipple and sucks it.

“Because of what I’ve done,” I moan, closing my eyes.

“I don’t care what you’ve done,” he says, biting my nipple gently. A moan escapes my lips and I reach for him, eager for his touch. I arch my back into him and he growls against my tits. “You’ve been mine since the moment we met. Nothing will change that.” He takes my wrists and pulls them over his shoulder, then leans back in his chair again.

Straddling his lap. I’m totally open to him and I know he can see all my secrets. “I’ll never be anyone else’s.” It’s all I want to be now, his.

Rome kneads one of my tits while he grips my hip with the other. I’m worked up now, emotionally and physically. I want him and I want this to cement our union. There are no more secrets. He was hunting me and didn’t know it was me, and I was supposed to kill him but now we are one. Nothing can separate us now.

I undo his belt and the fly of his slacks and pull his cock free. It’s hard, ready for me. I’ve done this dozens of times, but never like this, never as myself with all my secrets in the open. Never once have I felt accepted the way I truly am. I stroke him and he growls in pleasure.

“Fuck... I’ve missed you.”

“I love you, Roman,” I rise up, sliding his dick into myself and then lower onto it gently. But Rome doesn’t do anything gently. He grabs my hips and thrusts up into me, filling me completely.

“Oh god yes,” I moan. He grabs my ass and grinds me up and down on his cock, fucking me hard and fast. I lean back and rest my hands on his knees as he fucks me. He slams into me and I throw my head back in pleasure, then moan his name again and again.

I cry out, then moan as he reaches up and pinches my nipples, one in each hand. He rolls them between his fingers and I

moan louder, lost in the pleasure. I lean back and look down at him, at the man who has become my whole world.

“I love you,” I say again, and feel the tears well up in my eyes.

“I love you too,” he says, his voice strained as he comes close to orgasm. He fucks me harder, and I cling to him and let him fuck me. The pleasure builds inside me. I’m so close. I need to come so bad. I reach down and rub my clit, then pinch it between my fingers. I’m so wet and turned on, it feels amazing. I can’t hold back; orgasm hits me and I gasp. My whole body shakes and tenses and I feel like I’m going to explode.

“Oh god, oh god,” I cry out as wave after wave of pleasure washes through me.

“Fuck yes,” Rome grunts and thrusts up into me as his own orgasm overtakes him. His cock swells inside me and he comes, filling me with his seed. He groans as I ride out my orgasm and lean down and kiss him. He has no clue how much I need him, how hard my brothers will fight to get me back and what Mickey will go through to silence me. I know that man’s secrets.

Laying across Rome’s chest, I catch my breath, and I know it won’t be easy. “I need to get into my place and get some things.”

“I’ll take you...” he says, lifting me up so I can look at him.

“No... It’s too dangerous. They could be watching.” I touch his face softly. “I can’t lose you now that we finally have each other.” I stare into his eyes. “You have to leave. I’ll meet you near your house, at that little bus stop, tomorrow morning around eight a.m.” I slide off his lap, and he puts his junk back into his pants.

“If you’re late?”

“I won’t be.” I nod and kiss him as he stands and I back away so he can leave. “I love you, Rome.”

He sighs and leaves obediently and I watch him shut the door. Now, I just have to get in and out of my place without my

brothers seeing me. Then I can start over with Rome—and our child.



## ROME

Rain clouds hang in the sky, drenching us as we hover beneath the outstretched branches of the pine trees in our family cemetery. Dad didn't want a ceremony or any fanfare, just a simple cremation and to be dumped at sea or something. I was too busy hunting a ghost to help in the plans at all. But we have a casket and a hole in the ground to commemorate his death and send him to the other side. Dominic thought our extended family would appreciate the sentiment.

"So you finished it?" Dominic is as collected as normal, stoic face as his eyes roam across the mourners seated beneath a canopy listening to the priest offer a blessing over Dad's life. Rain patters on the umbrella I hold up in almost deafening volumes making it impossible to hear anything except my brother's voice.

"I spoke with her. We were supposed to meet but she didn't show, and I don't know where she lives. She isn't responding to her voice and text messages and she hasn't shown up at the club since." Bianca's confession shocked me, but I thought we were on the same page. I sigh in frustration as I try to make sense of it all. She's gone, like the wind, and that frustrates me. I can't help but feel a pang of sadness as her words echo in my head. I should have made her come with me. Anything could have happened to her, or maybe she just skipped town.

"So you have no idea where she is?" His eyes roam across the cemetery, watching everything that moves. We know there is a credible threat to our lives today since we're all out in the

open. After Bianca's warning we took steps to mitigate that risk, but it's never zero.

"My gut tells me she's here. If she wanted to kill me, she would have, Dom." I bite down on my tongue to stop the anger from rising up. She confesses she's pregnant then vanishes without a trace. That is fishy to me. She had no reason to tell me about the pregnancy at all, but she did. It tells me her disappearance is suspicious, that perhaps Mickey harmed her or worse.

"Find her..."

"Dom, there's something you need to know." I brace myself for his reaction to the news, but it has to come out. If Bianca is out there waiting for me to find her and bring her in like I told her I would, Dominic will find out anyway.

He jerks his chin upward in the tiniest of perceptible movements and I know he's waiting to hear what I have to say. It's going to color everything he thinks about me and Bianca, and I have to say it anyway.

"She's pregnant."

Dominic's eyes widen in surprise as he processes the news. For a moment, he's silent, and I can see he's struggling to keep his emotions in check. I can't blame him. This changes everything.

"Pregnant?" he repeats, his voice low and dangerous. "How do you know this?"

"I... She told me," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "And before you respond, I know what it means, and what you might expect, and I will make sure it's handled."

Dominic's eyes narrow as he stares at me, and I can feel the anger radiating off him. He doesn't say anything for a long moment, but I can see the wheels turning in his head.

Finally, he speaks. "Handled? You think this is something that can be handled?" His voice is laced with disbelief and a hint of fury.

I take a step back, feeling the weight of his anger. “I know it’s not ideal, Dom. But I’ll take care of it.”

