



DE LUCCI'S

Obsession

VICTORIA PAIGE

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About

There was no escape when a De Lucci became obsessed.

All Ava McGrath wanted to do was save her family's pub.

Even if that meant facing her best friend's older brother.

But Cesar De Lucci wasn't the man she remembered from long ago.

He'd become temptation in a three-piece Italian suit.

His piercing gaze unsettled her while each encounter with him stole her breath.

But Cesar's shady connections to the mob might be Ava's road to ruin.

The underworld tore her family apart, and her father paid the price.

Ava should run.

Run far, far away.

Away from the insanity, intensity, and the reckless feelings spiraling between them.

Before the taste of his obsession becomes her addiction.

Author's Note

The story takes place in 1995. Smart phones then were not the ones we know now. The use of cell phones weren't ubiquitous and pay phones were still commonly used. The lack of this technology and the internet certainly made this story fun to write. Also, the music I picked is reflective of that time period.

Playlist

Where The Streets Have No Name — U2

Dreams — Cranberries

Every Breath You Take — Police

Red Right Hand — Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds

All I Want Is You — U2

You Give Love A Bad Name — Bon Jovi

Can't Help Falling In Love — Elvis Presley

CHAPTER

One

AVA

“Are you sure, Ava?”

Mom’s scratchy voice came through the receiver I had cradled between my neck and shoulder while my fingers fiddled with the coffee machine.

“I’m so sorry to—”

“Mom,” I stopped her apology. “You sound awful this morning. You had no business working yesterday either.”

“Our last intern quit. Tommy needed help in the kitchen.”

Thomas “Tommy” O’Connell was a long-time chef at Eamonn’s, our family-owned Irish pub. He learned to be a chef from the school of hard-knocks and had no patience for the interns from culinary schools.

I chuckled, my mood starting to improve as the aroma of life-saving brew teased my nose. Life-saving for other people around me that was. Admittedly, I was an ornery person first thing in the morning. After studying for my midterms until midnight and then getting jarred awake at four, a challenging day was, no doubt, in my future.

“Yes, he’s old school,” I answered. “Anyway, I have to hop in the shower if I’m to make it to the pub in time for deliveries.”

After ending the call, I trudged back to the bedroom with my mug of coffee. I lived in a brownstone belonging to a group of properties owned by the McGrath clan. This one had been renovated into two-household living. I dwelt on the third floor, while my brother Robert and his family occupied the first and second. We shared one staircase with convenient landings leading to the entrance of each floor.

While in the shower, I mentally sorted my attire for the day. It was a no-brainer: jeans, Keds, and a flannel shirt with a tank underneath. The thick material and long sleeves should protect me from any unwanted burns. I could shed the layer if it got too hot in the kitchen as long as I wasn't working the stove.

Sufficiently awakened by the shower and after mainlining eight ounces of caffeine, I filled up my travel mug from the fancy coffee maker that I confiscated from my ex-boyfriend when he and his rock band left for the Pandora Resort in Vegas. The breakup caught me by surprise. I wasn't bitter, or so I told myself. I was telling myself a lie. Because here I was, five months later, depending on this coffee machine to get me through the day at the same time it reminded me I was a disposable girlfriend.

On my way out the door, I grabbed my leather jacket, my pity-party squashed by a smugness that at four-thirty, I was on the road, thirty-five minutes after Mom called me. I wasn't an au naturel girl by any stretch. I knew when to primp up and when to dress down. No use letting sweat bleed over my foundation with only good old Tommy as a witness. If I was waitressing, I'd put on make-up and probably stuff tissues in my bra. My brothers frowned when I did this, but I'd proven that considering all services being equal, bigger boobs and a winsome smile scored better tips.

In the time it took me to drive from Brooklyn, across the Pulaski bridge, and into Manhattan, twenty-five minutes had passed. I pumped the brakes when the light turned yellow, slowing down my Toyota until it stopped at an intersection on 3rd Avenue and 44th. Drumming my fingers on the wheel, I

checked the clock. Gorski should be at the restaurant in ten minutes. I had plenty of time to make it.

A dark sedan pulled up beside my vehicle, triggering an involuntary jolt in my chest. I glanced over at the driver in a feigned casual appraisal which he returned with his own perfunctory look before the road ahead regained his attention.

When the light turned green, my car rolled forward while his turned right.

I hadn't been able to shake the feeling that I was being watched ever since a photographer took my picture standing outside Eamonn's. He said he was with The New York Times, and they were writing an article on the Hell's Kitchen bar scene. When I said he should have asked permission first, he cheekily asked me right then and there if he could use it.

I asked to look at his ID. He immediately offered it up and it all checked out. Although in retrospect, it was probably faked. The photographer even said I could be mistaken for Katie Moore. Even my ex said I bore a resemblance to the supermodel who made waif chic, so maybe I was flattered a little.

As another excuse for my gullibility, in recent months, our pub was barely keeping its head above water. A bigger, swankier one opened up on the same street, so I figured any publicity was a good reminder for our customers that newer wasn't always better.

Eamonn's was an institution. A pub started by my gramps.

That lying ass photographer. I had excitedly told my family that we should be on top of our game and be on the lookout for the Times food critic who'd been known to put on disguises. We had her picture plastered on the wall leading to the kitchen for all our front servers and kitchen staff to see. A few weeks later, The New York Times published a review of our new rival O'Toole's instead. Not a single word about Eamonn's but at least the review was only a two star.

As my Toyota made the turn onto 9th Avenue, my eyes squinted at the higher headlights of a truck in the rear-view

mirror. It followed me into the alley behind our pub. Looked like I made it just in time for the delivery.

I coasted into the narrow space beside the dumpster just as Gorski's truck stopped in front of the loading area. He jumped down from the truck. Gorski was Polish and he's been our purveyor of meats and seafood for as long as I could remember.

"You taking over for your Ma?" he asked.

"Yup. She isn't feeling well." It wasn't the first time I did this. My eldest brother Sean was a successful investment banker on Wall Street. Six months ago, Robert started his job as assistant prosecutor at the U.S. Attorney's Office of Southern District of New York (SDNY). My sister-in-law, Mads, pitched in sometimes but with three kids to look after, that was a rarity. That left my brother, Charles, who manned the bar and closed the pub late at night which didn't make him a good candidate either.

So it was down to me.

"She works too hard." Gorski went to the back of the truck and unlocked the lift gates, shoving it up. As he prepared to unload our order, I unlocked the door and turned on the lights to the kitchen, heading straight to the locker where I kept some of my things like the assorted bandanas I liked to wear.

I returned to the kitchen and squinted at Gorski. Was he limping? He was pushing the hand truck into our walk-in cooler. His head was down, but with the fluorescent lighting at full force, he couldn't hide his mottled, swollen cheek.

Frowning, I grabbed the delivery clipboard from the wall and waited for him to emerge. He sighed when his gaze met mine.

"What happened?" I asked.

He handed me the invoice, tilting his chin toward it as if I would find the answer to my question there. My brows furrowed. Even without checking my clipboard I knew the delivery was short. "It's Fish and Chips Friday. This haddock won't be enough."

Gorski shrugged. “That’s all I have. I’ve tried to split them up for my customers. Even gave you guys more.”

“But why the shortage?”

“Not enough fish?”

“That’s a lie, and you know it.”

He grabbed his cap from his head and fidgeted with it. His beaten-up face was the answer I needed. “How much did they get you for?”

Gorski tried to wave it off like nothing. “Who?”

“The mob.”

“Look.” He waved in my direction with his hat. “Don’t want no trouble, girl. I know your brother is AG, but I’d rather wear this face than end up in some New Jersey landfill. Get me?”

“Oh, Gors...”

“Tell me you get me, girl. Don’t want no trouble for you, too, so leave this alone.”

“Besides ... it’s my fault.” His mouth twisted. “That’s all I’m saying ‘bout this. Best get on with my deliveries.” He slapped the hat onto his head and left.

I was left seething, staring at the door where he’d exited. Angry at the situation. Feeling helpless. The thought of filleting haddock, this tainted fish, was the last thing I wanted to do. In the end, my aggression needed an outlet, and there was nothing more soothing than sharpening my boning knife on a whetstone, imagining the faceless soldiers who beat up Gorski.

The Five Families of New York squeezed so much from mom-and-pop shops. Though a few should have known better, most of them didn’t have a choice but to pay the price. Mobsters controlled the labor unions and they controlled construction, they even controlled sanitation and garbage collection. And when a restaurant couldn’t pay up? That was a direct ticket to hell. It wasn’t unheard of to have trash dumped in front of a store when one refused to pay protection money.

However in 1985, SDNY and the FBI did something no one thought was possible. They were able to indict the untouchable bosses of the Five Families, at least the ones who didn't get assassinated in the ensuing mob war.

They'd been weakened, but their influence never truly went away. They just turned more devious, less blatant. Everything to do with the mob was rumor. No one really wanted to get on record unless they wanted to get capped at the knee or have their fingers broken or disappear into the New Jersey marshlands. One thing that was common knowledge but not publicly discussed was how the United Seafood Workers union was mobbed up. They controlled the loading and unloading of fish from the docks, dictated the prices, and which restaurants got the goods.

Mom didn't want to do business with the Fulton Fish Market but that would mean taking business away from Gorski who still got his seafood from there. His family had been our supplier for thirty years.

I was still fuming when Tommy walked in at five thirty. He gave me a look and then proceeded to his locker before returning with a mug of coffee. "Your mam sick?" Lean and five-ten, Tommy had a gravelly voice that told of his fondness for his cigarette breaks at the pub's back alley while the anchor tattoo on his upper arm was a reminder of his time in the Vietnam War. His shrewd gaze burned the side of my face.

"Sick as a dog. We don't have enough fish to last us past lunch," I said in the same breath while keeping my attention on the cutting board.

"Gorski got in trouble again?"

"Again?" I looked up. "How often does this happen?"

"Often enough. I was telling your mother we need to switch suppliers. Gorski gambles, you see," Tommy said. "And the surest way to feed his vice is to borrow from a loan shark."

I arched a brow. Maybe I could do something about this. "Do you know which one?"

“No.” He looked at me suspiciously. “And you didn’t hear this from me and you’re not doing anything about it.”

“Maybe if I call—”

“No,” Tommy growled. “De Lucci called us to cater a party, and your mam turned him down.”

“Paulie?” I hadn’t talked to him in months. Mostly it was to keep Mom and my brothers happy, but I felt guilty because my friend’s only fault was his family name. Paulie’s father was once the boss of the De Lucci Crime family until his heart attack a couple of years ago. His uncle now ran *the family*.

“No. A secretary who worked for them.” Tommy started organizing his station. “They’ve been calling a lot lately.”

My eyes narrowed. “For catering?”

“They always have something going on,” he scoffed. “Weddings, engagements, first communions, confirmations etc.”

I couldn’t help grinning. “They may be mafia, but they’re still Italian.”

Tommy snorted. “They hug and kiss each other and act like friends and family, but won’t hesitate to turn on each other. Your mam wants none of that drama to touch us. Next you know, they’ll be coming in and having meetings here.”

“We can’t turn away business just because they happen to be Italian.”

Before Tommy could answer, one of the waitresses, Sheila, walked in. The blonde was always put on the morning shift because she seemed to be one of those unicorns who had a bubbly personality upon waking.

“Good morning!” she chirped.

Tommy mumbled something; I mustered a smile.

“Morning, Sheila.”

“You taking over for your mother today?” she asked.

I gave her the same response I'd given Tommy. We never resumed the thread of our conversation because he had to prepare for the morning rush and I had to filet fish.

At around ten-thirty, I was in the office on the PC to enter the deliveries for the day when the phone rang.

“Eamonn’s.”

“Branna?”

“No, this is her daughter.”

“Ava? This is Carol.”

“Oh, hey, Carol, what’s up?” She was our beverage supplier. I inquired about her family, and she did the same.

“Listen, dear. I would have waited if it wasn’t Friday but needed the money for this weekend’s rent payment.”

“You lost me there.”

“The check bounced, Ava. Ugh, I didn’t want to tell you. I know your mom wouldn’t want you to worry, and it’s probably nothing. But can you let her know?”

My grip on the receiver tightened. “How much?”

She told me. I blew out a breath, mentally calculating how much I had in my bank account. I was saving pocket money for a trip to Ireland, a graduation present from my family.

“I’m not making excuses for Mom, but she wasn’t feeling too well this week and probably didn’t make sure there was enough balance in the bank.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Oh, dear, now I feel bad.”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel bad,” I exclaimed. Crap, I really didn’t. “If you can send someone here at two, I’ll have the money waiting for you.”

“Thank you so much, kiddo. And I’m sorry Branna isn’t feeling well. Take care, you hear.”

After I hung up, I contemplated the phone for a few seconds longer before scrutinizing the accounting database and invoices.

Thirty minutes later, I'd discovered that Eamonn's was in the red. Mom had been shuffling money around to keep the creditors at bay. She was doing a fine job, but we weren't making any money. There was no reason for her to turn down catering jobs because of her pride. An honest job was an honest job. I understood her misgivings, but I also knew Paulie wouldn't put us in a difficult situation.

I was finishing up notes on what bills needed to be paid first when Charles walked through the door.

"Hey, teacup. Heard you might need some help." He frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Did you know about this?" I tapped the stack of invoices. "Carol just called and said the check bounced."

"Dammit." My brother cursed, resting his hands on his hips as he dropped his gaze to the floor.

"Mom keeps turning down business from the De Luccis. I don't see a legitimate reason why."

My brother sighed. "You know how she is. It's a grudge more than anything else."

A grudge that included sending Charles and my father, Cillian, to prison. They went to jail six years ago on racketeering charges. Charles served two years and got out. Dad was still in prison. He worked for Paulie's father and had taken me along when I was younger in an effort to hide his activities from Mom on the pretense of spending time with his only daughter. He left me in their mansion while he went away to do his "collections." When Mom found out, she kicked Dad out of the house. They'd reconciled on and off over the years, but I wasn't sure she was taking him back this time. Scratch that. I was sure she wouldn't. If he hadn't dragged Charles down with him, then maybe there would have been a chance.

Now my brother had a record.

I had mixed feelings about my father. Famous for his temper, he'd earned his moniker as Red Cillian not only because of his ginger hair, but because of his propensity to draw blood with a single blow. But he never raised a hand at

any of us no matter how angry he got. I inherited his red hair. My brothers were all dark like Mom.

“I know, but is holding a grudge worth losing Gramps’ legacy?” Eamonn’s had belonged to Mom’s Da.

“I’ll talk to her.”

I stood and peeled off my flannel shirt and walked over to the coat stand to grab my leather jacket. I yanked open the door. “Do that.”

“Where are you going?” he called after me.

“Going to get business and get Carol her money.”

My brother stalked after me and before I could get to the dining section, he yanked me back to the hallway. Charles could be intimidating if he wanted to. That was why the mafia loved it when he and Dad teamed up.

The fighting McGraths they called them. Both over six-feet and muscular, they trained every day at the boxing gym and could scare the bejesus out of anyone. But right then, those piercing blue eyes did nothing to quail the self-righteousness simmering inside me.

“You are *not* asking Paulie for charity,” Charles snarled.

“This is not charity. This is business,” I hissed.

“Teacup,” he said, voice gentling. “You shouldn’t even be worrying about this. Worry about your studies. You’re almost done. Don’t be like me who pissed away a college education to become a thug. I can’t even claim my daughter.”

“You can,” I returned. “You just have to show you’re worthy.”

“Then let us—your brothers—talk some sense into Mom.”

“You’ll still need the business, right?” I smiled and wriggled away from him.

“God, you’re so bullheaded,” he grouched. “Phone call. Nothing else. Let us handle the rest.”

I waved him off and left the pub.

CHAPTER

Two

AVA

Over the years, Paulie and I had developed a method of communication. If we were talking about stuff relating to the shadier side of his family, we used pay phones. I picked random locations and never the same ones, and definitely never one that was near the pub or where I lived. The FBI was notorious for wiretapping, and I didn't want to get my friend in trouble.