Dominic doesn’t respond immediately. Instead, he turns his gaze back to the cemetery, scanning the area once again. I can see the tension in his body, the way his muscles are coiled and ready to strike at any moment. I know that he’s not just angry about Bianca’s disappearance or her pregnancy. There’s something else, something deeper that’s fueling his rage.

Finally, he turns back to me, his eyes dark with fury. “You don’t understand, do you?” he says, his voice low and dangerous. “This isn’t just about Bianca or her pregnancy. This is about trust. You made a promise to me, to this family, and you broke it. You went against my orders and you put us all at risk.”

I take another step back, feeling the weight of his words. “I know, Dom,” I say, my voice barely audible now as the rain increases. “And I’m sorry.”

I never once intended to put my family at greater risk, but I know I have. If Bianca switches sides and joins me, we’ll have an even bigger target on our backs and so will she. Not only will the Italians, headed by Mickey, be after her, but also her brothers will have a personal vendetta to settle with me. I’ll never cease from looking over my shoulder. But it’s my child.

Dom takes a deep breath, his nostrils flaring as he contemplates what to do. I know that whatever happens next is going to be hard for both of us. Finally, he speaks. “You will find her and bring her in,” he says sternly. I nod my head in agreement, feeling a wave of relief wash over me. Dom may be angry with me, but he still trusts me enough to put his faith in me to get the job done. “But,” he continues, “she will end this all for us. Once for all the Italians will look a new direction and our warring will be over.”

I nod my head, understanding the gravity of the situation. It’s not just about finding Bianca and bringing her in, it’s about ending this war once and for all. I know that it won’t be easy, but I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen.



“So what next?” He’s got some sort of scheme cooked up. I can tell. It won’t be as easy as me bringing Bianca in and keeping her safe. There will be bloodshed somehow.

“There’s one more thing,” he says, his voice low and serious. “We need to take out Mickey.”

My heart sinks at the mention of his name. Mickey is the head of the Italian family, and the man who owns Bianca, dead or alive. He’s ruthless and cunning, and taking him out won’t be easy. He’s surrounded day and night by protectors; no one gets in his inner circle without paying a hefty price.

“How do we do that?”

Now it is my eyes that are scanning the cemetery, watching as mourners filter away from the casket through the mud to head home. Not one of them approaches us. They all know we are talking business. What else would we be doing standing so far away from everyone else?

“Bianca will do it,” Dom finally says. “You will instruct her to kill Mickey, or we will kill her.”

My jaw tightens as I try to wrap my head around what he is suggesting. Force Bianca to kill Mickey? He must be out of his mind. Surely, there must be another way. But then again, Dom always has a plan and I know he’s not one to make rash decisions. If Bianca kills Mickey, it draws the attention away from us, thus alleviating the feud between families for a moment.

“Do you think she will do it?” I am under no illusion that she will turn her back on everything she’s known.

Dom looks at me for a moment before turning away again and staring off into the horizon. When he finally speaks, his voice is strong and determined. “She will have to,” he says firmly.

I know that Dom is right. Bianca is the only one who can take out Mickey and end this feud once and for all. But the thought of forcing her to do it makes me sick to my stomach. I can’t imagine what she must be going through right now, being hunted down by both families and forced to do our bidding.

I make my way back to my car, my mind racing with thoughts of Bianca and the task at hand. The first thing I have to do is find her, which might prove impossible if she doesn't pick up her phone. I've tried calling a million times but to no avail. Still, as I start the car and pull out, I try one more time. The line rings and rings. I nearly hang up when finally, after days of calling, she answers.

"Rome..." She sounds rushed and scared. She's whispering and panting, as if she's out of breath too. "They won't let me leave."

My heart sinks as I hear her words. I knew something was wrong when she didn't pick up my calls, but I never thought it would be this serious. I grip the steering wheel tighter and take a deep breath, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Who won't let you leave, Bianca?" I ask, my mind already racing with different scenarios.

"My brothers..." She trails off, as if she's afraid to say more. I hear men's voices in the background laughing.

"What's going on?" I drive, but I have no clue where I'm going.

"They said they're going to 'rehabilitate' me. I'm not sure what that means but I don't like it. Someone has been here round the clock to make sure I don't leave. I think the order came from Mickey. Rome, they're going to kill you." She sounds scared for the first time since I met her and that makes my instinct to protect her blossom.

"It's alright, Bianca," I reassure her. "Just tell me where you are. I'll come get you."

She gives me an address and hangs up, leaving me with more questions than answers. As I make my way to the location she gave me, I can feel my anger rising. How could someone do this to her? How could they think they have the right to keep her against her will?

When I arrive at the address, I see a run-down building that looks like it's been abandoned for years. Bianca's car is parked outside, but there are no other signs of life. I park my car a few

blocks away and make my way to the building. As I get closer, I can hear muffled voices coming from inside. I take a deep breath and approach cautiously, preparing myself for whatever is waiting for me.

The door is unlocked, so I push it open slowly, trying to make as little noise as possible. The room is dimly lit, but I can see Bianca tied up in a chair, her mouth covered with duct tape. She looks up at me with pleading eyes, and I can tell she's been through a lot.

I move quickly, cutting the tape off her mouth and untying her hands and feet. She falls into my arms, tears streaming down her face. I hold her tight, feeling anger and protectiveness surge through me. I can't believe someone would do this to her, someone who I care about deeply.

"Are you okay?" I whisper, rubbing her back gently.

"Rome, we have to get out of here. They'll see you..." She clings to me and I lift her into my arms. She has no shoes, no jacket. It's a crisp forty-three degrees but with the wind it feels like below freezing. We make it to the car and I tuck her safely away inside before hearing the door slam open. I look up to see a man who looks just like her staring at me.

I dash for the driver's door as he pulls a gun and aims it at me. Bullets fly as I climb in and floor the gas pedal. She's still traumatized by what happened and trembling next to me, not the trained killer they make her out to be. I hear the sound of squealing tires in the distance, and I know that we're not out of danger yet. I glance over at Bianca, and my heart aches at the sight of her trembling form.

"It's alright, Bianca," I whisper, my hand on her thigh. "I won't let anyone hurt you. You're safe with me." I glance in the rearview mirror and see a black SUV gaining on us. I weave in and out of traffic, swerving around parked cars and speeding up when I can. The car behind us is relentless, but I manage to stay ahead of them for now. I take a sharp turn and we both scream as the car almost flips over, but I'm able to correct it by accelerating into the turn.

I hear the sound of gunshots as they try to take us down. We duck lower in our seats and I press my foot harder on the gas pedal, determined to get away from them. Bianca straightens and looks back through the rear window while holding out her hand.

“What?” I snap, uncertain what she’s asking. I nearly strike a car as I zoom through an intersection with a red light.

“Your gun!” she shouts, holding her hand out emphatically. Bullets still rain down on us, but I yank my gun out of its holster on my hip and thrust it into her hand.

She grasps it firmly and takes aim at the car behind us. I hear a crackling sound as she fires off two shots, and the back window shatters. More rounds strike the car, and I swerve through another intersection. This time the car behind us isn’t so lucky. They crash into a lamppost and I keep driving, not daring to look back. Bianca curls into a ball sobbing and I rest my hand on her shoulder.

I don’t stop driving until we are on the far side of town, doubling back on my route more than once to make sure I’m not being followed. Slowly, she comes out of her shell, drying her tears and sitting straighter. When I do find a place to park, I know what I have to tell her will only make her upset again.

“Bianca, you’re not going to like what I have to say.” I shut the engine off and angle my body to face her. We can’t stay here long. With the ruckus we made across town, someone will surely report my car as being shot up with a busted window. The cops will be out looking for me.

Bianca wipes her eyes and nods at me. I can see she has put her trust in me to keep her safe now, and that must feel terrifying to her. She is quite literally in her enemy’s hands and there is no way of going back now, not after shooting at her brothers and causing them to crash.

“What is it?”

I take a deep breath and blow it out, then purse my lips. It won’t be easy for her to accomplish the task, especially given the climate of the Italian family and their knowledge of her

now. Our only chance to do this is now. If we wait, her brothers will inform Mickey that she's run away and he'll never trust her again. If that hasn't happened already.

"Can you get close to Giordano?" I look her dead in the eye as she swallows hard.

"I think so... Why?" Her eyes blink rapidly. She's concerned and confused.

"Because you have to kill him." I put a steadying hand on her knee. "It's the only way Dominic lets you live."

"Rome, I..." She looks away and her face falls. "I can't."

"You have to." I squeeze her knee. "Because I intend to raise my baby with you, and this is the only way we can do that."

She shakes her head and stares off into the distance. I knew it wouldn't be easy for her, but I will make sure she does it. I will be there to confirm it happens, and then I will make sure to fight like hell to ensure she's safe from my family.

My child's life depends on it.



## ROME

**W**hat Rome suggests I do—killing the Don of the Italian mob—it's insane. My mind reels at his pronouncement. Kill Mickey and I'm free? I can be with Rome then, but at what cost? He won't be able to stop the Italians from coming after me every day the rest of my life. And while a pseudonym or alias may be able to disguise me for a while, they'll recognize me one day. It won't even take long, not when they put two and two together and realize I'm pregnant with Rome's child. They'll look for me, and they may very well start with him.

"I can't do this, Rome." I stare out across the city block stretching out before me. Rome's car sits across the street and down a few blocks from where I know Mickey does his business. Right now I see several cars, all of them belonging to the muscle that follows him around. They're having some sort of meeting. "I can't walk right in there and kill him. Look how many cars there are. If my brothers told Mickey about their little plot to rehabilitate me, he'll see me coming from a mile away."

"And if they haven't said a word, you can walk in and kill him and walk out as easy as buying a candy bar at the Seven-Eleven." He thrusts a gun out toward me but I push it away. I know that much noise would only draw attention. If Rome's idea is for them to pin this all on me, he has to do it my way. Guns are loud; that's why L'ombra uses poison. I have to stick to the shadows.

“Just watch,” I tell him, starting to finally get up the nerve to do this. I have no emotional connection to Mickey, no reason to feel sorry for him or abstain from making the hit. My conscience tells me the same thing it did every time Mickey has ordered a hit. It’s just a job. Someone is paying me a very large price to take someone’s life, and in this case, the price is my life and the life of my unborn child. I just have to kill the most powerful and dangerous target I’ve ever had.

We focus our eyes on the front of the building where a man exits through the door beneath the marquee. The old restaurant still functions but only as a front for Mickey’s money laundering operation. They bring in rolls of wrapping paper from Canada that are really just sheets of counterfeit cash that needs washed and cut. Then they hand it out as change through several of their businesses and even a few laundromats.

The man walks toward one of the cars parked out here and takes off; then another joins him, leaving a few empty spaces out front. Before long only two cars remain—one parked in front of the building and Rome’s more than a block away. Their meeting is over, and at this time of day—and with the pouring rain slicking the streets and sidewalks—the place is dead. There may be a half-dozen wait staff, including management, but in the back room, it’s likely just Mickey and one of his bodyguards. If Soren hadn’t become Mickey’s right-hand man, I’d never know any of this. Lucky for me, my brother is ambitious.

“So how do we do this?” Rome seems antsy, and he well should be. Taking out the Don isn’t going to go over well, though from my perspective it’s seeming more and more likely that I succeed. The waiters and waitresses will let me walk right through the building unfussed. They know me. Soren has brought me to meetings with Mickey here a few times.

“I will go in the front.” I pick up the small darts Rome bought for me only a few hours ago as we plotted out the safest way. He still thinks I should carry a weapon, but that will only raise suspicion before I even get in the room with Mickey. My darts



will go undetected. “You will go around back. When I’m past the wait staff, I’ll let you in where the cameras won’t see you.”

I take the sodium cyanide out and fill the end of one dart with it, then use a tranquilizer solution in the second. I will get one shot each, but I’m not worried. I am an ace shot with every dart gun I’ve ever used. The one Rome bought at the sporting goods store will do the trick.

“And I’m there as backup?”

“Yes.” I glance at the building and try to bolster my resolve. “Keep the car running out back in case we need a getaway. I wish you didn’t have to come in at all.”

Turning to look at Rome, I watch him pull his balaclava over his head. It’s the only one-hundred-percent fool-proof way of making sure his face doesn’t get seen. I can lead him past security cameras, but I can’t make sure a stray waiter or manager doesn’t get a glimpse of him.