Surprisingly enough, the Commission Trial of the eighties had set the mafia up in some kind of antihero worship. They also had to thank "The Godfather" films for that kind of myth.

I trekked down Ninth, made a turn onto Fiftieth until I came to a pay phone beside the bodega three blocks up. I plunked in my twenty-five cents. Paulie had a mobile phone in his car, but he rarely used it. One of these days when the mobile's antennas didn't stick out, when it didn't weigh like a brick in my purse, and when the cost per minute wasn't three times the quarter needed for a single pay phone use, I'd spring for one.

"De Lucci Investments, how may I help you?"

"Paulo De Lucci please," I said and told her who was calling.

There was a long pause, and I thought I'd lost her, but she sighed and told me to wait a moment. That moment turned

into minutes, and I started to get annoyed. I was also ornery when I was hungry and probably should have eaten before I headed out on these errands.

“Ava?”

“Paulie.” *Took you long enough.*

“Long time no hear. What’s up?”

“Call me from the outside. Do you have a pen?”

He chuckled. “Uh-oh. Do you need me to fix something?”

“Paulie. Pen. Paper. Now.”

“Damn, you’re still bossy.”

“As if you’re not.” I rattled off the number. “Got it?”

“Got it. You know—“

I hung up. That was probably rude. But Paulie was so happy-go-lucky sometimes, and I worried that his big mouth would get him into trouble. Add to that my face was about to get fried under the midday sun, leaving my freckles to have a field day. I should’ve worn a cap.

The phone finally rang, and I answered on its first ring.

“What’s got you so snippy, girl?” he asked.

“Have you been trying to book Eamonn’s for catering?”

“Yes. We’ve been having parties left and right, and we’re getting tired of Italian food. We had Japanese the other night. Also Greek, but Cesar said he wanted that Irish Cheesecake and Shepherd’s Pie your dad used to bring.”

I stilled. “Your brother is in the States?”

“Yup. He arrived last month.”

“The prodigal son returns.” My brain grasped at whatever memory I had of Paulie’s brother. He’d always been in a suit—blue, black, or gray. Granted the last time I saw him, it was at their mother’s funeral, but it was the first time I laid eyes on Cesar De Lucci that set the tone for my opinion of him.

I had been cross-legged on the sunroom floor with a pile of entertainment magazines scattered before me. I was clipping news articles and pictures to put in a scrapbook that exhibited my obsession for Bon Jovi. That year I turned twelve, their eponymous album came out, and I had the song *Runaway* on repeat so much that Mom thought I needed more quality time with Dad. Paulie was lying on the couch reading a book when his brother walked in.

Cesar's disdainful eyes landed on me and then on the mess I had lying on the floor. "Who's she?"

"Ava is Cillian's daughter," Paulie answered. "What, no 'hey, bro'? How's Harvard?"

Instead of answering his brother's questions, Cesar scoffed, "Are we babysitters now?"

"Don't be an ass, Cesar."

Paulie's brother didn't look apologetic. In fact, I'd become invisible as he asked, "Where's Lorenzo?"

"In the study with Pop."

Without another word, he pivoted on his right foot and left the room.

"Don't mind Cesar, he's got a stick up his ass. I think Harvard does that to you."

"Hey, did I lose you?" Paulie's voice broke through my trip down Cesar memory lane.

"No. I just remembered that time he walked in on us in the sunroom, and I had all these clippings and magazines on the floor." I found out later Cesar was a bit OCD. But first impressions were first impressions. "Does he still have a stick up his ass?"

Paulie burst out laughing. "He appeared stuck up because you were into rock bands then."

"Hey, your words, not mine," I replied. Though I still enjoyed Bon Jovi, I'd had enough of rockers for boyfriends.

As if reading my mind, Paulie said, “I’m glad you got rid of Brian.”

“Brad,” I corrected. “And he was the one who left me.”

“Whatever.” I imagined him waving his hand. Like most Italians, he liked gesturing while speaking. He asked about my classes and I asked about his work, but I needed to cut through the chit chat. “My brain is frying under this heat, and I need to go to the bank, but I was wondering if you still have a catering gig open.”

“Perfect timing. Cesar’s been threatening to cancel Sunday’s party if we went with O’Toole’s.”

“You called our rivals?” I yelled.

“Hey, your mother kept turning us down, and my poor secretary had to find an alternative.”

“They’re not even Irish,” I grumbled. “I heard their main investor is Russian.”

“You heard right. Anyway, Cesar said to find another caterer, otherwise he was going to order pizza,” Paulie groaned. “I invited a few of my high-value clients. They wanted to meet him.”

“Your brother is a bigger deal than you?”

“For international investments, yes.”

“Why is he in the U.S.?”

“He wants to grow his American market. He’s a partner at a couple casinos in Vegas,” he mumbled something under his breath. “Look, I need to get back to the office. I can’t drop and run to take your call anytime you please. So there must be something else you need from me.”

“You know who Gorski is, right?”

“Sounds familiar.”

“One of the families is shaking him, and we’re turning up short with our meat and seafood.”

He sighed. “You want me to find out who it is? Ask my uncle?”

“Well, if you want your catered dinner this Sunday, you’ll fix this.”

“Are you blackmailing me, Miss McGrath?” Paulie teased.

“Not at all,” I said seriously. “This has to stop, Paulie.”

“I’m not involved with that shit.”

“How can you turn a blind eye to this?”

His silence indicated all amusement had fled from our conversation. I also suspected his nonchalant ways were a shield and hid a more sensitive side.

“What the hell am I saying?” I muttered, instantly contrite. “I’m sorry. It’s just that you should have seen Gorski this morning.”

“If he decided to borrow from the mob instead of the bank like a regular business owner then he wouldn’t be fucked up. Many people blame the mafia for the shit they’re in. I admit protection money is extortion, but loan sharking is a different beast and came about because there was a demand for it. The mafia merely provided the supply.”

“I understand, but with the way Gorski is being squeezed, it’s impacting our business.”

“You sure I can’t turn you on to a different supplier?”

Probably one that was mobbed up as well, but I didn’t say that. “No. It’s Gorski or nothing.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Also, what’s the ballpark of the number of guests?”

“Fifty.”

“And I have carte blanche on the menu besides the cheesecake and the Shepherd’s Pie?”

“You got it.” The smile was back in his voice, and all was right again between us.

By the time I returned to Eamonn's, the lunch rush was over. Friday's business was one of our best which was why we were depending on those fish and chips to sell. Being short on that hurts our bottom line. I winced when I saw the board that said the menu item was sold out and we hadn't even gotten to dinner service yet.

Only Sheila was at the bar. "Where's Charles?"

The waitress shook her head at me. "In the kitchen. And you better get your ass in there."

Uh-oh.

I slid her the envelope with Carol's money. "Carol's going to send someone to pick this up. Make sure to ask for identification before you hand over the money."

Sheila nodded and gave me a mock salute.

I threw my leather jacket over the bar and barged into the kitchen with a swagger like I'd conquered the day. Both Charles and Tommy's heads whipped my way, their laser-gazes compelling my steps to falter along with my bravado. Off to the side stood a sheepish Gorski.

"What the hell did you do?" Charles thundered.

"Hunt for business, that's what," I retorted. "It's honest business." Paulie knew how I felt about blood money. "We got a gig this Sunday for fifty people."

"I also brought more haddock, already filleted, same price as whole," Gorski said.

"Don't do us no favors, Gorski," Tommy snarled.

"No, but this tornado of a woman did me a solid," Gorski shot back and walked up to me. "Told you to stay out of it. But the crew from De Lucci sorted everything out with the Rossi soldiers."

My brows shot to my hairline. "So it was the Rossis who were squeezing you?"

“You didn’t hear it from me.” Then he looked around nervously. “Your brother don’t have a bug in this place, does he?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Charles said, looking at me. “So, you just called Paulie and suddenly Gorski’s got all the goods?”

I shrugged. “He told me he’d see what he could do. But it’s his brother’s party this Sunday. And from what I’ve heard, he’s very influential.”

“Is he made?” Tommy asked.

“I don’t think so.” Paulie would have told me if his brother was a made man, a fully initiated member of the mafia.

“You know Robert is going to shit a brick when he catches wind of this, right?” Charles asked.

“That’s why we’re going to plan the menu now and order the stuff for Sunday before anyone else finds out.”

All three men stared at me as if I’d signed my own death warrant.

I probably had.

My other two brothers and Mom were going to skin me alive.

Well, and Charles.

“You know they’re going to blame me for this, right?” my brother told me in a resigned voice.

“But I’ll back you up,” I said cheekily.



Charles and I managed to evade the family until Saturday evening. But when I left Tommy in the kitchen and stopped by the bar, my brother informed me to prepare for tarring and feathering when I got home. Apparently, Robert had already ripped him a new one over the phone.

When I arrived at the brownstone, I still thought I could sneak past Robert's floor, but their door opened just when I took one step past their landing.

"Where do you think you're going, missy?" his voice boomed. "Get in here."

Shoulders dropping, I dawdled on the stairs before entering their apartment. As soon as I moved past him, he closed the door and leaned against it.

I spotted Sean standing behind the couch with his hands spread across its back, a stony expression on his face.

I gulped.

Except for their dark hair, my brothers couldn't be more different from each other. Sean was the tallest at six-three. He was thirty-two, leanly muscled with scholarly features punctuated by glasses. In contrast, Robert was stockier, had the shoulders of a linebacker, and exuded the focus of a Rottweiler. He was thirty, and three years older than Charles.

Madelyn, also called Mads, was Robert's wife. She was sitting on the couch where she had five-year old Kelly on her lap. The expression on her face only underscored the shit I was in with my brothers.

Kelly was Charles' kid whose mother was the daughter of Giovanni Rossi—the boss of the Rossi Crime Family. The daughter who was married off to the Chicago Outfit boss. Our family's ties to the Italian mafia were forever bound by the blood running through little Kelly.

"Hi, Aunt Ava," six-year-old Callum yelled from the hallway. "Dad said you were in deep crap."

"Cal, go to your room," Mads told her son.

"Uncle Charles said she was only trying to help Nana, right?" Ronan, who was eight, piped up beside his brother.

"Kids, you heard your mom," I said. "No need to witness your aunt's interrogation."

Both boys pealed with laughter and fell back into their room, slamming the door.

Sean walked over to the phone. “Mom said to call her when we have you.”

“Is she feeling better?”

“She is,” Robert said. He hadn’t budged from his position at the door. Was he blocking my exit, expecting me to bolt? A ghost of a smile touched the corners of his mouth before he continued, “And I quote: ‘Who knew that my reckless daughter’s hare-brained idea would be a spontaneous cure to this flu?’ I think when she found out what you did, her temperature shot so high, it killed the virus.”

“Ha, ha,” I muttered.

“Ava’s here,” Sean said, pressing the speaker.

“Two days,” my mother fumed. “I couldn’t leave you alone in the pub for two days and you do this.”

“We needed the money,” I said.

“Oh, and you think getting close to the De Luccis again is the answer?”

“It’s just business.”

“You know nothing is *just* business with those people. Soon they’ll be asking to store dead bodies in our freezer.”

“Oh my God, have you been watching mob movies again?” My mother loved cinema. She’d watched “The Godfather” and “Scarface” countless times. It was also probably why her imagination ran wild. Not that I could blame her given that Dad and Charles turned out to be real-life gangsters. But still. “And it’s Paulie ... and well, they’d been celebrating Cesar’s return.” Then I added for good measure, “He loves our Irish cheesecake.”

“Cesar is in New York?” Robert asked.

“Since last month. I’m surprised the feds didn’t tell you,” I derided.

Robert let my sarcasm slide and murmured, “Interesting.”

“What’s interesting about this, Robert? I’m not letting my daughter step into that mansion again.”

“Well Charles can’t,” I said. “That wouldn’t go over well if any of the Rossis are there.”

“And you think you being there will be any better?” Mom challenged.

“Better than Charles. And Paulie’s there. He won’t let anything happen to me.”

“Who else is going to be at the party?” Robert asked.

“Robert!” Mom’s voice cried over the phone. “We’re supposed to be reprimanding her over this. Not encouraging her.”

I turned to Sean, and my lips tipped up. “Paulie mentioned that a few of his top clients are eager to talk to Cesar.”

“Motherfucker,” Sean mumbled. “I don’t have the numbers, but I hear the older De Lucci brother is—”

“Sean!” Irritation was evident in Mom’s voice, and I was having a hard time keeping my laughter contained, so I compressed my lips together. She could be dramatic at times.

“It seems,” Mads said. “The food is already getting prepped by Tommy as we speak. The whole purpose of this meeting is to remind Ava that decisions like this should be discussed with family.”

“I couldn’t help it, okay?” I fretted. “You all should have seen Gorski yesterday morning.”

“Gorski? What does Gorski have to do with all this?” Robert asked.

Obviously, neither Charles nor Tommy told the rest of the McGraths the whole story.

“I’m not really sure.” I wasn’t comfortable discussing our purveyor’s problem in his absence, and especially not in front of Robert. “All you need to know is our orders came up short, and we ran out of fish by lunchtime yesterday. And.” I split a look between my two brothers. “In case you don’t remember since you both haven’t been running things in Eamonn’s for a while, you never run out of fish on a Friday.”

“Jesus,” Sean said. “When did you start being this sarcastic?”

“I’ve always been like this.”

“She inherited it from your father,” Mom said. There was no bite in her tone, I could even say there was some fondness. My chest clenched tight. Ah ... Mom. She missed Dad.

“If I’m reading between the lines here, the mob could be involved,” Robert speculated. “The Fulton Fish Market and the Seafood Workers Union are currently under investigation from the mayor’s office.”

“And I hope I’m reading between the lines wrong,” Mads told her husband. “You’re not about to ask your sister to wear a wire, right?”

My brother threw an irritated glance at his wife. “I’m appalled you would think I’d suggest that.”

“I’m not betraying my friend anyway so that’s a moot point,” I added.

“You’re picking him over family?” Robert asked.

“No. I’m picking him over the SDNY.”

I never played the ‘I’m exhausted’ card unless it was true, but with the excitement of the day before plus the work done tonight, not to mention how the next day was shaping up, there was no playing. With all this going on, I still needed to study for my test on Tuesday. At least I had Monday to prep for it.

“I’m sorry I didn’t involve all of you, but what happened yesterday was a perfect storm. Gorski, and then Carol.”

“I told Charles to pay you back on that,” Mom sighed. “He’ll have the money for you tomorrow. It was really an oversight on my part. We’re really managing.”

I flicked my gaze to my siblings and Mads. They shook their heads, allowing Mom to think we accepted her explanation about the pub’s financial situation.

“No rush. I don’t need it yet,” I said. “Hey, treat that as me chipping in for the free rent I’m getting in this house.”

“Just be careful tomorrow,” my mother said.

“Tommy is coming with me. He can be a scary dude,” I assured her. That seemed to satisfy Mom enough.

After Sean ended the call, he asked, “How bad is Eamonn’s in the red?”

“I did a cursory check,” I said. “It looks like Mom is waiting until last minute to pay our suppliers. We have a few that are due in thirty days, but many of them are small shops themselves, so it’s COD.”

Sean blew out a breath. “Why doesn’t she ask me for help? I can release funds from our rental corporation. Eamonn’s is our legacy. She needn’t manage this on her own.”

“Mom has an independent streak,” Robert told him, even if it was a rhetorical question because we all knew exactly why our mother was this way. “She took over the reins of Eamonn’s when she was in her twenties. Dad helped, but he found out he could help more with the money he got working as an associate for the mafia.”

Not to mention its connections.

Sean pointed a finger at me. “I’m the patriarch of this family now. Do not make a move like this without consulting us again.”

“You know that’s like waving a red flag at the bull, right?” Mads said dryly.

Sean glared at our sister-in-law. “She’s twenty-three years old, damn it. She should be concentrating on college.”

“Watch how you talk to my wife, bro,” Robert warned, all teeth, leaving his position at the door, and standing right where Mads was seated.