“Are you ready?” I ask, now feeling my nerves kick in. It’s a healthy feeling to have, knowing you are walking into a lion’s den and all. Having no fear would be stupid—like trying to surf in a hurricane—just death waiting to happen.

“Ready,” he mumbles, holstering his gun. I tuck the darts into the waistband of the jeans I’m wearing—also compliments of Rome this afternoon—and step out of his car. He pulls away slowly. He knows the plan and I know he will stick to it. That’s one thing I can count on, that Roman Gusev will back me up in killing his family’s largest rival. I don’t have to think twice about it. And I know he won’t leave me here to fend for myself. He wants this child as much as he wants me.

My sneakers slosh through puddles as I jog up to the restaurant. A few heads pop up to look at me when I walk in and the bell jingles. I recognize the host right away and he nods at me. “Here to see Mickey?” he asks, and I jerk my chin up. My business is always way above his pay grade, so today is no different. “He’s in the back.”

Eyes nervously scanning the empty dining room, I head to the door to the kitchen. Two waiters watch me walk across the

dimly lit room, weaving between tables. I keep my head down because none of Mickey's business connections ever speak to these low-level schmucks. They probably understand he's part of the mob, but they're here to wait tables and get tips. It's just a quick paycheck with no liability or tie to the darker business dealings.

In the kitchen, I shimmy past a large rolling shelf of dishes steaming hot from the dishwasher. The cook grunts an acknowledgement of my presence but doesn't so much as glance at me. That's all the better. The host has seen me and so have two waiters. They will confirm to Soren and the rest of the mob that I am the one who was here, the one who killed Mickey. And when that happens, Soren won't have a choice but to come after me.

The storage room in this place is large, overly large considering the size of the restaurant, but again, it's just a front for Mickey's organization. This back room is easily twice the size of the dining room and the private office in back is like a fucking suite at the Hilton. Security cameras cover almost every angle, leaving one specific blind spot to the back entrance. It allows Mickey to sneak in and out undetected when he does nefarious crimes and needs an alibi.

I hear voices coming from the office, but I head straight to the door, opening it. Rome is there, mask on, ready to move. I let the door swing shut after he enters and he progresses toward the office the way I showed him, hugging the wall like it's my body. I walk just in sight of the camera and pray that Mickey isn't watching the feed. If he saw that I opened the door for Rome, he'll be prepared for me to enter the office. The closer we get though, the more convinced I am that he saw nothing.

"Stay here," I whisper to Rome, but he knows how this is supposed to go down. He's only here if I miss and they get physical. He nods his consent and remains just outside the door as I slink in, ready to make my move.

"Ah, Bianca, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Mickey straightens in his seat and tucks his tie beneath his suit coat.

“It’s done.” The jacket I wear is damp from the rain, and I fiddle with the end of the dart gun tucked up my sleeve. It’s a short one, the end of which I feel pressing against the heel of my palm.

“And the proof?” His eyebrows rise in intrigue, but his lips draw to a thin line as he runs a tongue across his teeth beneath them.

“You’ll see on the news.” He sits behind a large table, leaning back. His muscle, a guy I recognize but whose name I don’t know, stands beside him. Just as I thought; he only has one guard today.

So far my plan is working and Mickey doesn’t seem to suspect a thing. I move deeper into the room, folding my hands in front of myself. I grasp my right wrist and feel the tip of the dart gun there hiding away.

“Hmm, interesting, because when I last spoke to Soren, he was certain you weren’t going to pull it off and that he needed to take over.” My blood runs cold at the mention of my brother’s name.

“He was wrong.” I square my shoulders and stiffen my resolve. I’m looking into the eyes of death and they’re staring back at me accusingly. “I did it this morning at the funeral for Alexsi as I promised I would.”

Mickey looks up at his guard and the man reaches for his weapon. I’m made. The only way he could know I’m lying is if Soren’s plan for rehabilitation was Mickey’s idea all along. Without thinking, I drop to a knee while pulling the gun out and a dart from my waistband. The green tip slips into the gun as I bring it to my lips and I manage to send a puff of air down the tube as the man takes aim.

Before he can pull the trigger though, I’m rolling, maneuvering away from the spot to dodge a literal bullet. The gun booms loudly and I say, “Shit!” I missed him. I had to have. I find myself crashing into a chair before pushing myself upward and the door bursts open to reveal Rome with his gun on aim. He pulls the trigger and the man drops, and Mickey is left with his hands raised in surrender.

“Do it,” he barks at me, and I pull the second dart from my hip.

“Now, wait a second, Bianca... We can work this—” But Mickey can’t even finish his sentence as the dart sticks in his neck. He grasps at it, but the release is clean. Even if someone could suck the toxin out, he has only minutes left now. He begins coughing, grasping at his neck and chest.

“It’s over, Mickey... I’m out,” I tell him, moving toward the door. After the gunshot the employees will be coming to see what’s going on. We make it to the back door just as the cook rounds the corner with a shotgun in hand. He fires off a round that blasts the heavy metal door as it closes behind us and we jump into Rome’s car. He races off, tearing the balaclava off his head and glancing down at me.

“Are you okay? Are you hit?”

“I’m fine, Rome, drive.” I sit up and buckle in for the ride. I have no clue where we are going but I assume to his house. The job is done now and my heart is so torn up. I stare off into space not paying attention to where we’re at or what we’re doing. My brothers will come for me and Rome will be forced to defend me. It’s just what will happen.

“You can’t harm them,” I mutter, and he grunts. He knows what I mean. “Not even if they harm me. That’s my condition.”

Rome is silent the rest of the drive. At his place, he opens the car door for me and leads me into his house. It’s smaller than I figured it would be, smaller than it looks from the outside at least. His strong hand rests on my back as he guides me into a bedroom. I’m worn out and emotional. This entire fucking thing has given me a headache, but I still want his arms around me. So when he gets me to strip down to my panties and tucks me into bed, I grasp his hand and ask him to stay.

“Please...” I whisper and he nods. Rome peels off his suit and button-down shirt. Just in his boxers he crawls into bed next to me and curls around me. We lie there for a few minutes in tense silence until I feel a flutter in my stomach. I grip his

hand and press his palm against my skin and he kisses the back of my shoulder.

“He’s a strong one.”

“Or she...” I counter, pushing his hand lower. His fingers dance over my mound, pressing on my panties until they find my clit. I arch my pelvis into his hand and moan softly as he rubs. He doesn’t shy away either, pressing harder against me. His dick is swelling too, pressing against my panties in back.

He pulls my panties down and removes his boxers. His cock is swollen and red. I wrap my fingers around the base and stroke him. I love the way he moans for me, his eyes squeezed shut. “Fuck me, Rome,” I whisper.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I spread my legs, resting my feet against the bed. He grabs my waist and pulls me to the edge of the bed. My eyes are on his cock as he guides it to my entrance.

“Yes,” I moan, and he begins to slide inside me. I bite my lip and wrap my arms around his shoulders. His hands grasp my hips and he pulls me to meet his thrust. He thrusts into me slowly at first, but the pace quickens as he begins to fuck me.

“Faster,” I moan, and he obeys. He fucks me hard against the bed, pushing me against the mattress so hard I can barely breathe. My toes curl and I struggle to keep my eyes open.

“Oh fuck,” I moan, and he whispers something I can’t hear. I feel his cock twitch inside me and I know he’s close. I squeeze my legs together and he slides into me harder. He thrusts into me hard and fast; each time he hits the back of my pussy. He wraps an arm around my waist and uses his hand to stroke my pussy. I arch my back and cry out as my orgasm creeps up on me. “Rome!” I groan, “I’m coming.”

My pussy clenches around his cock and he thrusts into me once more before I feel him come. He groans and kisses my shoulder. I slowly come down from my orgasm, feeling Rome’s hot lips on my skin. His hand brushes hair away from my face and he kisses my cheek. “You alright?” he asks.

“Yeah.” He smirks and kisses me.

“Good.” He pulls out of me and I frown. I want him to stay inside of me forever. “Sleep,” he whispers. “I’ll be here when you wake.”

I curl into a ball and he covers me, and I’m already dozing before he leaves the room. The rest of my life will be lived on the run but it’s the only life I have now. I have Rome and this baby, and I have fear. But two out of three ain’t bad. Right?



## ROME

I stand in the doorway watching two of my brothers' wives sit with Bianca and chat about plans for a baby shower.

The smile on her face is priceless. I haven't seen one like it in months, not that genuine anyway. Bianca has seen better days. The way her brothers search for her and haunt her is relentless. It's been exactly three months since she told me she was pregnant, and despite the little skirmishes on the street being squelched by bigger issues, the war is not over as Dominic planned.

I sip my glass of whiskey, thankful that she is here. Their plan to "rehabilitate" her would have killed her, and if I hadn't gotten her out of there my child would be dead. Now we are planning all the things needed to bring a child into the world. I had no idea babies need so much furniture, but the ladies all insist that all fifty things on her gift registry are essential.

She smiles up at me from across the room. Her eyes glow with emotion. She's truly happy here for the first time in her life. Dominic has accepted her in with open arms, though he still has one of my guys watching her round the clock. I tell her it's for her protection to keep any unwanted intrusions away, but it's as much for our family as it is her. Her brothers represent a threat to us all now, though they're scrambling with trying to find a new leader for the entire organization.

Just last week at one of Bianca's prenatal checkups we had to cut and run. Her oldest brother caught on to the fact that she's pregnant and had the clinic staked out. He's been watching and it makes me nervous, so now she stays inside the walls of my



home unless accompanied by me and riding in an armored car. I am not under any illusion that we'll catch a fucking break any time soon, or that they will give up trying to get at her for killing their leader, but one can hope.

“Dom, would you like a refresher?” Nanette—Dominic’s wife—holds a bottle of whiskey up and I allow her to top off my glass. Today is a day of celebration for more than one reason. Bianca’s shower is this weekend and Matty has finally made a full recovery and he’s back in the game. Not only that, he’s planning to marry his woman soon, and another bundle of joy will join us in the tradition of carrying on the Gusev name.

“Thank you, Nan.” I nod at her, and she pats my shoulder.

“Bianca fits in so well, Rome. She is such a wonderful woman.” Nanette’s acceptance was hard fought. Convincing her to allow a woman who switched sides mid-war wasn’t easy, especially given how many times she killed someone in our family. But when it came down to it, her brother came into this family by similar means and with Dominic’s blessing, Bianca was accepted.

“I am quite happy she’s mine.” I sip my whiskey again as Nanette excuses herself to join the ladies and have a drink with them too. Bianca has a glass of grape juice, hand rested on her rounding abdomen. It won’t be long and she’ll bring my child into the world. It’s surreal to think that I will be a father in just a few months’ time, and on the heels of burying my father. He taught me everything he knew about parenting, though, and with my band of brothers, we’ll get through anything. Including fatherhood.

“Rome,” Dominic calls from somewhere behind me. The only one of my brothers who joined us today for lunch, I turn to see him standing in the open door to my den. He holds two cigars and a lighter.

“Have to do that outside now,” I grumble. I feel like I’m being domesticated like an animal, but Bianca—who quit smoking for the health of the baby—insists that smoking be done outdoors now.

Dominic chuckles and mutters, “You’re pussy whipped.”

I shake my head but can't hold back a grin. "Just look at her? Wouldn't you be?"

Moving toward him as he retreats down the hallway toward my back patio, I think of Bianca. She had everything going for her as a singer, looks, pizzazz, charisma... She gave it all away to be a mother, to bear my child. She could easily have aborted and carried out her job to kill me, but in the insanity of it all, she saw something in me she needed in her life.

"Matty doesn't know what he's getting into, does he? All these women around are making us soft, Rome." Dominic pushes open the back door and walks out into the crisp fall air. I let the door swing shut behind me and take a cigar from his hand.

"Not soft..." I think for a moment trying to come up with the appropriate word. "They make us human."

They have a way of taking our stony hearts, hardened by years of killing and "business," and softening them to have compassion and understanding. All the while, we still keep things floating, every cog wheel turning in time. Dad always said there is a right way and a wrong way to do things. We are trained killers, mercenaries, arms dealers, drug traffickers, and the list goes on. But to do so from the paradigm of what family really means, none of us knew until we found the women our souls were destined to.