And that signaled my exit. “I need to study for a test, and just FYI, I may be twenty-three-years old, but I am the one who fixed that shit yesterday.”

Without waiting for their response, I left the apartment.

CHAPTER

Three

AVA

Among the sea of black, blue, and gray expensive suits, Cesar De Lucci stood out in the crowd.

As I weaved in and out of the dinner guests, balancing the appetizer tray of gravlax and caviar on a palm, my previous impressions of him rapidly morphed into newer ones. He seemed taller with broader shoulders. His tanned skin contrasted sharply with the crisp white of his dress shirt.

His chiseled face was sensually attractive, not somberly austere.

His demeanor broody, not boring.

And definitely not an expression of someone with a stick up their ass.

Surrounded by guests eager to make his acquaintance, one would think Cesar was a celebrity.

But it was his intensely masculine presence that commanded attention. I struggled to look away, but my eyes kept returning to him. This alpha among men. I was fascinated how he managed conversation around him with ease, even as his dark gaze roamed the room until it landed on me, settled on me. I was pinned to the spot, my heart and lungs competed for space in my chest, waiting for his attention to move on. But it didn't.

His stare pierced right between my eyes and maybe a few inches out behind my head. It certainly scrambled my motor skills, rattling the tray in my arms.

Did he want me to come over?

And was that a smile playing on his lips?

Unable to stand our locked gazes a second longer, I spun around so quickly that I crashed into someone.

“Watch it, *idiot!*”

Only my balancing act saved me from making a bigger fool of myself in the middle of a high-society party.

My cheeks flamed under the condemning gaze of Paulie’s wife, Carlotta.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. She was the one who let us in through the service entrance in the back of the mansion. A reminder that I was the hired help. Not an associate like my dad who used to drive up to the impressive pillared entrance of this multi-million-dollar residence.

Despite the warm chandeliers illuminating the opulence of gold-gilded ceilings, despite the Italian string quartet playing a lively tune, and despite the laughter and chatter rising from the movement of guests crowding and then dissolving into smaller huddles, a cloud of somberness and coldness permeated the four walls of this mansion.

There was no joy here, only sadness. Maybe because the last time I saw Paulie’s family together was at his mother’s funeral.

It took all my effort not to hide my disdain for his wife. But I could admit Carlotta exuded the cultured elegance of a De Lucci hostess.

Her voice lowered, but was no less venomous. “Paulie thinks you walk on water, but that doesn’t excuse you from being lazy on the job.” She jerked her head over to her girl posse of wannabe mafioso wives. “They want more of that smoked salmon and the lobster salad on a cracker.”

I wanted to correct her that our gravlax was not smoked, but I held my tongue and hurried back to the kitchen where Tommy was preparing the main dishes of the evening.

“Setting this Shepherd’s Pie out on the warmers. Can you follow with the stew?”

“Carlotta’s bitc—friends need a refill.” I deposited more appetizers on my tray. “They’ll probably think up other bullshit for me to do, so don’t count on it.”

Paulie also took pains to avoid me tonight. After an awkward greeting earlier with Carlotta at his side, we hadn’t talked. That was fine by me. I’d rather not be the target of his wife’s displeasure, especially with a job to do.

“She’s jealous is what she is,” my friend said. “Don’t let her get to you. Just ask Paulie for a big tip.”

Trust Tommy to make me laugh.

“You’re okay, right, kiddo?” he asked. “Coz if these folks are making your evening hell, we’ll call a halt to this shit right now and let them fend for themselves.”

“I’m fine.” I tipped my chin to where the party was ongoing. “Go!” He hesitated briefly before leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I was glad Charles advised us to wear the black polo version of our pub’s uniform. Paired with dark trousers and loafers, six of us blended in as polished waitstaff to a room full of Armani suits, Versace cocktail dresses, and Jimmy Choo stilettos. Still, my feet weren’t used to the unyielding leather of never-broken in shoes, and I longed for either my Keds or Dr. Martens.

“I didn’t mean to get you into trouble.” A low baritone spoke from behind me, and even without turning, I knew it was *him*. Cesar witnessed my humiliation, but I’d be damned before I let on that he was the cause of it.

I squared my shoulders and faced him.

He was leaning against the arch of the pass-through, a glass of wine in one hand while the other was shoved into the

pocket of his trousers. If his suit wasn't an Armani, then it would be one of those ridiculously expensive bespoke creations from an elite European tailor. It hugged his shoulders as if it was custom-made. Cesar was taller than Paulie. I'd say he was definitely over six-three, but where my friend was leaner, his older brother packed serious muscle.

Lifting my chin, I said, "I'm not sure what you mean, Mr. De Lucci."

His brows furrowed, and though he wasn't smiling, amusement glinted in his eyes. "You're going to be formal with me? What's wrong with calling me Cesar?"

It took all of my willpower not to look away from those piercing dark eyes, ones that seemed to scrutinize every freckle on my face. My throat bobbed. "Did you want more gravlax?" I held the newly refilled tray out to him.

He pushed away from the entrance and advanced on me. My instinct was to back away, except I was up against the counter.

Very casually, he took a square of the gravlax and caviar and popped the entire thing in his mouth, chewing deliberately, before taking a sip of wine. He did all this without taking his eyes off me.

Dammit, where the hell was Tommy? "You weren't supposed to eat it in one bite," I chided.

He licked the crumbs from his lower lip and raised a brow. "How about you show me?"

"I'm not supposed—"

"To sample the merchandise?" he scoffed. "I'm paying for it. You don't have to worry about me filing a complaint."

"Very well." I wasn't going to let him intimidate me even though he seemed to elicit a tingling voodoo over my body. Lowering the tray on the counter, I picked up a gravlax appetizer and said, "Take one bite." Then I pointed to my mouth and chewed, savoring the salty brine of the caviar exploding in my mouth and mingling with the silky texture of crème fraîche. "And then ... another." His eyes dropped to my

mouth and then lifted back to mine. My throat muscles tightened, and before I could decipher the intense expression I saw there, I started choking.

My hand flew to my throat and without hesitating, grabbed the wine Cesar offered to me. I finished it in three gulps while vaguely noting the heat of his hand rubbing my back.

“Oh my God. I’m so sorry.”

A pained expression crossed his face. “You need to know, *cara*, the wine you just gulped down came from a three-thousand-dollar bottle.”

My mouth gaped, feeling sick to my stomach. “Oh shit.” If anyone understood the reverence bestowed upon fine wine, it would be someone whose family owned a pub.

His mouth twitched. “Since you seemed intent on teaching me a lesson on how to eat caviar and gravlax, it seems I owe you a lesson in how to savor Italian wine.”

“What do you mean?”

Before he could answer, Carlotta strutted into the kitchen and looked suspiciously between me and Cesar. Her full lips trembled in an effort not to snarl so that they ended up twisting hideously.

“We’re about to serve dinner and my friends still haven’t gotten the appetizer,” she told me. She glanced at her brother-in-law. “Papa and Paulie are looking for you to make a toast.” Then directing her attention back to me, she said, “Well, don’t just stand there.” She spun on her heel and started back for the gathering.

Cesar swore under his breath. “Carlotta.” He didn’t yell. The sound level of his voice was only slightly higher than his speaking one, but his displeasure at his sister-in-law reverberated around the kitchen. He grabbed the tray from the counter and stalked toward her. “Serve your friends. Miss McGrath and her crew are overworked as it is.”

“That’s what we pay them for,” she shot back.

“I. Carlotta.” Cesar leaned into her face. “I.” He shoved the tray into her hands. His expression must have left no doubt what he thought about her behavior.

She sniffed indignantly, snatched the tray, turned on a heel, and left the kitchen.

Much to my relief, Tommy walked in and like Paulie’s wife, looked suspiciously between me and Cesar.

“What’s going on here? Is this man harassing you, Ava?”

I couldn’t see Cesar’s face, but I could hear the laughter in his voice when he said, “On the contrary, it was Miss McGrath who was harassing me regarding eating gravlax properly.”

Tommy turned his befuddled face to me.

I shrugged. I wasn’t about to admit that I committed the ultimate sin of gulping down this man’s expensive wine.

Cesar faced me. “I’m needed for speeches and toasts and I’ve taken up enough of your time.” He made for the exit but paused and cast a look my way. “I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty, Tuesday evening.”

Without waiting for my reply, he disappeared into the party.

“But I have exams,” I said weakly.

Tommy appeared in my line of vision as I was busy spiraling into a panic. What the hell did he mean pick me up?

“What did he mean about Tuesday?”

My shoulders hitched in bewilderment. “I have no idea.”

The man before me crossed his arms and regarded me. “Should we pack up and leave?”

Shaking out of my Cesar-induced haze, I said, “Don’t be ridiculous. Come on. Let’s feed them so we can get out of here.”

I got my reprieve when Cesar left me to do my job, staying away from me for the rest of the evening. Carlotta also left me alone, but the collective glare coming from her girl posse wore

me down and even with the high ceilings of the mansion, the party halls became suffocating. I longed for fresh air.

I ducked my head into the kitchen. Sheila was helping Tommy pack things up. “Hey, stepping outside for fresh air. That okay?”

“I would join you,” Tommy quipped. “But I’d be smoking and polluting your space.”

Laughing, I said, “Give me five minutes.”

I exited the kitchen into the rear gardens, nodding to a guard standing there. I remembered a secluded patio with a cherubim fountain in the middle. Rumor has it that this spot was where some of the secret conversations took place when the mafia found out that the FBI had planted wiretaps inside their houses.

My body was overheated, and I welcomed the chill of late October weather. It prickled my skin and cooled my cheeks, but exhilaration expanded my lungs with this evening’s success.

A presence made itself known behind me, but unlike the exciting awareness Cesar invoked in me, this one threw out a malicious vibe.

I whipped around just as a stocky figure emerged from the shadows. I couldn’t make out his face as the moon had hidden behind the clouds. I looked toward the kitchen. Where was Tommy? The guard?

“No one’s going to help you,” the voice said. “I made sure of that.”

“What do you want?” I edged around him to make my way back inside, but he pounced and shoved me against the moss-covered walls. Pressing his barrel-chested body against mine, he immobilized me. His hand covered my mouth. The speed at which he had me at his mercy spoke of his experience.

“Listen to me, you cunt,” he rasped. “Keep your claws away from the De Lucci brothers, you get me? And stop sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

I tried to shake my head but I couldn't. It almost felt like he was crushing my cheekbones.

His face came closer, and the pungent smell of onions on his breath almost made me gag. "What do you have? A golden cunt? You tired of spreading your legs for Paulie, now you want his brother too?"

He released my mouth, and I thought his oppressive weight would disappear, but the gleam of a knife appeared by my face.

"You can scream," Onion Breath said. "They can't hear you with the music playing so loudly inside. Yes, I planned that too." The warm blade traced my cheek, and my breaths came in quick bursts.

"Or is it your face? Those wide innocent eyes." The tip of the knife touched my temple and then trailed under my chin. Pinprick pain broke through skin.

"Or ... should I just slit your throat? You did cost my crew money—"

My heart pounded. I had to think fast. The kitchen door was only ten feet away.

Onion Breath wasn't a tall man and with adrenalin flooding my veins, everything my brothers taught me about self-defense focused my mind on how to get out of this situation. If only—

The stench of onion disappeared, leaving me with crisp glorious oxygen.

Steel clattering on pavement was followed by muffled grunts.

Confusion set in as my eyes tried to make sense of the tangle of shadows. The man who attacked me was being held in an arm lock by an unknown savior. A tall man with a broad back stood in front of the grappling pair, and with controlled power, slugged my attacker twice with his fist.

"Take him to the basement," he ordered in a tone that vibrated rage.

Cesar turned and faced me. The moon slipped out from the clouds and cast sinister angles of shadows and light on his face, giving him a preternatural aura. He gripped my shoulders painfully.

At my yelp, there was a muttered apology and then a gruff, “Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“Shit,” he hissed. A finger gently lifted my chin to the moonlight. “You’re bleeding.”

I backed a step.

His eyes that were dark as the night reminded me of a demon. “It’s just a nick. I’m fine.”

His hands fell to his sides, clenching in fists. He cocked his head in the direction where Onion Breath disappeared with my other rescuer. “I need to take care of this.”

“What will you do?” I asked.

“Whatever is needed to keep you safe.”

CHAPTER

Four

CESAR

Fucking Silvio.

I choked down my rage, focusing on the smoldering tip of the cigarette hanging between my fingers. Impatience slithered under my skin. I observed our guests from the second floor. Below me, they were oblivious to the violence that almost took place outside the walls of this mansion. Oblivious to the violence I was about to mete out as soon as I concluded my duties as the oldest De Lucci heir.

Paulie appeared beside me. “It’s done.”

“No one saw you?”

“No, we used the entrance to the basement located at the back of the house.”

I took a drag of the cigarette. “Ava?”

“They left a few minutes ago,” my brother informed me. “Listen, it wasn’t a good idea to approach her in the kitchen. You just started a shit-storm of trouble, and it’s not what we need right now.”

I didn’t answer him immediately and exhaled a stream of smoke. “Control your wife.”

“Damn you, Cesar,” Paulie snarled. “You think it was only Carlotta who noticed you couldn’t keep your eyes off Ava? Everyone,” he stressed. “Everyone noticed how your eyes

followed her. We could still play it off as you being interested in some tail, but you have to back off until we get our own shit resolved.”

“First of all,” I gritted. “Never refer to Ava as *some* tail.”

“Fuck you,” Paulie shot back. “You know what I mean. That was in reference to how the Mafiosi would see her. If you react like this every time one of those motherfuckers insults her, then we have a problem.”

My brother was right. I needed to contain my obsession with Ava McGrath. An obsession that started six months ago when I looked into the McGrath family after one of her brothers joined the Attorney General’s office of the Southern District.

She was a complication I had no intention of unraveling from myself. The file I had on her bordered on stalkerish. She had no idea what lengths I’d gone through to put myself in her path.

“You never even noticed her when she was hanging out with me when we were teenagers,” Paulie pointed out.

I angled my eyes at my brother. “We’ve had this conversation before. When she was fifteen, I was twenty-six. I’m no pedophile.”

“I knew she’d turn into a knockout,” he continued.

I glared at him. Paulie knew how to push my buttons. He chuckled, “Hey, she’s more comfortable with me. Remember that.”

“I’m not discussing this with you.”

“It was me she called for the catering job. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“I put her in a situation with Silvio.” By getting close to her, I put her on everyone’s radar. I underestimated her effect on me once we were in the same room. I needed to see her up close. See the face that had captivated me from a mere photograph. A reality surpassing the fantasy. Not her dark, drab clothes, nor twisting her flaming hair in a knot could she

hide that energy that bled from every pore. That was what intimidated Carlotta. That was what Silvio wanted to crush.

That was what I wanted to possess. The lethal combination of Ava's innocence and strength.

"What about the guard Silvio bribed?"

Paulie emitted a disgusted sound. "My men are going to make an example of him. I'm sorry, bro. I will vet Pop's guards better."

"Money is not an issue."

"Damn you, I know that," Paulie growled. "The Rossis are trying to make us look weak."

This was one of the reasons I came back. The power play. My uncle's focus as acting boss was on the family business, and I was worried Pop might become a target if the New York families clashed. Everyone seemed to be a hair-trigger away nowadays.

"What do you want to do with our guest in the basement?" Paulie asked.

Gorski was Silvio's territory. The man was a hothead and thought he was untouchable. Having to be forced to do a favor for the De Luccis that benefited Eamonn's was seen as a slight, especially since the Rossi crew were backing a rival pub. I was familiar with the culture of pride among these made men. They equated their ego to honor. To Silvio, hurting Ava while doing it on De Lucci property must be his big idea of retribution spurred by tiny-dick syndrome.

"Give him what he deserves." For hurting my woman.

Even to my brother, I hesitated to reveal the depth of what I was feeling for his friend because I was having trouble wrapping my mind around it. I walked to the small sitting area near us and snuffed the cigarette in the ashtray. "I've had enough of this circus. Send everyone home."