"Ah, yes," he strikes the lighter and a flame flickers to life. I watch as he holds the cigar out, flame running across the cut end, and then lifts it to his lips to take a long drag. When he hands me the lighter, I do the same.

A breeze carries away the faint hint of cherry tobacco, a scent impressed upon my mind as that of my father. His life and legacy live on in our hearts and through our actions. Dominic is our leader now, and all of us know he was the right choice. Things are running more smoothly with him at the helm. Dad's medical issues prevented him from being the leader he wanted to be.

"So the wedding..." Dom says. "You're running security?" He puffs on his cigar and eyes me. The bright red cherry of flame burns brightly and then fades as he lowers it from his lips.

“Yeah...I’ll be handling security,” I reply, taking another drag from my cigar. “We’ve got a lot of high-profile guests attending. We can’t afford any slip-ups.”

“You know your stuff, that’s for sure.” He nods and takes another puff from his cigar. “I’m glad you’re on the job. No one else could do it better.”

His compliment strokes my ego. Not like I need an ego stroke, but it’s good to know my leader has confidence in me, and it’s good to know my brother is proud, even if he didn’t exactly say those words.

“And the war?” I ask, knowing it’s not over.

Dom’s brow furrows and he takes a long drag from his cigar before setting it down in the ashtray Bianca purchased so we don’t leave cigar and cigarette butts out here. He looks away, off into the distance, as if lost in thought.

“The war is far from over,” he says matter-of-factly. “We are still outnumbered and outgunned. But we will prevail. We have to.” His voice is filled with determination as he speaks, and I can see the fire in his eyes as he stares off into the horizon, brooding.

My mind drifts away from the conversation as I ponder my own thoughts. I think about how far we have come and the challenges that lie ahead. I remember all of the people who have died in this war for territory and prominence, and those who are still fighting for their lives. And then I think of the women who have come into my life, the ones who have taken our hardened hearts and made them soft. They have given us a sense of purpose and understanding that was never there before, and it is because of them that we continue to fight with strength and resilience.

“It’s quiet now, but when they get organized, they’ll come with vengeance.” Dominic’s cigar ash blows in the wind and he turns so it doesn’t catch on his jacket. The valley between his eyebrows is deep, worn in by years of hard-earned wisdom and experience.

“We’ll be ready,” I say, knowing that we will never give up until the war is won.

He nods and takes a final puff from his cigar before extinguishing it in the ashtray.

“The Italians will never give up,” he says. “They have a thirst for blood and a persistence that is unmatched.”

I agree with him, knowing that the Italians will never stop until they have achieved their goal. They are relentless in their pursuit of victory, and no matter how bloody things get, they won’t back down.

My concern is for Bianca, but I will protect her with my life. She is the one person I can’t bear to see hurt or taken away. She has become my rock, the light at the end of the tunnel, and having her in my life has made me a better man.

“What will we do when they strike?” I ask, knowing that the war is far from over.

Dom takes a deep breath and looks me in the eye. “We fight,” he says simply.

Behind us we hear the door open. I turn to see Bianca there, happiness in her eyes. Dominic sighs and slaps my arm. “I’ll see you inside.”

He turns and walks towards the door, leaving me alone with Bianca. She smiles as she approaches me, her eyes twinkling in the moonlight.

“I’m glad I found you,” she says, wrapping her arms around my waist. “I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

I smile and pull her close, taking in the smell of her hair and the warmth of her body.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, my voice gentle yet concerned. She looks up at me, her eyes filled with worry.

“I’m scared,” she admits softly. “I’m worried about my brothers finding me.”

I tighten my arms around her and look into her eyes. “They’ll never touch you or a hair on our child’s head,” I reassure her.

“We’ll protect you with everything we have, and together we’ll make sure you’re safe.”

She looks up at me, tears in her eyes, and I pull her close and kiss the top of her head. She buries herself in my chest and I can feel the fear radiating off of her.

“Nothing will ever come between us,” I whisper into her ear. “No matter what happens, we’ll always be here for each other.”

Bianca snuffles and takes a deep breath before she looks back up at me with determination in her eyes. “We’ll make it through this,” she says firmly, a newfound strength in her voice as she speaks.

I smile down at her and nod. “Yes, we will,” I agree.

We both know that the battles ahead won’t be easy, but with the strength of our love and the support of each other, we’ll make it through. We may have lost some battles already, but there are still plenty more and if we fight together, side by side, there is no doubt in my mind we’ll win them all.

“Let’s go inside.” I nudge her and she pulls away and takes my hand.

Bianca’s strength and determination is inspiring. She may have been scared at first, but she has a courage that I’ve never seen before. She is a force to be reckoned with, a warrior in her own right, and I am proud to stand beside her.

“Ah there they are!” Nanette greets us and says, “Lunch is ready. Let’s go eat!”

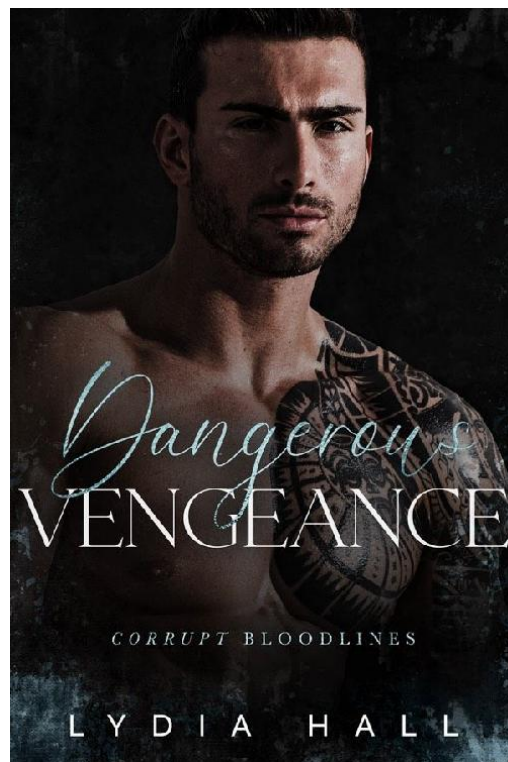
I take Bianca’s hand and walk toward the dining room. Dominic is right. The war is far from over and the next battle will be our fiercest yet. They’ll come in strong, but we will be stronger, because we are Bratva, and the Gusev name can’t be tarnished.