“You’re dead, De Lucci,” Silvio spat. “You think my crew won’t look for me?”

The man who attacked Ava was tied to a chair. Paulie went home with his wife and I made sure Pop didn’t come looking for me before I took care of the business I had in the basement. I unwound the wrap around my hand. Having cut up knuckles when I checked on Ava later wasn’t ideal. As for Silvio, his face had become unrecognizable, and he was missing a few teeth.

“I can make you disappear, *stronzo*,” I informed him in a bored tone as I walked over to the table and unrolled my set of knives.

“I’m a made guy!” he said. “The Cosa Nostra will hang you for this.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “You’re not listening. They’ll never find you. For all they know, you’ve turned federal witness and are off somewhere under a new identity.”

“What the fuck? You’re gonna frame me? They’ll never believe that I turned. I’m loyal.”

My fingers tightened around the handle of my favorite blade.

Turning to face him, I regarded him with disgust. “That’s just it, isn’t it? Loyalty has become a scarce commodity.”

His eyes narrowed. “Wait. I told you what you wanted to know about Gorski because the Rossis have an alliance with the De Luccis.”

I raised my brow. “Do they?”

“Fuck. Ask your uncle. I’m not telling you no more.” He winced when he tried to lick the corners of his bloodied mouth.

“It’s because you have nothing else to tell me. Your capo has been withholding shit from you.”

“You’re lying.”

“I have no reason to lie.” Satisfaction rose inside me when the meaning of my words hit him. Through the swelling of his eyes I could see it track nervously to the knife in my hand.

“I can’t believe this. All this for a fucking cunt,” he spewed.

“Call her a cunt again. I dare you.”

His fat lips thinned. “You should be ashamed of yourself,” he said finally. “Think about Lorenzo. You dishonor your brother’s memory.”

Hatred hazed the edges of my vision as I stalked toward the man in the chair, raising his chin with the tip of the blade.

Before he mentioned Lorenzo, all I could see was the knife the bastard used on Ava, splitting her skin, making her bleed. All I could feel was the rage that blinded me when I imagined what could have happened if I hadn’t listened to my instinct that she was in trouble.

But at the mention of Lorenzo, it took me back to that day I walked into the study where my brother was spinning a revolver on the table.

His face was a study of agony. A bottle of whiskey sat empty beside a glass that was half full.

“What’s wrong, bro?” I asked warily. There was no one else in the house. How long had he been drinking?

“Everything,” he replied. He lifted tortured eyes toward me. “All my life I wanted to be a made man. Follow in Pop’s footsteps.”

I forced a smile. “And you made it, right?”

He shook his head. “Tonight, I had to watch Tony Cap kill a pregnant woman and her son. Uncle Jackie and I just stood there and let it happen. The husband was a federal informant.”

Fuck. Bile turned in my stomach at the depravity of the Rossi capo on this team-up between the two families to hunt the person who’d given evidence to the feds that put several of our soldiers in jail. My brother witnessed this?

“What happened to our vow that women and children are not to be touched?” he asked. His eyes brimmed with unshed tears. “I’m not cut out for this, Cesar. You always hated the business. Leave New York, you follow? But ... promise me ... don’t let Paulie become a made man.”

“No. *You* are going to make sure.” I approached, hoping to get the gun away from him. “Not me.”

The regret that etched Lorenzo’s smile was one I will remember for the rest of my life.

He pointed the gun to his head. “You’re the best of us De Luccis, bro.”

My eyes squeezed shut at the memory of what happened next, but when I reopened them, Silvio’s face reflected everything I hated about the mafia. I was born into it, I had to live within its circle to keep everyone I cared about safe.

His throat swallowed. “Wait. Wait. I have more information ...”

“No. You don’t.”

I plunged the knife into his jugular.

CHAPTER

Five

AVA

I stood under the shower for thirty minutes with the smell of onions lingering under my nose. I was too wired to sleep. The fleshy hands and the weight of that man's body ... I could feel them surrounding me like a suffocating shroud. What would have happened if Cesar hadn't shown up?

I shuddered at the thought.

Tommy asked me several times if I was okay. He threatened to tell my brothers that the older De Lucci was bugging me. Little did he know that the passing flirtation with Paulie's brother had been the highlight of my evening. I replayed my encounter with Cesar to push away the unpleasant one of Onion Breath, but my nose had latched onto the stench.

Desperate for sleep because I still had to study, I opened the blinds and stared into the lit-up night sky of New York City.

The shrieking phone startled me.

It was three a.m. Who in the world would be calling me?

Paulie?

What the hell?

I answered the phone, hoping his wife hadn't gone off the rails and plotted to murder him.

"Is Cesar with you?" he asked without preamble.

Confused, I said, “What the hell are you smoking? Why would he be with me?”

“He’s been drinking. He called me an hour ago and said he was going to see you.”

“All right. You lost me. Why would he think to see me? If he’s worried about last night, I’m fine.”

“Are you? You don’t sound like you’ve just woken up.”

Damn him. “Well, he’s not here.”

“Humor me and check outside your window.”

I returned to the window and squinted at the street below. A man was leaning against the streetlight. The silhouette fit Cesar to a tee. In fact, I’d bet all my passing midterm grades that it was him.

Swearing under my breath, I said, “You De Lucci men are nuts.”

Paulie chuckled. “Can you collect him and have him give me a call?”

“You’re saying I should let your crazy brother into my apartment?”

“Hurting you is the last thing he’d do, Ava. Trust me on that.”

“You owe me for this.” I ended the call and headed to the door. My hand closed over the knob, and I hesitated. This was crazy. I backed away and paced the kitchen and debated calling Paulie to come collect his brother instead. But I could still smell onions in my nose, and it reminded me that Cesar rescued me. Before I could second-guess myself again, I tore out of the apartment but had the sense to descend the steps quietly.

Disabling the alarm of our brownstone entrance, I opened the door.

The figure across the street straightened and started toward me. Anticipation and apprehension warred inside me. My desire to hold the door open clashed with the alarm bells

urging me to slam it shut. Although Cesar was sinisterly clad in all black, it wasn't danger to my life that was triggering my flight response. No, it was the awareness between my legs and my nipples' sensitivity to the fabric covering them. A sensual awareness. One that started the second I laid eyes on him again.

He never slowed down to ask permission if he could come in. He strode right into the foyer and into me. Arms wrapped around me as though he was saying hello to a long-lost friend. The heat of his breath fanned my cheeks. "Ava." He said my name like a prayer. Okay, maybe long-lost lover was more appropriate.

Grasping at some semblance of sanity, I pushed against his chest. He smelled so good, a heady combination of expensive scotch, cologne, and cigarettes. "You're nuts. How long were you standing out there?"

"Forty-five minutes."

"You have to be really quiet. Robert is a light sleeper."

He obliged me by removing his shoes. And then with him in his socked feet, we went up to my unit.

All through our ascent, I was worried my brother would find me sneaking in with a man. Not just any man, but the man the SDNY office might be interested in.

Oh, the tangled web we McGraths find ourselves in.

I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do with Cesar when I let him into my apartment. It was like sneaking a wounded wild animal into my house. There was something feral in his eyes that told me he was hurting. I led him into my kitchen which had suddenly felt too small. I put a kettle on the stove and ignited the burner. I could offer him hot chocolate or tea.

When I turned to ask which one he wanted, I noticed his dark hair appeared mussed unlike earlier this evening when it was gelled back, indicating he'd taken a shower. His eyes were bloodshot, face tight.

"Did you drive over here?"

He shook his head. “My man dropped me off.”

I’d always seen him in impeccably pressed shirts and a suit with a serious face, which was why I always thought Paulie’s brother was boring like Sean when he talked about the stock market.

But seeing Cesar less than perfectly starched worried me. It did, however, make him less distant.

Earlier that night in the mansion’s kitchen, we’d exchanged more words with each other than the entire time I’d known him, yet he still seemed far away—like a notion instead of reality. But here, in my apartment, he felt real. A living, breathing, warm blooded male. My temptation clad in black.

“Do you want anything to drink?” I asked.

“If you’re making something for yourself.”

“I’ve got hot cocoa and tea.”

He smiled. “I haven’t had hot chocolate in a while.”

I shot him a brief smile and motioned for him to sit while I headed to the retro-style phone I had on the kitchen wall and called Paulie. He answered on the first ring.

“He’s been collected,” I told him before handing Cesar the phone.

“You shouldn’t have bugged Ava ... well, as you can tell, I’m fine. It’s done. Now go back to sleep before your wife wakes up.” Cesar returned the phone to me, and I re-hooked the receiver to its cradle.

He glanced around. “Cozy place.”

I sat in front of him. “I’ll get straight to the point.” His eyes flared when I said this as though he delighted in my directness. But the side effect was that I momentarily forgot my point. I gave myself a mental shake, trying to squash my awareness to his potent male pheromones. “You showing up in front of my building is weird as hell ...”

“I worried about you.” His jaw tightened. “You were attacked at my house while under my care.”

“Technically, I’m not under your care. We were at a job, and we’re insured although I need to review our coverage. It could be you’re still liable for your guest’s—” I was rambling, so I cut myself off and said, “Anyway. I appreciate that you’ve gone above and beyond ... but you could have called and checked on me.”

“I needed to see you’re okay with my own eyes.” He leaned over and crooked a finger under my chin where the tip of the knife pierced my skin.

“It’s just a nick. It’s nothing.”

My words didn’t appease the murderous look on his face.

“I doubt you’ve slept.” He dropped his hand and the chair creaked when he leaned back.

I crossed my arms and rubbed my biceps. “No. But, I’ll be fine.”

“I wanted to kiss you.”

“Whoa there, buster ... you’re giving me whiplash.”

I was still processing his statement, when he added, “I wanted to kiss you earlier tonight, but that bastard ruined everything.”

“What?” I’d come to a conclusion. Trying to understand my reactions to Cesar would require a college thesis, but it boiled down to this: I wanted to jump him or I wanted to run far, far away from him. There was no middle ground. It was give in or get out.

He smiled wistfully, oblivious to the war he’d started between my logical and illogical brain.

“And when you came to get me just now.” His gaze darkened. “I wanted to push you against the wall and kiss the fuck out of you. But because of your attack, I held back. I wasn’t sure where your head was...”

The intensity emanating from the man in front of me was too strong, I had to stand up and put some distance between us. Perfect excuse to prepare the hot chocolate. I’d never had a knife held to my throat. I’d been bullied in school. My

brothers defended me and beat up those assholes. Working at the bar, I'd had my share of handsy customers and I'd learned to put them in their place. Besides, given what Charles and Dad used to do for the mob, I could unequivocally say, I wasn't living in fairy-tale land.

The kettle started whistling. I still hadn't looked at Cesar while I poured the hot water over the hot chocolate powder and handed him the mug with a teaspoon to stir. I resumed my seat in front of him.

"This is good. Belgian?" He commented after taking a sip.

"Besides coffee, this is one of my guilty pleasures. Come to think of it ... dammit." I inhaled the hot chocolate. Why didn't I think to indulge myself in the aroma of dark chocolate.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Okay, the reason I couldn't sleep was because I couldn't get rid of that guy ..." I shook my head. "What's his name?"

"Silvio," he growled.

"Silvio's onion breath ... good Lord. I showered and everything, but I still can't get the smell out of my nose."

"Psychological?"

"Right? Why didn't I think of making hot chocolate ... well, maybe the caffeine in it might keep me awake, but it's better than having that blasted onion breath still filling my nostrils."

Cesar's gaze dipped to his mug. Without looking at me, he said, "Are you saying you're just trying to replace the smell you associate with an unpleasant experience with a more pleasant one?" When he glanced up, his eyes captured mine.

"Well, sort of," I took a sip of my hot chocolate.

"Can I offer myself?" he stated bluntly.

The chocolate went down the wrong way, and I started coughing. My unexpected guest rose from his seat to pat my back.

“Seems to be a habit of yours whenever I’m around, Miss McGrath.” Amusement laced his tone.

“What can I say? You have a way of making my breath snag.”

“That’s not very flattering.”

When I recovered, I was keenly aware that he had descended on his haunches and was still staring at me intently. “I wasn’t trying to flatter you.”

Why did it feel like I couldn’t breathe? “You’re making me self-conscious.” I wanted to lean in closer. Inhale him, his scent competing with the deliciousness of hot chocolate.

Cesar’s face was an inch from mine, maybe less. Warm sensations ghosted over my skin and heat pooled between my legs. This time I didn’t back away. It had been six months since I’d had sex and Cesar was better than a one-night-stand with a stranger. An aching pulsed in my core and with it the signs of my arousal. Warmth and wetness.

I thought he was going to kiss me, but he didn’t.

Instead, he helped me to my feet.

He picked up both our mugs and led me to the couch in front of the fireplace and I was only too aware of the slickness between my legs as I moved.

“Sit,” he murmured, lowering our drinks to the coffee table.

“That should be my line. I’m the host,” I said, but I did it anyway.

An indulgent smile touched his lips. Like one you’d give a child who thought she was in-charge.

“Can I start the fire?” he asked.

“Sure. Make yourself at home.” I was being sarcastic, but he didn’t seem to notice.

That moment in the kitchen was gone, and it was obvious someone put the brakes on us jumping on each other. And that someone certainly wasn’t me.

I was relieved and disappointed. However, Cesar gave me something else to be mesmerized about with how he deftly kindled the fire that chased away the chill from the room. He settled beside me on the couch, leaving a foot between us. He leaned forward and grabbed our hot chocolates and handed me my mug. Together we watched the fire and listened to its crackling.

“What happened to Silvio?” I asked, unable to hold back my question any longer.

“He won’t bother you again.” A hard edge entered his voice.

“Cesar ...”

“He touched you. He’s gone.”

“I must be missing something here ...”

I could see the muscle ticking in his jawline before he turned to me and awarded me with a glare. “Let me spell it out. He touched what’s mine.”

“Mine ... you mean ...”

“Yes ... you.”

I gulped the hot chocolate, feeling the burn in my throat, and then jumped to my feet, returning his glare. “When did I become yours?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it does.”

“It wouldn’t make sense yet. Just trust me.”

This attractive man was telling me to trust him blindly. If he were ugly, would I trust him?

I continued to glare at him. “It doesn’t work that way.”

“We’re not in the right frame of mind to discuss this.”

“To discuss why I’m supposedly yours.” I used air quotes around the “supposedly” with my fingers.

A muscle pulsed in his jaw. “Fine. I shouldn’t have said that. I consider you mine because you’re Paulie’s friend and,

as such, consider you family. I consider family as mine. Happy now? That's what I meant."

I squinted my eyes at him, not sure if I believed this simplistic explanation.

"I just want to help you sleep, Ava," he said softly.



Cesar

I would say anything to banish that bastard Silvio from her memory. When Ava told me she couldn't sleep because his foul breath tormented her, something snapped inside me. Something akin to possessiveness. The next time she falls asleep, the only scent Ava should have is mine.

From the second I saw her by the open door wearing those shapeless pajamas, I'd been imagining what she wasn't wearing underneath. How her skin would feel beneath my touch. She wasn't wearing a bra. She probably thought because her breasts were small, I couldn't see the outline of her nipples. My mouth watered to suck on her tits. To push her against the wall and kiss her, to shove my hand beneath the elastic of those pajamas and make her come.

But I fucking stopped myself because of goddamned Silvio.

"If you don't let me help you sleep I will feel guilty that you almost got hurt."

Her mouth fell open. "You're a blatant manipulator."

I bit back a smile. "I take my responsibilities very seriously."

"So, I'm trusting you because you're Paulie's brother." She cautiously lowered herself beside me.

With blood lust still pulsing furiously in my veins, I had no business showing up on Ava's doorstep. Silvio, the

motherfucker, had been disposed of by my men. He would never be found. But I wished him alive so I could kill him again. Ava needed me. She just wouldn't admit it. What she didn't know was how much I needed her too. To calm this storm inside me. This rage.

"I'm going to wrap my arms around you," I told her. "Okay?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Let me know if it triggers anything."

"I'm fine, Cesar. I'm telling you it's just his breath ..."

I edged closer ... but then she abruptly held up a hand, panic on her face.

I stilled.

"Okay, wait. It's also the weight of his ... ugh. He pinned me against the wall, so I might freak out, but probably not," she added quickly, "Because I really, really felt safe when you took me in your arms—"

I embraced her. Ava didn't know what she'd given me. I needed, *craved*, to be her solace from her fears. Her fingers clutched my sweater, nose burrowing in the wool. She inhaled.

"You smell better," she whispered.

Relief mixed with my humor. "I damn well hope so. Now hush. I'm just going to hold you, *capisce*?"

"You're so warm."

"Come on, Ava." I scooted to the end of the couch and rearranged her so I had her cradled on my lap.

"I don't know why I'm letting you do this," she whispered.

"Because I make you feel safe?" I offered.

She chuckled. "Yeah."

"I didn't get a chance to tell you ..."

She rubbed her cheek against my chest. "Sorry. Itchy."

That action fueled a roar of satisfaction inside me. “Be my guest.”

She laughed briefly. “What didn’t you get a chance to tell me?”

“My thanks for indulging us with the delicious dinner. I’m guessing your mother is not too happy about it.”

She sighed. “Paulie said she kept turning away business from your family. We can’t afford to be choosy.”

“I respect her stand on this, but I’m impressed with how you pulled it off.”

“When there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“That’s your father talking.”

She glanced up at me and grinned. “You’ve heard him say that?”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure if this was going to dredge up sad memories, but judging from how her eyes sparkled, the memory was good. “Pop tried his best to keep your dad and brother out of prison. The evidence was just so damning. There was no way around it.”

“They knew the risks.” She stared at the fire. “The night of their arrest, I covered for them with my family. Dad was already separated from Mom, but she worried a lot because Charles had been spending too much time in his company.”

My arms tightened around her, but I didn’t interrupt because I wanted to know everything about this woman who had occupied my mind for the last few months.

“Sean got suspicious when they disappeared that night. I said they were at the Yankees game.” She glanced at me. “They were hijacking a truck with a shipment of generators. I found that out at the hearing. I knew they were planning a job, but I didn’t know the details then.” Ava blew out a breath. “Mom was furious with me. She didn’t speak to me for almost a month.”

“You were what? Seventeen at that time?”

She laid her head back on my chest. “Yes. Robert was the voice of reason and defended me. Said that there was nothing I could’ve done to stop them. I wasn’t about to rat them out.”

Somehow I had already formed this opinion of her. Ava was very much like her father. Tenacious and loyal. I also had a feeling the reason she was working so hard to save the pub was because she felt responsible for what happened to Cillian and Charles.

Silence and the warmth of the fire permeated the apartment. She was as lost in her own thoughts as I was lost in mine. I wanted to spend the night but needed to leave before daybreak. She didn’t need to deal with a family inquisition of why a De Lucci spent the night. I glanced outside. I could have one of my men pick me up at the corner.

“Ava?”

“Hmm ...”

“Tell me how to disable the alarm.”

“It’s disabled.” She yawned. “Please enable it on your way out.”

“Right. What’s the code?”

She didn’t answer, and I thought she’d fallen asleep.

“You’re sneaky,” she said finally because I didn’t need the code if it was already disabled, but she rattled the numbers out to me.

I smiled. “Thank you.”

“And I’m only telling you this because you’re Paulie’s brother.”

Keep telling yourself that, *cara*. I’ve seen how you look at me. “Of course.”

A few minutes later, her breathing evened out. I sat with Ava a while longer, unwilling to let her go, never fathoming how content I would be watching a woman sleep. The evening stirred up toxic shit stemming from Lorenzo’s death. I blamed myself for not seeing the signs of my brother’s despair. Maybe

if I'd not been so damned consumed in my efforts to distance myself from the family, I could've helped him. After Lorenzo died, my mother succumbed to heartbreak. Vengeance was my absolution; I became exactly who I never wanted to become. Numbing my emotions was the only way to function.

I felt no joy, no sadness, and no hope.

My soul was a black hole of emptiness I kept falling into, never finding its bottom.

Until I saw a picture of Ava.

The moments that morning I opened the file on Robert McGrath were captured in my memory forever.

I didn't leave for De Lucci Transnational offices that day because I had a sit down with the Camorra underboss and his two capos to settle territorial disputes. Why they couldn't deal with this internally was not my problem, but I was careful to remain relevant within criminal organizations whose businesses intersected with mine.

The file on McGrath could have waited. I had a pile of documents waiting for my signature. And yet something pulled me to take the pouch in my hand.

It was one of those brown accordion files with an elastic cord closure overlaid by the seal of the private investigator firm I hired. Taking out the documents, I reviewed the financial information first. I was certain the SDNY did this as well to evaluate an employee's susceptibility to bribery. There was no question which side of the law this particular McGrath fell on because Paulie told me it had been painful to see Ava as the only family who'd appeared during her father and brother's indictments.

The first pictures were of Robert and his wife and their three kids going for a stroll in a park. Just photographs of them doing mundane day-to-day activities. Then a close-up of a young woman commanded my attention.

This was ... Ava? Paulie's friend.

An intense jolt speared through my chest. The first time I saw my brother's friend was in the sunroom. Thin arms, thin

legs and her red hair partially covered her face. But my skin crawled seeing the scattered pages and magazines on the floor. I couldn't look in her direction because I was sure my scowl would scare her off. My OCD was not her problem.

Over the years, I'd seen Ava around. I remembered her mostly as a gangly teenager and simply as Paulie's friend. Maybe I was stuck up and arrogant, thinking a teenager didn't merit my attention, but she certainly had my complete attention now.

No longer a teenager but a young woman.

I studied the photo. Her jawline was too angular, almost too strong to be on a woman's face, yet her luminous blue eyes and generous lips mesmerized me in their breathtaking symmetry.

The other photographs were group pictures, but my eyes frantically sought her face in them. Then I picked up the first photo that captured my focus and sank into my chair.

For the first time in a long time I felt something.

Ava's face delighted me.

Deep inside, I wasn't quite as hollow; there was an absence of emptiness.

Ava stirred in my arms and mumbled, pulling me out of the day when my interest in her started. I stared at her face and traced a finger on the contours of its bewitching lines.

The amount of photographs I requested from my PI was a testament that I'd gone beyond simple interest in the guise of investigating her brother. My initial fascination with the beauty she'd become was quickly overtaken by preoccupation with every facet of her life.

Ava McGrath had become my obsession.

CHAPTER

Six

CESAR

I returned to the mansion before five that morning, slept until ten, and then joined my father for breakfast in the sunroom. It was the only room in the house that was routinely swept for wiretaps.

Pop sat at the head of the table. My father Riccardo “Richie” De Lucci became boss of the De Lucci Crime family in 1983 when it was clear our cousin, who was boss at that time, was going to jail. Beside him was Uncle Jackie—Giacomo De Lucci—the acting boss since Pop’s heart attack following my mother’s death. My father relinquished most of the running of the organization to my uncle but continued to advise him.

Lorenzo had been meant to run the family one day.

“You could ask him yourself,” my father told my uncle when he spied me walking toward them. Jackie didn’t look anything like Pop who remained lean and had the strong, angular features of the De Luccis which was passed down to his sons. Uncle Jackie took after Nonna—stocky with beady eyes and a short chin. He wasn’t blessed with the De Lucci’s head of thick hair either and was balding at the top of his head. Jackie De Lucci reminded me of a pit bull and with his reputation on the street, the similarity was not merely physical.

“Ask me what?” I asked, easing myself into a chair beside Pop and facing my uncle across the table. One of the house

staff immediately appeared, set a plate of sausage and eggs in front of me, and filled my cup with coffee.

“Why were you at the McGrath girl’s apartment this mornin’?”

“Having me followed, uncle?”

“Part of my job, kid. Know what’s going on in this family,” Jackie said. “You think, just because you’re not a made guy, your actions don’t reflect on us?”

Lowering my coffee, I shrugged, picking up the knife and fork. “She’s ... interesting.”

“Jesus Christ, Cesar.” Jackie slammed his palm on the table. “Her brother is working for the fuckin’ U.S. Attorney. It’s makin’ everyone nervous.”

“I’m not seeing a problem here,” I said. “Do you, Pop?” I sawed through a sausage and lifted it to my mouth, eyeing my uncle with derision. “I’d even say it’s an advantage—”

“I’m not buyin’ this *keep your friends close, enemies closer* bullshit,” Jackie hissed.

I took my time chewing in a way that let my uncle know that I hated being interrupted. Finally, I said, “Red Cillian had been loyal to this family. He took the heat that would have put half your men in jail—including you. You gave the order that night. He hasn’t given up anyone. Neither has Charles.”

“They know how to play the game and keep their mouths shut,” my father agreed.

“That’s more than could be said of several of your wise guys.” I shot my uncle a meaningful look, indicating that I had a pulse on the family even when I’d lived in Europe.

“So you’re sayin’ awarding them last night’s gig has got nothin’ to do with your interest in screwin’ the chick.”

My fingers tightened on my knife and fork, and I could feel a vein bulge in my temple. Silvio’s bloody end flashed through my mind.

Pop must have sensed the spike in my temper and sighed, “Jackie.”

“Disrespect her again, and I’ll fuckin’ shove this knife down your throat and make sure those words are gonna be your last,” I said softly.

My uncle’s eyes widened, but instead of being offended, the asshole seemed delighted. “Guess Harvard can’t take the thug out of a De Lucci, eh?”

“Don’t get too excited,” I muttered. My Brooklyn street guy accent had a way of slipping out when I got pissed.

Lowering the silverware before the violence roiling inside me became a reality, I sat back in my chair. “And stop with the goddamn tail. You follow?”

As we traded stares across the table, Jackie was probably imagining ways to slit my throat. One never spoke to a made man that way and most especially the boss. Being my father’s son didn’t protect me from my uncle. But my murky connections to criminal organizations in Italy and the rest of Europe made the Five Families wary of my presence in New York and that worked to my advantage. It also presented a disadvantage because I was sure they were keeping tabs on my movements.

My uncle’s beady eyes lost focus for a bloody instant before he turned to Pop. “We have another problem.”

Nice. Changing the subject without agreeing to my demand. I let that slide for now.

The house staff took that opportunity to refill our coffee. My uncle waited until they disappeared into the house before he continued, “I got a call from one of the Rossi capos at seven this morning. One of his soldiers didn’t show up for their construction job.”

“And this concerns us, how?” Pop asked.

“Stinky’s last known whereabouts was last night at the party.”

My father frowned. “Stinky?”

“Silvio ‘Stinky’ Capuano,” Jackie supplied. “Tony Cap’s cousin.”

The capo, Anthony Capuano, led the highest-earning crew of the Rossi Crime family. He was working with the Russians on side businesses the Five Families frowned upon but didn’t know how to address.

Keeping my expression neutral. “Yes, he was here.”

“So you saw him last night?” my uncle pressed.

“He’s hard to miss. His breath precedes him.” At my father’s blank stare, I added, “He eats raw onions like one would eat apples.”

“There won’t be surveillance to review,” Pop said.

Whenever there was a mob gathering like last night, it was understood that video surveillance would be turned off for the main rooms. However, I made sure that all the footage leading to the basement was erased. My trek to Ava’s apartment served two purposes. One, I wanted to see her and make sure she was okay, and two, I knew I was being followed and I used myself as a distraction so my men could leave with Silvio’s body and get rid of it.

Paulie had been working with me in the background. To the world, he was the happy-go-lucky De Lucci. To keep my promise to Lorenzo, my youngest brother took a page from the Roman emperor Claudius who everyone thought was a fool. For wasn’t it better to survive with half of one’s wit when most have died with all of theirs?

I cut another piece of sausage and forked it together with eggs and pretended ignorance. “That’s still the case with the surveillance?”

Pop nodded.

“What the hell do we tell Tony?” my uncle asked.

“You’re the boss, Jackie,” Pop said. “Think of something. Now, regarding this other thing about the dope. It’s a bad idea. We don’t want that shit on our garbage routes. We have

enough trouble skirting RICO, we don't need the DEA on our ass. Leave that business to the Rossis."

Stilling my tongue about the drugs was difficult. Didn't these people learn when the feds busted the Pizza Connection in '87?

I felt Jackie's stare on me so I glanced at him with a raised brow.

"We owe Tony Cap a favor for the Gorski business," he told us.

I knew this was coming. It wasn't enough repaying the loan with more interest than they could possibly collect on it. "What does he want?"

"An invitation to the show." The show was my high-stakes card game that was set to begin tonight.

"Fine."

My uncle slid back his chair and rose. "Thanks for breakfast, boss." He then nodded to me. "Will I see you tonight?"

"I'll make an appearance." And it depended on my plans for a certain redhead who occupied my mind.

His mouth tightened, before he replied, "Good. Let me know if you hear anything about Silvio."

"Same. Keep us updated," Pop said.

"Uncle Jackie," I called to his retreating back. When he turned, I said. "I'm not fucking around about the tail." Even when I knew they were following me, it did annoy me that they would actually think I wouldn't know. "End that shit now, *capisce?*"

Eyes narrowing, he glanced at my father. Whatever look was exchanged between them, I didn't care, but my uncle gave me a tight nod and left.

"Try not to add to Jackie's problems." Pop gave me a look. "He's got a lot on his plate."

"Then he should mind his own goddamn business."

“How serious are you about the girl?”

“Her name is Ava,” I gritted.

A ghost of a smile curved his mouth. “Ah, it’s serious. If it’s serious, I’m okay with it.”

“So you’re okay if I pursue McGrath’s daughter?”

“I wasn’t aware I had a say. You’ve always done as you pleased. And I’m not questioning what you have going on in Italy, but those rumors are keeping you safe.” Pop leaned forward. “But when it comes to women, I see myself with your mamma in you.” He sighed regretfully and waved around. “I would give this all up. This power, this money. Live in a little house in Brooklyn if that meant I would still have your mamma and Lorenzo with me.”

“Pop ...”

His eyes shone with tears. I’d heard his laments before. His regrets.

“I failed her.” His voice cracked, and I lowered my knife and put my hand over his. “She married a monster. She died because of a broken heart when Lorenzo died,” he continued. “My sons ... they inherited her good heart. You could not stomach this life.”

Pop was wrong. I had done things that normal people would consider me a monster for doing.

“She loved you,” I told him. “She knew what she was getting into. She never blamed you. That’s why you never let drugs into the business ... because of her.”

“My reign is ending,” he said. “Jackie is a good boss. He’s got more balls for this kind of work, for what the family is becoming. I can only offer guidance now. With RICO bearing down on the mafia, most of the bosses want to delegate.”

Couldn’t say I didn’t see this coming. “The cartels and gangs.”

Pop gave a lift of his chin. “Colombia and Mexico are already in the mix.”

“How is it getting in? The docks?” I surmised since the families still controlled the Seaworker’s union, they controlled the unloading.

“Yes,” Pop sighed. “You know we always joke around that half of our wise-guys are psychos.”

I’d heard this more than a couple of times. It was mostly said in jest, but there was truth to it because how else could someone kill without a fucking conscience? If I killed only the worst of them, did that mean I had some level of psycho in me?

Pop shot me a resigned look. “Soon the other half will be dealing drugs and wanna bet they’d be hooked on dope? But whatcha gonna do?”

CHAPTER

Seven

AVA

I exited NY Business School with a bounce in my step. I had an inkling I aced the exam. I'd been anxious going in because all I did on Monday instead of studying was daydream about a sexy Italian. The one who carried and laid me gently on the bed. The one who snuggled up to me for a while. I even put a do-not-disturb sign on my door on Monday so I could study. Half the time I was daydreaming about the kiss Cesar planted on my brow before he left that morning.

I wasn't sure if I imagined it.