“Coming...” Bianca calls.

Now, to make sure her brothers stay away and our business keeps booming.



## EXCERPT: DANGEROUS VENGEANCE



**M**y need for revenge led me to the most dangerous member of the Bratva.

Ruthless and heartless, Matvey “Matty” Gusev, doesn’t deserve my body.

Let alone my soul.

And yet, as his captive, I crave the moments I spend alone with him.

Finding my uncle’s murderer was the only reason I became a journalist.

And investigating Matty was my only mission.

Now, I know his secrets.

But I also know he's *not* a monster.

Matty would never hurt me.

Letting go of my desperation for revenge is tough as I'm faced with an impossible choice.

Put Matty behind bars or let him walk free and right into my arms...

### **Natalie**

The more information I dig up on this family the more I'm convinced someone needs to take them down. Sure, it started as a grudge. My uncle was murdered, and I am searching for his killer after police brushed it aside and said all their leads were cold. If they won't help me, I'll do it myself. But this? It has got to be one of the biggest cover ups in history. I shake my head, reading the words on the screen.

And the best part about this story is not only are my coworkers not going to scoop me on this—because they aren't even seeing what I see—but it's going to make my career rise so fast everyone will take notice. Imagine, a newspaper reporter exposing Bratva, the dirty police, finding her uncle's killer and all while still interning at the Herald. Yeah, I think that's going to feel amazing. I look out the window overlooking the city. It's not a great view, too many high-rise buildings stretching skyward to see much. It's the sort of view that makes you want to go higher, which is where I'm going. Up.

When Uncle Hal went down, it was like losing a father. Every Christmas, every birthday, every soccer game, Hal was there for me, right alongside my parents. My dad was really close with him, and it left a massive hole in our lives. When I noticed details in the case files weren't lining up, I questioned police detectives until I got stonewalled. I've spent my entire career—albeit a short one—with one pursuit, to uncover corruption. I had my eyes on this family long before Hal was gunned down in cold blood, and I blame myself partly for his death. Maybe I turned over the wrong rock and the roach that crawled out was the one who took him from me.



A glance at the clock tells me it's time for my review. I've been with the Herald for six months as of last Friday. Sheffield—my boss and a family friend—gave me the leg up after the Tribune shat on my chances of ever scoring a spot on their roster. They said I was nosy, not investigative. Hal spoke to Sheffield on my behalf and now with six months under my belt, he will assess my capabilities and determine if I go permanent here or if I'm destined to move to small town America in order to have a shot at being a reporter.

I stand slowly, straightening my pencil skirt. The sheer silk top I wear hugs my curves, straining at the buttons as I take a deep breath to prepare myself. A few nearby coworkers watch me as I walk through the newsroom toward Sheffield's door. They know it's review time too; I heard them talking this morning near the breakroom where they sit and drink coffee every morning, hashing out stories and sharing trade secrets. I've never been accepted into their club, maybe because I'm just the intern.

I catch eyes staring and keep my gaze fixed on the windowpane with black lettering etched into it. Sheffield is a private guy. He keeps to himself and keeps his door shut at all times. I knock on it and hear him call me in.

“Yes?”

My hand nervously turns the knob and pushes the door open, and he looks up at me. “We have a meeting now?” I stand in the doorway awaiting his invitation and his eyes flick to the clock on the wall.

“Yes, Natalie, come in.” He pushes some papers to the side and uses his mouse to pull something up on his computer screen.

I nervously walk to the chair opposite his desk, my heels clicking on the floor. I know I've done a kick-ass job at this place for the past six months but without Hal around to go to bat for me, I'm in with the big-league players now. Parts of me think maybe I haven't done well enough, that Sheffield will pass on me after all, which is why I've kept this little gem of a story about the Gusev's to myself. If he tries to give me the ax,

I can let him in on it, and that could save my job. If not, I can take the story elsewhere with my intel, because there is no way they are getting the same inside source that I have.

“So, Natalie, I’ve looked over your employee files thoroughly.” He drums his fingers on his desk as he leans back and continues. “It appears you’ve been assigned pretty trivial stories by your editor.”

“You think so too?” I try to hide my sarcasm, but the leach editor hasn’t given me anything good. She’s intimidated by my experience or something. I worked at the Herald long enough to score a few decent stories that dwarf anything her department has worked on.

“Yes, well...” He sighs and his eyebrows rise. “Given your history, well...” He pauses and I feel the ax ready to drop. So, this is it? He’s just cutting me loose after losing Hal not so long ago? I can’t go to the Times; that’s the only place left, and they’ll never take me until I have years of experience elsewhere. I hold my breath as he continues. “Given your history with the Herald and the stories you produced there, along with your behavior and professional work ethic here, I think we will give you a shot.”

My emotions yoyo, rebounding upward and a smile blossoms. “Really?” I want to jump up and clap my hands, make a big fuss because I’m so happy, but I sit still. Controlling my excitement is challenging but I have to remain professional. I can do a happy dance when I’m off duty.

“Yes, really. And I think we need to put you with a different editor too. One who sees your talent and knows your value.” He leans forward and uses the wheel on his mouse to scroll. “Says you worked in crime news at the Herald. Is that where you’d like to be? Or maybe we should start you in—”

“Crime is perfect,” I blurt out. “In fact, I have a story I’d love to work on first.” Here is where I wow him. If he is happy to hire me, then he will be thrilled to learn I’ve already got a huge story that will draw lots of attention to the paper.

“Is that so?” He leans back in his chair again and cocks his head. “We don’t usually let someone so green choose their

own story... but go on. Tell me what it is.”

I beam a smile at him and begin. “Well as you know I’ve worked in crime for the past few years. I’ve reported on a lot of things, seen a lot of the corruption of organized crime and how cases go cold for various reasons. I have a source willing to speak out against the Bratva family. The Gusev’s are into some pretty shady stuff and I have hard evidence that could bring them down. I plan to connect with my source soon and get more that can back it up. If you allow me, I believe this story will make waves, get attention, you know?”