He left his scent on my pillows and, admittedly, I was pathetic with how often I'd sniffed it. In my defense, I was just getting rid of Onion Breath. I shuddered at the cold, calculating manner in which Cesar informed me Silvio wouldn't be bothering me anymore. Being holier-than-thou never figured in my mentality. There was bad and there was evil. I had no qualms of saying sayonara to slime like Silvio.

I also hoped I wasn't attached to Cesar as my savior or protector. Because jumping every time the phone rang thinking it was him was also another level of pathetic. What happened to my mantra—"No boys until I finished college"?

I snorted. Cesar was not a boy.

Thigh-high white tights encased in white Mary Janes stood in my path, rousing me from my musings. A woman in a

yellow plaid suit stood in line where there was a row of pay phones. *Clueless* came out this year and Cher Horowitz became a fashion icon. I thought about my own black and gray plaid in my closet I bought on a whim.

The line to the pay phone wasn't longer than normal, but I was really hungry. I intended to reward myself with good ole Brooklyn-style pizza and beer. Maybe Mads and the kids were up for company, although it was almost seven and she'd probably prepared dinner.

I was pondering my choice of pizza toppings when I felt *him*. Not in a supernatural way by ESP. The shiver down my spine was me knowing it was Cesar, but it was the same scent on my pillows that assailed my nostrils. Woodsy oak moss blended with leather, citrus, and bergamot.

Glancing up, I saw him staring at me in amusement.

“Ready?” he asked.

Confusion rattled my brain. “Ready? What are you talking about?”

Without answering me, he grasped my elbow and led me to a double-parked Bentley. “Eric was circling,” he said. “Should've put a tracker on you.”

Digging in my heels, I snapped out of my surprised haze and yanked my arm from him. “Hold on. Hold on. What?”

His eyes turned indulgent. Ugh, I wanted to kick him in the shin. I wanted to do violence to this man. My heart was also racing in anticipation.

“Our date? Told you on Sunday,” he informed me.

“How do you even know my schedule?” My mouth fell open. “Oh my God, you didn't.”

Cars started honking.

I flung my arm in the direction of the street. “You're causing traffic.”

“No. You are.”

Mutiny sparked inside me. “That's blackmail.”

“Take it however you wish.”

An irate driver got out of his car and stalked toward the Bentley. “Hey, asshole, move it!”

Cesar seemed unconcerned. His driver got out and was twice the size of the irate driver who cowered instinctively.

“Your choice,” he mocked.

“I can’t believe this.” I ducked into his stupid vehicle before I gave in to the desire to follow through about kicking him in the shin ... or where it would cause more damage.

Sitting back against the luxurious leather, I crossed my arms and huffed. Words wouldn’t form on my tongue.

Cesar got in beside me. “This is Eric.”

His driver was blond, with a buzz-cut and looked ex-military.

“I’ll have you know your boss blackmailed me into getting into this car.” I glared at Cesar whose mouth was twitching in amusement. “I take that back. He kidnapped me.”

“Guilty.”

“What else do you know about me?” I fumed. “I hardly know anything about you except you’re Paulie’s brother.”

“That’s why I invited you for dinner.”

I shot him a dirty look.

He barked a laugh, and I tried very hard to ignore the warmth suffusing my body. I was pissed at him. That was why I was feeling hot. The pulse below my pelvis called me a liar, but, good heavens, he was devastatingly handsome when he cut loose.

Cesar cleared his throat. “There might have been a little coercion.”

“This *was* pure coercion.”

“But how else would you get to know me? I’m sure you have questions. I might not answer every single one—”

“Ha. Figures.”

“We have reservations at Le Bernardin for eight-thirty. If we head to your apartment now—”

“I want pizza,” I cut in. “I’ve been craving it since this morning.”

“You’re trading a five-star meal at Le Bernardin for pizza?” Cesar’s affronted expression made me want to laugh. How was this happening? I’d never been attracted to a man in an expensive suit. They were a dime a dozen in New York. But his dry humor ... I dug it.

“I am. And just a warning. I’m starving. Diavolo Pizzeria is in my neighborhood.”

“You sure? I’ve heard of the place. We might not find a table.”

“I don’t care if I eat standing up. I want that pizza.”

Cesar leaned forward, his face inching so close to mine I thought he was going to kiss me. His eyes gleamed with a promise that made me hold my breath, then his mouth quirked in a self-deprecating smile.

“Your wish is my command, *cara*.”



In the midst of New York rush hour, Eric skillfully navigated the streets from Manhattan to Brooklyn and delivered us to my neighborhood in less than twenty minutes.

“I’m impressed. Even I don’t know some of the side streets he just took.”

“Eric was born and raised in Brooklyn.”

“So was I,” I said, and then leaned forward to ask Cesar’s driver a question. “Do you have military experience?”

His driver cocked his head toward me. “I’m afraid if I tell you, I’d have to kill you.”

“Eric,” Cesar said quietly. His driver exchanged a look with him in the mirror and merely smiled.

“I don’t know when Ava and I will be done. I’ll probably walk her home.” Cesar looked around. “I believe your brownstone is a few blocks up?” We got out of the Bentley at a cross street where the restaurant was located.

“It is,” I said.

He took my hand and we started walking toward the pizzeria.

“Cesar?”

He glanced at me as though I’d interrupted a debate in his head.

I had a debate battling in my brain as well. “I’m not sleeping with you.”

A mildly exasperated look crossed his face. “You’re being presumptuous.”

“Am I?”

“We’ve already slept together,” he pointed out.

“Snuggling in bed is not the same as having sex.”

“It’s more intimate.”

Huh, he got me there. “So, no sex.”

His brows drew together. “It’s off the table unless you initiate. We managed it last Sunday.”

“I don’t understand why—”

He stopped walking and grabbed my shoulders. It made me yelp, not in pain but surprise, partly due to the abruptness of the gesture and the fierceness in his eyes. It was as if all self-restraint had left him.

“I ...” his mouth twisted in a controlled snarl. “I need ... need you in my arms and I can’t explain it without sounding psycho.”

“Tell me anyway.” I was attracted to him. He was a gorgeous man, and he obviously didn’t know what to do with me. Causing as much turmoil inside himself as he did in me was extremely gratifying.

A wry smile took over the intensity of his gaze. “If you promise not to run away screaming.”

“Maybe this isn’t a conversation for the streets. It seems you need me, and I need you to feed me.”

“I feel so used,” he said.

We entered the pizzeria and, just like Cesar had warned, there was a line. The turnover of tables seemed to be quick though, and when we were about third in line to be served, a cozy corner table opened up, and Cesar told me to snag it.

“I want two slices,” I informed him. “One all meat, the other just cheese. Oh, and a Coke.” I changed my mind about the beer.

“Got it.”

I weaved my way to our table and sat with my back against the wall so I could observe Cesar move through the line. He stood out not because he was in a suit. He was not the only one. But there was just something about him. A don’t-fuck-with-me attitude that made people give him a wide berth, yet they couldn’t help gawking at him.

And then it struck me—he looked like the movie ideal of a mafia Don. A wisp of laughter passed my lips just as he cocked his head to check on me.

He frowned and mouthed, “What?”

I waved him off and pretended to look at the specials that were on a tiny rectangular acrylic stand on the table.

Was this considered our first date?

I guess it was. He’d been planning to take me to Le Bernardin—a Michelin-starred restaurant. Not in my wildest dream had I ever imagined dining there. It was a place where Sean took his high-value clients. I knew Robert had taken Mads there for their anniversary. But with Cesar being a billionaire, it could just be another dinner for him in Manhattan.

My mind wandered back to Sunday when his eyes met mine across the room. I thought he was teasing when he spit-

balled the time and day for our wine-lesson date. My family owned a pub. I was used to flirting from customers and didn't think about it especially when Silvio ended my evening on a sour note.

Cesar made his way to our table with a tray and settled into the chair beside me. "What's so funny?" He pulled back the tab of the coke can and poured it into a plastic tumbler of ice and set it in front of me.

I rolled my lips. "Nothing."

He wiped the crown of his beer bottle and took a swig before saying, "Don't deny it, *cara*." His gaze swept around the restaurant. "I'm not the only one in a suit."

I was suddenly conscious of what I was wearing. A leather jacket, t-shirt, jeans, and Docs.

"You look fine," he said as if reading my mind. "They probably think I'm your sugar daddy."

"You're not that old," I protested. "How old are you anyway?"

He arched a brow. "You don't know?"

I shook my head. "Thirty-two? I can't even keep track of Paulie's age."

"Thirty-four."

"You're eleven years older than me."

"Don't remind me." He took another draw from his beer. "You look eighteen right now without makeup."

"I look better with makeup?" I asked.

"I don't really care." The way he said those words were so soft I almost didn't hear him amidst the noise in the pizzeria. "I like seeing your freckles."

I instinctively touched my nose. He pulled my hand away. "Don't do that."

A server came up to us. "Three meat pizzas and two cheese?"

Cesar exchanged the order number with the tray.

“So, at least I could say, you’re eating one more slice than I am,” I declared as he set my order in front of me. I immediately folded my pizza and took a bite.

“I admire a woman with an appetite,” he said. “And I’m glad you’re not shy about eating in front of me.”

“When it’s pizza and when I’m this hungry, I lose all my social graces and forget all my dating etiquette.”

His eyes gleamed. “There’s a dating etiquette?”

I swallowed my next bite and smirked. “You tell me? You’ve got years more experience than I do.”

His face came closer, and his gaze dropped to my mouth before returning to my eyes. “I can show you what other experience I picked up along the way.”

My mouth went dry, and I was acutely aware of his knees touching mine. I continued chewing and the pizza got stuck in my throat. I chased it with Coke. “Wow, that’s very forward.”

“Does it bother you?” He sat back as if giving me space after a sneak attack. “I’m not used to waiting. I go after what I want. Take what I want.”

It was getting very warm in the pizzeria. “We just met again Sunday.”

“I’ve known you since you were twelve.”

“Not really.”

He gave a lazy smile. “True. But trust me. I’ve waited long enough.”

What did he mean he’d waited long enough? “You’re not making sense. But you promised, right?”

“Scout’s honor.” He put a hand over his chest.

We each ate a slice before my hunger was satisfied enough to continue our conversation that started on the street. “So tell me. Why me? And how did you know my schedule at

school?” My thoughts started racing. “Did you set a PI on me? Do you know that’s an invasion of privacy?”

His eyes danced, and he let me stew over my questions by working on his second slice.

“Well?”

“Paulie.”

“Oh.” Of course! I had told Paulie about my schedule when we talked on the phone. Cesar turned my brain to mush and addled my otherwise passable deduction skills, but I still didn’t understand one thing. “Why me?”

“Why not? You’re a beautiful woman.”

“I’m far from your type.”

“Oh?” His mouth twitched. “And what do you think my type is?”

“Maybe a supermodel or a curvaceous Italian opera singer.”

“Why, Ava, are you stereotyping me?”

“Sorry, it’s just ...” I shrugged. “Here I am.”

“Are you fishing for compliments?”

My cheeks heated. “Of course not.”

“I’m attracted to you. Why is that hard to believe?”

“You certainly put a lot of work in to be with me. I mean, Sunday ... and then here. Don’t you have a billion-dollar empire to run instead of sitting here at a pizza joint and ... and ...”

“Enjoy the company of a woman I couldn’t get out of my mind?”

I threw up my hands. “You’ve never even noticed me before.”

“You were fifteen to a man of twenty-six. The last time I saw you...” he exhaled heavily.

“It was at Lorenzo’s funeral, and then at your mom’s,” I said softly. “That was a heartbreaking two years for your family.”

His mouth grew tight, but he nodded.

“I didn’t go to Paulie’s wedding,” I said. It was held in Chicago. I was mad at him for marrying into the Chicago crime family. Partly from my loyalty to Charles, but mostly because I was worried he’d be drawn further into the mobster life. “You probably didn’t notice I wasn’t there.”

“It was a hectic time. I flew in the day before the wedding and left two days after.” He smiled briefly. “You were what? Nineteen? It was probably a good thing, or I would have noticed you then.”

I laughed. “Can’t say I filled out.”

Cesar’s eyes searched my face before he cocked his head and let his eyes do an exaggerated appraisal of my body.

This time my cheeks were on fire.

He smirked. “No comment.”

“What?” I wasn’t willing to let that slide. I didn’t know why I was so bullheaded about this. Oh, wait. I knew why. “I’m determined not to make the same mistakes of the past. My latest boyfriend of two years didn’t think twice about leaving me when a lucrative job offer came up. That was five months ago. And I want to be honest here. I might not be ready for any kind of relationship, serious or casual.”

His face darkened, and his upper lip curled in a half snarl. “He didn’t deserve you.”

“You’re in no position to judge. You don’t know him. Maybe I’m not lovable. I’m certainly not a unique beauty that would launch a thousand ships.” Or inspire a rock musician to give up his dreams of making it big.

“I’m not that shallow,” he said tersely.

I made a pfft sound. “You have the luxury of not being a starving musician.”

His nostrils flared. He grabbed his beer and drained it. Afterward he speared me with a glare and said, “Are you prejudiced against someone with money?”

“I consider Paulie one of my best friends,” I pointed out. “And my family isn’t exactly destitute, but we work hard.”

“And you think I don’t?”

This discussion wasn’t going anywhere because there was no comparing Brad and Cesar. Polar opposites, not only in looks, but financial status and personality.

I grasped at something else. “I recall Paulie saying you had an opera singer girlfriend. And she was ...” I did the universal gesture of the hour-glass figure.

“I never keep girlfriends.”

The pizza I just ate threatened to back up my throat. “Oookay. Then maybe you need to be clear about what we’re doing here.”

Cesar muttered under his breath as though explaining himself to me irritated him. Well, tough.

“Physically, I’m attracted to you,” he rasped. “A face like yours is unforgettable.” At my doubtful look, he grabbed my hand. “I see beauty, innocence.” He let go of my hand to trace a finger along the line of my jaw. “Strength.”

“Mom said it was a stubborn jaw,” I said.

“Apparently stubborn jaws are my thing.”

“Cesar ...”

“But,” he continued. “I don’t like explaining the why, Ava, because I don’t understand it myself. I’m drawn to you.” He let out a breath. “I have a million things that need my attention, but all I could think about is spending time with you.”

“I just don’t want this to be a guilt thing because of what happened with Silvio.”

All humor vanished from his face and what I saw reflected in his eyes reminded me that this man had no problem being

judge, jury, and executioner. “Do *not* mention that fucker’s name in my presence again.”

I looked away, unable to make sense of the chill that wrapped around my heart where earlier it was basking under the glow of his attention. “Oh, right. Sorry.”

He leaned forward and said quietly, “Tell me you get me, Ava.”

“I do.”

“His crew is looking for him. It’d be best if you give yourself amnesia over what happened.”

“Okay.”

“He is not linked to you whatsoever. I want it to stay that way.”

“But—”

“This discussion is over.” He straightened in his seat and attacked the last slice of pie.

I didn’t want Cesar to get into trouble, but I guess he was more an expert at making people disappear. My stomach rolled. Even if Silvio deserved it, it was only just hitting me now that I’d caused the death of another person.

“He is not worth thinking about,” he told me as if sensing my turmoil.

Somehow that pissed me off, and that time it was I who inched my face closer. “Don’t tell me who or what is worth thinking about. Especially the cost of a human life.”

“Ava—”

“This date is over,” I told him. “I want to go home.”

He opened his mouth to argue but shut it again when he studied my expression. His jaw clenched, before he notched his chin down and threw a couple of bills on the table. I slid back my chair and got up, anxious to get away from him.

Cesar had excited me like no man ever had, but I wondered if I was attracted to the danger and power coiled

inside him. I wondered if I was destined to make the same mistake as my mother.

I pushed out of the pizzeria doors and welcomed the chilly air on my flushed skin.

Steel-like fingers clamped around my elbow to slow me down, and Cesar's warm breath teased the shell of my ear. "I'm still walking you home."

"Thanks for dinner," I mumbled.

His grip tightened. "I hate politeness," he growled. "Being polite is the last thing I want from you."

I inhaled sharply and stumbled, but he kept me from falling.

We continued our walk, passing blocks of brownstones on our way to my apartment.

"Aren't you curious what I want from you? Want to do to you?"

I glared at him and noted his face had lost all emotion except the heat in his eyes. "Not particularly."

He chuckled, but it was devoid of humor. How quickly our date turned sour.

My strides were brisk, and I managed not to cause a scene because his implacable grip on my arm was irritating the hell out of me. We survived our trek in silence, but tension squeezed my skull.

When we arrived at the front door, I yanked my arm from his hold. "Thanks for the pizza," I said again. "I had fun ... for the most part."

He glanced away, muttering another curse before his piercing gaze returned to me. He waved his arm. "I'm walking you to your door," he clarified. "The door to your apartment."

"No need—"

"Or we could stand here all evening."

I had no doubt he would do that, remembering the sinister figure he cut while peering up at my apartment from across the street during the ungodly hours of Monday morning. I wasn't freaked out because he wasn't a stranger. He rescued me from Silvio. I was too frazzled that night to remember how many people were in that garden. Was Eric one of them? Was Paulie?

"Fine," I grumbled, unlocking the outside door and stalking up the steps to the third floor, conscious of Cesar following close behind me.

When we were in front of my apartment, I turned to face him, intending to end whatever was starting between us. "Look, I don't think—"

Cesar slammed his mouth on mine and shut me up.

CHAPTER

Eight

CESAR

Ava was infuriating.

A damned stubborn woman.

And she was fucking irresistible.

Call me a fucker, but I was kissing her, and there wasn't a damned thing she could do to stop me. I'd waited a long time. I could read her well. She was about to throw me out on my ass forever.

Tough. Not gonna happen, and I let her know it.

My mouth slammed on hers, my tongue taking advantage of her surprise to push past her outrage.

Her mixed signals amused me.

Her fingers bit into my shoulders pushing me away, while her lips responded to my kiss. The moan that vibrated from her throat made me want to lift her against the door and grind into her. Yet I reined in my instincts because what I wanted from Ava was more than a quick fuck.

I tore my lips away and stepped back. "I've been wanting to do that all night."

"How dare you!"

I raised a brow. "You kissed me back."

She swiped her hair from her face. “I was pushing you away.”

“Yeah? And the reason you’re not pinned against that door the way I wanted to kiss you is because of what happened with Silvio.”

“I thought you said we should never mention him again.”

“Maybe after this question.” I moved closer and brushed away her hair. Her eyes continued to shoot sparks at me. “Does this closeness bother you? Does it remind you of when he held the knife to your face?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Good. I wanted that out of the way.” I lifted her chin with the crook of a finger. “Because I fuck hard, *cara*.” The blue eyes I loved so much widened. “But I’m giving you a little more time.”

I forced myself to let her go and started down the steps.

“More time for what?” she called after me. “I don’t want to see you anymore.”

Tell yourself that. I raised my arm and waved without looking at her.

I was halfway down the stairs when the main door of the building opened and Robert McGrath walked in.

The surprise on his face was so comical, I had to control my amusement as we came face to face at the bottom of the stairs.

I had two choices. Hold out my hand and introduce myself or leave Ava to explain. I chose the latter.

“Good evening.” I passed her brother and left the brownstone.

Digging out the brick inside my suit jacket, I called Eric. He answered on the second ring. “I’m at the corner of Gates and Grand. I wasn’t expecting you to pick up.” I was prepared to leave him a voice message.

“Look behind you,” he said.

I glanced over my shoulder, and, sure enough, the Bentley was rolling up.

I crossed the street and got into the vehicle. “Told you I was spending the night.”

“I was betting you’d crash and burn,” Eric smirked.

“Fucker.”

Eric wasn’t my employee, but we had the same objective. He had certain skills and connections I needed besides being an overqualified driver.

“So what happened with Miss McGrath?”

“Damned Silvio entered into our conversation,” I said.

“Just as well,” Eric said. “Your presence is required at StarLite Lounge.”

I raised a brow. “Required?”

Eric chuckled. “Let me amend that. Strongly requested.”

With my frustration at how the night with Ava had turned out, seeing Roxy at the strip club might not be a bad idea. “New Jersey it is.”



Ava

“Was that who I think it was?” Robert bypassed the landing to his unit and headed straight to where I stood. Just my luck, Mads also came out of their apartment. She had Kelly with her, holding my niece by the hand.

“What’s going on?” she called.

“Yes. That’s Cesar De Lucci.” I skipped down the stairs past him, said hello to my sister-in-law, and picked up Kelly. “How are you, beautiful?”

If Cesar and I had a baby girl, she might look like Kelly. Dark hair with the most amazing skin complexion and blue eyes—a mixture of Italian and Irish. Although with my red hair it could go that way too.

Geez, would you listen to yourself, Ava?

I walked straight into their apartment and sat on the couch, holding Kelly on my lap as if she was my shield against the questions I was sure would come.

“Cesar De Lucci? As in Paulie’s brother?” Mads sat beside me, her eyes were bright with excitement. “I saw a feature on him in The New York Times business section.” Her eyes turned meaningful. “He looks ...good.” And then she giggled.

“For fuck’s sake.” Robert glared at his wife.

Her eyes narrowed. “Language, Robbie.”

Callum and Ronan emerged from their room. “Hi, Aunt Ava. You missed lasagna night.”

“Bummer.” I smiled at the boys.

“Why was Cesar De Lucci here?” Robert asked not backing down.

“We had pizza at Diavolo, and he walked me home.”

“Wait.” Mads looked appalled. “He’s a billionaire and he took you for pizza. Say that’s not true.”

I shifted Kelly to my other side. She was too big to hold on my lap. “He had reservations at Le Bernardin. I had my heart set on pizza. I was starving. I didn’t want to come home and change and then go out again. I’d probably have murdered him by then,” I added under my breath. “As arrogant as he is.”

Mads just stared at me, mouth hanging open. She closed it, but then, as though unable to help herself, she sputtered, “I can’t believe you traded Le Bernardin for pizza.”

I shrugged. “Well, I did.”

“Focus, babe.” Robert scowled at his wife before turning to me. “You can’t be dating a mobster.”

“Mobster? That’s hearsay, prosecutor,” I retorted. “Show me proof.”

My brother emitted a derisive sound. “Proof? I don’t have proof, but surely you can’t be that naïve.”

“From what I saw at the party, respected businessmen from Wall Street couldn’t wait to talk to him.”

Robert gave that derisive snort again, and I wanted to chuck the book on the coffee table at his head.

“Respected? That remains to be seen. Rumors at the office state he’s elbow deep in high-stakes illegal gambling.”

I kept my face neutral. I didn’t have a problem with illegal gambling especially after hearing stories about those high rollers from dad. For many of those men, it was a status thing to be invited into a game, especially when famous personalities like actors and sports celebrities were the draw. It was also the thrill of the illegal when you were rich as sin. The loansharking at such events left a bad taste in my mouth, but people had choices.

I thought about Gorski. But what if it was an addiction?

“He cleans dirty money through those games,” my brother said.

“You know that for a fact?”

He huffed. “Why do you think he’s a valued associate of three of the biggest mafia organizations in Italy?”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the couch. “Again, I need evidentiary support.”

Robert rolled his eyes. “Rumors. Everything is rumors with them. No one wants to go on record for fear of getting whacked.”

“Are the feds interested in Cesar?”

This time it was my brother who acted nonchalant. “Sorry, can’t confirm or deny.”

I tapped my fingers on my lips, trying to figure out if my brother was just trying to spook me, but it was a moot point

anyway. “If it’s any consolation, I won’t see him again.” I jumped to my feet. That last statement was hard to get out because my heart seemed to have glued to my throat. My latest encounters with Cesar had stirred conflicting but exhilarating emotions. I tried to be level headed about it. It was a crush. Nothing more.

“Why?” Mads asked. “Is he a terrible date? Did he chew with his mouth open?”

I laughed. “No. He was a perfect gentleman. Let’s just say there are issues where we don’t see eye-to-eye.”

“Well, thank fuck for that,” Robert muttered.

Callum approached his dad with the swear jar.

“Dammit,” he said, and then pressed his mouth in a straight line, dug into his wallet, and put in a dollar. “There.”

“You put in too much,” Callum said.

“Consider it credit to his account,” Mads told her son. “I have a feeling with what’s going on with your aunt, there’ll be more where that came from.”

We all laughed except Robert, who continued to scrutinize me as if he couldn’t decide whether to grill me for more information or make sure I understood Cesar was a no-go area.

“Oh my God,” Mads shrieked, startling Kelly so much my poor niece started to cry. She stopped immediately, though, when my sister-in-law picked her up and stood, rocking her while she disappeared into the kitchen. “Did you read The New York Times food section today?”

“I was in school all day and didn’t get the chance. Please tell me O’Toole’s is not on it again.”

“No,” my sister-in-law said emphatically as if I’d grown a second head. “Apparently Rose Ellis was at the De Lucci mansion Sunday night.”

“Rose Ellis? As in Rose Ellis the sneaky food critic? I didn’t see her!” I exclaimed. “And those pictures are imprinted in my brain. How did that sneaky bitch get past me?”

Mads grinned and tossed the newspaper on the coffee table, opened to the food section. Emblazoned in bold letters were “An Eamonn’s Revival?”

“Wow.” I sank into the couch and started to read.

“This still doesn’t change anything,” Robert interjected but moved behind the couch to read over my shoulder.

“Robust Irish stew with chunks of lamb that melted like velvet on the tongue paired nicely with the rich notes of a Morone Barbera...”

I wondered if that was the three-thousand-dollar bottle I gulped down.

“Italians,” Robert grumbled. “They should have gone with Guinness.”

“The pub was slammed today,” Mads told us. “Mom called the house a few hours ago hoping you were home, then I reminded her of your exams. She said you should cancel all plans after class for the rest of the week and help out at the restaurant.”

My head reared back at that. “What? I should be relaxing after instigating such an amazing coup.”

Mads laughed. “She said you started this. Might as well see it to the bitter end.”

“Some thanks I get,” I grumbled, but, inwardly, I was pleased. I even felt absolved from second guessing whether I did the right thing.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Robbie?” I teased my brother.

He one-arm hugged me and kissed my temple. “My sister is a rock star.”

“You betcha.”

CHAPTER

Nine

AVA

There was a line out the door for breakfast.

Mom wasn't kidding when she said that Eamonn's was mobbed. Inwardly smiling at my pun-y statement, I bypassed the crowd and headed down to the alley. She called me at seven this morning to ask me if I could skip classes because they were already getting slammed.

So here I was. All my midterms were done. I'd been already thinking of puttering around the house for the morning before I went in to help for lunch rush.

And I was glad I came. Poor Sheila and three other waitresses were in the weeds. Bangers and mash flew out the kitchen non-stop from breakfast until ten. Then the pendulum swung to the highlights of The New York Times review—the Irish Stew and the Shepherd's Pie. We made a decision to close the doors temporarily at three to get a breather.

It was four-thirty, and the line had been building again outside. Sean took off early from work so he could help at the bar. Robert agreed to come in later tonight. Sheila joked about having the three hot McGrath brothers working behind the bar being another draw.

Tommy and I laughed, but Mom didn't think it was funny.

She was shaving potatoes for the Shepherd's Pie which we couldn't seem to keep in stock. I was helping out chopping

root vegetables for the other crowd pleaser—the Irish stew. Mom brought in stock pots that had been kept in storage for the last few years. That was saying something.

When one compared Branna McGrath and me, you couldn't tell that I was a fruit of her loins. Mom was dark-haired. She was five-eight—an inch taller than me, and she had ample hips and breasts compared to my coltish figure. Being so different from the rest of my siblings, I used to wonder if I was adopted. When I was eight, I asked my dad since he was the only other one with red hair. He said I took after his paternal grandmother's side of the family. Long limbs, red hair, and freckles. My translucent blue eyes came from Mom. When our eyes were illuminated at a certain angle there was almost a light inside. Charles said it was freaky.

After finishing with the carrots, I laid down my knife. “Done. What else?”

“Take a break in the office,” Mom said. “It's looking like a crazy night.”

“Isn't it amazing?”

She lowered the potato peeler and rounded the counter to give me a tight squeeze, brushing hair that must have escaped my ponytail away from my face. “I'm sorry if I've been such a nag to you about the catering job.”

“You had reasons,” I said.

“I feel like we're just taking charity from the people who were responsible for your dad's imprisonment.”

“I know, Mom, but you changed your mind now, right?” I told her. “We have a great thing here. Gramps' legacy. He started a good thing.”

We'd had these conversations before. Sometimes she blamed the bad luck that dad brought into this place. Blood money. I remembered the story of the time he hauled in several boxes of whiskey which were confiscated from a guy who couldn't pay his debt. He and Mom had a fight about that. He thought he was helping with the bottom line.

“It just brings back bad memories,” she said. “Your dad and Charles ... they are grown-arse, fecking men. That is on them, and they paid the price. Well ...” Her mouth twisted. “Cillian still is.”

“Don’t get yourself worked up now.” I was only partly kidding because when Mom started cursing with a hint of Ireland in her tone, she was gearing up for a rant.

She heaved and resumed peeling potatoes. “Thanks for the reminder. I’ve wasted enough grief over it.” She glanced at me again. “I’m really sorry, Ava. I give you less credit than you deserve. That dinner and that restaurant review were just what we needed to turn our luck around.”

“Luck of the Irish,” I laughed.

Mom harrumphed. “That O’Toole’s is run by Russians. They deserve no luck.”

“Hell, yeah.”

She looked up from peeling potatoes. “So tell me about school. You had exams, right?”

“Yep. I think I aced them.”

“I should know better than to worry about you. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. You’re twenty-three, not fifteen. You’re graduating in a year and making good grades.” She quirked a brow. “I still think you have a lot of your dad in you, but I’m thinking your good traits came from me.”

I laughed. “I’m your most well-balanced child.”

Mom joined me in laughter. “Don’t let Robert hear that.”

I rolled my eyes. Sean may be the oldest, but Robert was the most competitive.

I left the kitchen and headed to the office where Mads was keeping the kids. She’d been helping at the cash register while keeping Kelly behind the bar, but when it got busy, Ronan was in charge of watching over her and Callum in the office.

It was quite a family business.

“Ready for round two?” I teased her.

“I can’t believe the line out the door. Did you see it?”

“No. I imagine it’s double the one from this morning and I, for one, didn’t want to be intimidated.”

“They usually give more warning than that at The New York Times. I heard from Sheila that the critic thought with the public still romanticizing the mob it would be a good draw for the food section.”

“I’m not complaining. I need to thank Paulie for the business.”

“Paulie or his brother?” Mads teased with a gleam in her eye.

“You think I should call him?” I worried my bottom lip. “I don’t want to give him the wrong idea that I changed my mind about dating him.”

I tossed and turned the night before and hugged the silly pillow, wanting his scent around me.

“This thing happened so fast between you two, we didn’t even get a chance to have our girl talk.”

“Right?” I huffed. Although truthfully, I had no idea what Cesar and I were. The only normal order of things we did was the pizza date. Even that was questionable because there was some coercion involved.

“I’m your BFF, right?” Mads asked.

“Yes, you are.” Growing up as the youngest and the only girl among four siblings and having a mom busy running Eamonn’s, I didn’t learn the finer things of being a girly-girl until Robert met Madeleine. My sister-in-law took me in hand and taught me how to use make-up, she introduced me to her salon stylist, and we had spa days. She even got my mother to go with us on occasion. Mom had only known hard work since taking over the pub at twenty-two and pampering herself wasn’t on her radar.

Yes, I’d learned to put on make-up and wear a dress. I’d even splurged on a pair of second-hand Manolo Blahniks, but I still preferred my Keds and Dr. Martens.

“We’ll talk soon. Promise,” I told her.

There was a rap on the door and Charles poked his head in. “You ready for round two, teacup? We’re about to let the horde in.”