“Hmm...” He bounces backward on his chair, mimicking a rocking motion, and his head bobs. “This source of yours, can they be trusted?”

“I believe so, sir. The person has given me a lot already but won’t hand over the big stuff until we meet face to face.” I personally checked the information against casefiles from the police, and most of it is a match. Maybe not enough to bring them down if there are dirty cops involved, which I suspect there are. And I don’t even tell him why I’m really searching this family out—my suspicions about their involvement with Hal’s murder.

Sheffield uses the tip of his tongue to polish his canine tooth and furrows his brow. “It’s got to be air tight. I mean, you can’t leave one single T uncrossed or one I undotted. These people you’re snooping around are dangerous.”

I sit a little taller in the seat and nod, sobering myself. I know what he’s talking about. I’ve had a few run-ins over the years, and once I narrowly escaped a drive-by. It wasn’t intended for me, but no doubt they’d have been happy to get me off their backs. So, yes, I’m well aware of the dangers.

“Yes, sir. I understand.” I scoot forward on my chair, anticipating his answer. It really is highly unusual for a new hire to score an assignment like this, but he can’t do this without me. I’m the one with all the notes, research—going back years—and the source. It makes sense to let me run with it because this source isn’t going to trust anyone but me.

“Alright then... Prove yourself.” He nods and looks down his nose at me. “Just remember you’re a news reporter, not a cop. We don’t provide protection.”

I stand and nod firmly, hiding my grin. “Yes, sir. I won’t let you down.”

Sheffield nods at the door and I turn and jaunt out, shutting it behind me. This is going to be perfect. I planned a call with my source for this afternoon, and I am hoping to push them to meet with me soon. The sooner I can get any hard evidence they may have the better. What I have is good, but I know dirty cops or prosecutors could poke holes in it. Which is why I need this to work out right.

Eyes follow me back to my desk and I duck into my cubicle where I sit and immediately pull out my phone. With the approval to move forward on the case, there is no time like the present to push the source. I dial the number I have. It goes to a burner phone, no doubt, but it’s how I contact them. The phone rings through, and I hold it to my ear waiting for the answer.

A fleeting thought passes through my mind, that perhaps this source is just using me as a means to draw them out or something. Like they have a personal vendetta against the family and in time, when the Gusev’s are made a public spectacle the real fireworks will begin, but I can’t miss this opportunity-not for my career and not for my uncle.

“Hello, Natalie.” The voice that answers is deep and robotic, made by a person talking through a device to disguise who they are. It’s the only voice I’ve heard, so I can’t even say if this person is male or female. Just dangerous.

“Hello....” I swallow hard and continue. “I was hoping we could meet. I have the story mostly ready to go, but I still need that evidence you spoke of—something hard to bring them down.” I talk cryptically, not wanting anyone around me to overhear what I’m saying. They don’t need to know I’m working on the story of the century.

“I’m not sure you understand how dangerous a meet would be.”

“Oh, I know, and believe me; I’m terrified. But I need that information. So, how is this afternoon?” I clench my jaw while I wait for the response. Even if they only agree to a drop and not an in-face meet, I still have to have it. A few seconds tick by with just silence on the line and then they speak.

“Corner of Tenth and Broadway. Twenty minutes. Come alone. There will be a blue sedan parked and waiting. Climb in.”

That really sounds sketchy and very unsafe, but if I want this story, I have to take risks. I’ve been speaking to this person for months now and they’ve never threatened me. They’ve only ever been helpful in my research into the Bratva.

“I’ll be there.”

As soon as I say the words the line clicks and goes silent. The call ends and I lay my phone on my desk. Dad has a bead on my phone at all times because of GPS—we use an app to keep tabs on each other—so if I have my phone on me, even if I don’t use it, I’ll be safe. They’ll never know I’m being tracked, and if something goes sideways, and I disappear, Dad can just ping my phone. It’s going to be okay.

I glance at the clock and see that I barely have time to make it to the destination in twenty minutes, which is a bit concerning. The source knows where I work and what I do, which means they’re probably watching me at times. That means they know what I look like, but I still have nothing on them except a mechanical voice.

Standing, I pick up my cell and grab my jacket and satchel. As I head toward the door, one of the reporters at their desk perks up. “Where you going?”

“Meeting a source.” I swing my jacket over my shoulder and hold it there with a few fingers as I continue walking. “Don’t worry. Sheffield knows.”

That guy is a bit nosy, so I don’t mind blowing him off. I take the elevator down to the ground level and stroll out toward the street. I have to hail a cab, which sometimes takes a few minutes. This time, I see a few coming toward me, so I walk

right up to the curb and raise my hand, cell phone tightly gripped in my fist, and suddenly I feel someone grab me from behind. Something gets wrapped around my head or shoved over it—I can't tell.

“What the! Stop! Help!” I scream and writhe, kicking and swinging my arms.

“Get her cell,” a voice says, and someone pries my cell phone from my hand.

“No, you can't take that.” As I say the words, I hear something drop to the ground and I yank my arms away as I hear someone stomp.

“Get the car.”

“What! No, give me back my phone. You can't do this. Help!” I make such a fuss that I hear a few cops nearby shout at whoever it is that has grabbed me. They take my bag. I feel my hands being tied up, maybe with a zip tie, and then I hear the report of a gun. Someone is shooting? “Oh fuck, help!” Tears come to my eyes as I am shoved into a car.

“Get out of here,” a voice screams as inertia forces me into the seat of the car. The tires squeal and more gunfire sounds.

“Help,” I plead, writhing on the seat.

“Shut her up!” It's a man, and he's angry. I feel a knee in my hip, then hear more gunshots.

“Oh god... oh god.” I sob and curl into myself. Is this my source? Did they know I would be coming out and they just snatched me? What is happening?

“I say we just kill her.”

“No, we can't. She has files... We have to keep her around until we get them.”

The two men go on as if I'm not tied up in their car, and I realize with a gut-sick feeling that this is not the source. This is the Bratva. They've learned I'm on to them and they're not happy.

Oh god, what did I get myself into?

**[Read the complete story here!](#)**

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