“Oh my God, I can’t feel my feet,” Sheila moaned, leaning against the bar and bending one leg up and then the other. “I need a raise.”

“You’re getting overtime pay,” Mads said.

“Can I get a free massage too?” She made eyes at Charles who was busy getting the beer flowing.

“Hey, eyes off my bro,” I told her, squeezing into the space near the hinged door of the bar. “Where are my three Guinneses and a Bud?”

“Coming right up,” Sean yelled over his shoulder.

I leaned over to Sheila. “Did you notice the groups of women huddled by the bar?”

She laughed. “We should have used the McGrath brothers as advertisement sooner.”

Mads rolled her eyes. “Please hold me back when Robert gets here, and some bitch leans over and gives him an eyeful of cleavage.”

“Hey, he might make good tips,” I tongue-in-cheeked. “Think about that.”

My sister-in-law scowled at us, and Sheila and I cackled like banshees.

We were two hours into dinner service and the neck-and-neck bestsellers were the stew and the pie. For dessert, hands down, it was Irish cheesecake. Since the liquor in the dessert helped its shelf-life, baking extra was not a problem if it wasn’t consumed immediately. I swore it tasted better after spending twenty-four hours in the fridge anyway.

I loaded the beers on the tray and headed over to a group of preppy types, men in Chinos, checked polos, and argyle. “Gentlemen, are you ready to order?”

A blond wearing a navy blazer who looked like he stepped out of a GQ magazine leaned toward me and said, “I want the special right in front me.”

Although I gave him a look that bordered on an eyeroll, I played along and pretended to glance behind me. “Guess you mean me? Sorry, I’m not part of the menu.”

“That’s such a shame, but can I have your number?” The controlled smirks between the four guys at the table clued me in on a possible bet.

Unfortunately for them, I wasn’t in the mood to play. “Look, I’d love to come back and give you guys more time to decide what you want for dinner, but as you can see”—I cocked my head to where Sheila was doubling as seating hostess—“we’re packed.” And I communicated with my eyes that other guests would be more than thrilled to take their place.

Navy Blazer gave a self-deprecating grin. Not that I thought he was embarrassed. I’d waited tables since I was sixteen, and with three older brothers, I’d been schooled on different male tactics. That guy knew he looked hot, making sure to show his dimple on his chiseled jaw. However, my libido slanted toward tall, dark, dangerous men at the moment and not sunny, all-American, Ivy Leaguers.

Realizing I wasn’t going to play their game, they asked for recommendations. I pushed the pork tenderloin since it deserved attention and was underrated.

After taking their orders, I sprinted back to the hostess podium, depositing the menus, and hurried to the kitchen to hand in my ticket.

“Oh my,” Mads breathed when I returned to the bar to get my next drink orders.

“What?”

My line of vision followed hers to where she was staring at the entrance.

Cesar. He was with Eric.

And his eyes were zeroed in on me.

Sheila, recognizing him, waved him through, and he headed straight for me while Eric found an empty spot by the bar and checked the drink menu.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered.

His face was unsmiling. “You weren’t at the University.”

“I had to help out.”

He looked around and frowned. “Busy night?”

“Why didn’t you tell me there was a food critic at your dinner on Sunday?”

“I didn’t want you to feel pressured,” he muttered. “It helped?”

“Obviously. But how did you find out I was here?”

He looked at me as if I’d committed a grievous crime. “I went to your apartment. You weren’t there either. I called you and left you messages.”

“I was here all day.”

He raked fingers through his hair which was already mussed up as though he’d been at it for hours. “I thought you were hiding from me.”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

“Two buds, a Guinness, and a whiskey.” Charles lowered my drinks on the bar. He nodded stiffly at the man beside me. “Cesar.”

“Charles.”

I wasn’t surprised they knew each other.

“Something going on between you two?” my brother asked. Sean came up behind him, eyes on Cesar as well.

“For heaven’s sake,” I said. “Don’t you guys have something better to do besides this big brother act.”

“It’s not an act,” Charles said, not taking his eyes off Cesar. “Not when it comes to *him*.”

I looked past my brothers imploringly at Mads.

“Come on, you all,” she laughed. “Talk about this later. Busy night.”

If it were up to me, there would be no talking at all.

I loaded the drink orders on the tray and left Cesar at the bar. He shadowed me. Hungry and tired, my temper spiked. I stopped on the way to my table and glared at him. “I’m working.”

“And I’m following you until you give me five minutes.”

“Five minutes for what?”

His eyes flattened. “Do you really want me to show you here in the middle of the room?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.” His head dipped, and his face was scant breadth from mine. Even without looking around, I could feel every pair of eyes in the pub switch to us with interest.

I huffed in irritation and proceeded to my table. Thankfully, it was a four-top of older couples and I got their orders sorted away without the risk of a preppy guy trying to get my number.

One of the women made fun of Cesar. “Is this a new thing, dearie? Men in suits as trainees?”

“No, just one of my admirers,” I replied.

“Make him work for it,” the other woman called as I turned to walk away.

“Oh, I will,” Cesar drawled, making the two sixty-something-year-old women swoon.

“You’re such a Lothario, aren’t you?” I shook my head at him in a combination of amusement and irritation.

“Just making sure everyone here knows you’re mine.”

Because of the chatter in the pub, I wasn’t quite sure I heard him.

“What?”

He ducked his head and said in my ear, “Every man in here should know you belong to me.”

Rearing back with suspicion, I glanced at the table where the preppies were sitting, and Navy Blazer was scowling at us.

I switched my gaze back in time to catch Cesar in a staring match with preppy guy, before he locked eyes with me.

“Were you outside watching me?” I demanded.

He gave an infinitesimal nod of his head.

“How long?”

“Long enough.”

I edged past him and headed to the bar but flung over my shoulder. “You’re crazy.”

However, I wanted to double-back, because now, Mom, Tommy, Sean, Charles, and Robert—who must have just arrived—were huddled at the corner of the bar witnessing Cesar’s unmistakable pursuit of me. Mads was the only one working the cash register, and she was doing a poor job of hiding her delight.

“Order up, Ava,” Tommy grinned.

“We haven’t met,” Cesar said smoothly, extending his hand to my mother. As handshakes were exchanged, I loaded up my tray with the preppies’ orders. But before I lifted it, I glared at Cesar. “You’re not tailing me this time. I mean it.”

He smiled lazily and, then, before I knew what he was going to do, he kissed me lightly on the lips. “I think I’ve made my point, *cara*.”

My gaze fell past Cesar’s shoulder and on my family. I couldn’t decipher all their varying expressions, so I griped, “Are we standing around now? We’re a full house.”



Cesar

“She’s bossy, isn’t she?” Ava’s brother Robert walked up to my side.

I glanced at him briefly. “I’m aware.”

My attention returned to Ava. She was making her way to the group of men who flirted with her earlier—the same group that triggered me to stake my claim. The man who’d been flirting with her barely lifted his gaze when she lowered his order in front of him.

That’s right, fucker. She’s mine.

“Tommy and I are heading back to the kitchen.” Ava’s mother said from behind me.

Turning around, I told her, “It was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. McGrath.”

Her smile was far from friendly. “That remains to be seen, but from where I’m standing, my daughter’s got this handled. Thank you for the bump in business.”

She split a look between Robert and Sean, and I couldn’t discern whether it meant to leave me alone or put the fear of God in me—or the McGrath wrath. Their father was called Red Cillian after all, and despite wearing the fine threads of an office worker, the sons were regulars at the boxing gym.

When she disappeared into the kitchen with the chef, Robert slung an arm around my shoulder. It wasn’t a move I tolerated from any man, allowing them to be this close that they could slit my throat. But I gave Ava’s brother a pass.

“From what I gathered last night, my sister is done with you,” he said.

“She misunderstood.”

“Is that right?” Sean moved to block my view of Ava, crossing his arms. These men wanted my full attention. “Because between Robert and me, we could make your situation here in New York uncomfortable.”

I kept my expression neutral even when I wanted to grit my teeth, although it was laughable if they thought they could pin any criminal activity on me. That was what *uncomfortable* meant to Sean.

“I’d be protective too if I had a sister as beautiful as Ava.” Going diplomatic was always my first option, but the possessive beast inside me simply couldn’t be contained. “But no one is getting in between me and Ava. Not even her family.”

Robert gave my shoulder a squeeze and patted my back. Yes, her brother was pushing it. I caught Eric’s amused eyes at the end of the bar as if asking ... “need help?”

I communicated that I could handle these fuckers.

“Tough guy, this one,” Sean smirked. “Not sure if I want to slug him or buy him a beer.”

“I’m open to either,” I replied and pointedly looked past him to check on Ava. She stopped at another table, but she was casting worried glances our way.

“Hey, you two,” Ava’s sister-in-law walked up to us. “Stop giving Cesar a hard time. You’re not making it easier on Ava. He’s her problem, right?”

I shot her my most charming grin.

She transferred her attention to her husband. “Have you even said hello to the kids in the office? Mom said she was done in the kitchen and coming home with us. I expect you’re going to be late tonight. And Sean, go help Charles.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sauntering over to where Eric sat, he slid me a glass of whiskey. His thoughts were written all over his face. *Stronzo* thought this shit was hilarious.

“I took the liberty of ordering you one. Thought you would need it.” He grinned. “I also saved you the trouble of wondering if they’d poisoned your drink.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, taking a nip of the amber liquid and turning around so I could face the dining area. Ava passed me and shook her head as though she still couldn’t believe I was there.

Eric seemed to pick up our silent exchange and said, “So is it worth it going through the hassle of meeting the family?”

“I’ve waited long enough.” I wasn’t waiting another second to let them know I was in the picture.

“Are you fast-tracking this because you’re not sure how things will turn out with Lodestone?”

Lodestone was a code we used for our real purpose here in New York.

“In a way.” I tossed back my whiskey and caught Charles’ eyes and asked for another. Eric wasn’t wrong that I wanted my hooks in Ava just in case things blew up in my face.

Robert being her brother wasn’t ideal, but the investigation into him led me to her. Or back to her. I never expected Paulie’s friend to grow into a woman who’d become my obsession. Thinking about her past boyfriends made me want to hunt them down and take a tire iron to their faces. She’d had two. I wasn’t her first. But I sure as fuck was gonna be her last.

My gaze followed her flitting around the pub. She stopped to take orders at another table, but our eyes locked for a few seconds before she shook her head again and focused on her customers.

I didn’t imagine the electricity between us.

Ava was not escaping me tonight.

CHAPTER

Ten

AVA

All throughout my shift I felt his gaze on me. A few times I chanced to look at him because he was hard to ignore. His attention was either on me, or he was talking to Eric. Annoyance rose inside me when more than a few women approached him at the bar. How could they not? He and his driver exuded a kind of irresistible and dangerous underworld vibe. I doubted Eric was merely his driver. A camaraderie was apparent between them that transcended a boss-employee relationship.

As for my brothers, they mostly left them alone. The bar was hopping, and even the top-shelf whiskey was in demand.

At the end of dinner service and after we finished bussing the tables, the bar was packed two people deep. I managed to squeeze between two Wall-Street types and ducked under the hatchet door to get behind the bar.

“You heading out?” Charles asked.

“Yes. Do you guys need me here tomorrow?” I asked. Out of the corner of my eye, Cesar threw a couple of bills in front of him and stood.

Shit. There was no escaping him.

“Not until the evening,” my brother replied. “Don’t want you to miss any more classes. We’re getting more help

tomorrow. Sheila'll bring them up to speed on the menu. They're old-timers. So not wet behind the ears."

Sean appeared beside Charles. "You have your car?"

"No. I took the train."

"You going to be okay?" He nodded to where Cesar was already by the hallway that led to the exit.

"I can handle De Lucci," I said with more bravado than I was feeling.

"Call when you get home, got it?" This from Robert.

"Ugh, how did I manage to date in high school?" I mumbled. "Oh, wait. That's why I was known as one-date McGrath."

My brothers chuckled letting me know in no way did they regret their overprotectiveness during my high school years. I also know that it was hard for them to let me leave with Cesar, but I wasn't seventeen anymore.

I marched toward my inevitable fate. Toward the man who had the patience to wait for me all night. The predatory glint in his eyes didn't escape me, and even when Cesar's mouth pulled into a smile which was more of a smirk, it only enhanced the feeling that he was a lion who'd finally captured a gazelle that had eluded him forever.

Despite being exhausted, my body engaged for battle.

"I'm not sure what you're expecting," was my opening salvo when I passed him and headed down the hallway.

His hand pulled me back. "You're always running away from me," he muttered in my ear. "It's driving me crazy, *cara*."

The promise of retribution in his tone made all my appropriate girly parts pay attention. "You don't look crazy. Although waiting for my shift to be over, I'm impressed with your patience."

The smile widened. "You're worth the wait."

I couldn't help laughing. "You're confident you're going to get lucky tonight?"

We had arrived at the exit, but before pushing through the exit bar, he turned to face me. "You think that fucking you is all that I'm after?"

I inhaled sharply at his blunt statement. "Isn't it?"

He lowered his head and kissed the tip of my nose before letting his mouth dance above mine without touching it. The scent of whiskey permeated his breath. My skin carried the bloom of sweat from the evening's work, but had gotten stickier with something internal, something carnal.

"Fucking will be involved." He stepped back and pushed the exit bar to let me through. "But first, I want to take care of you."

The Bentley was already waiting outside.

"Cesar ... you're taking me home, right?"

I saw the flash of his grin before he turned to the vehicle to open the door. "Yes, but I'm coming home with you."

I wasn't going to argue. I got into the vehicle. The promise of not having to take the train, and all the walking that involved after a challenging day at the pub was enough to ditch my self-preservation for tonight—self-preservation that had nothing to do with my life, but more with lust. Cesar and I had been dancing around sex for a few days. I was afraid to give in because I had no doubt this man had experience in making a woman addicted to him. And what boggled my mind was he seemed addicted to me, too. Was it because I didn't fall at his feet like what he was probably used to? Would he have lost interest if I'd allowed him into my apartment and let him fuck me?

If I gave in to the lust between us, maybe I could spare myself from developing feelings. He would leave me alone. Just once, I could be with him. Be prepared never to see him again and I could move on. Treat this as my belated rebound fuck because I got dumped by a boyfriend for Vegas. I was certainly long overdue for one.

The drive to the brownstone almost lulled me to sleep. After keeping myself away from Cesar in the car, apparently I ended up leaning into him, or maybe he leaned into me. When he dragged me toward him so my head rested on his chest, I didn't argue.

I breathed in his scent. His jacket smelled like the bar, but his shirt smelled like a heady combination of his cologne and personal masculine musk. My fingers splayed over his torso, feeling the muscles contract under my hand. I dared to go lower.

"Careful, Ava," he whispered above my head. "I want to take care of you first before anything else."

I glanced up at him. Inside the darkness of the vehicle, it was hard to discern his expression.

"Going to run a bath for you so you can relax." He pressed his mouth to the side of my temple.

"Oh, that sounds good." Then I laughed lightly. "I'm going to fall asleep before you have your way with me."

He shrugged. "If it happens, it happens."

"You'll let me sleep?" I eyed him suspiciously.

He sighed. "Like I said, fucking you is not all that I'm after."

I didn't know how to make sense of our situation, but I was too tired to analyze it. Cesar offered to carry me from the Bentley, but I wasn't that helpless.

He pulled an overnight bag from the trunk of the vehicle, spoke to Eric, and together we entered the brownstone.

We were silent when we went up the stairs. Silent when we entered the apartment. No words were exchanged when he dropped the duffel and clasped my face between his hands and kissed me.

The kiss started slow, growing intensely demanding. His tongue slipped between my lips and tangled with mine. From my face, his fingers caressed down my neck and then he

divested me of my leather jacket, before coming back to skate my sides.

I pushed myself closer. He groaned into my mouth which sounded more like a growl. My action seemed to have emboldened him. Still kissing me, his hands slid under my butt and boosted me on the kitchen counter. This time his fingers tugged my shirt from my jeans and for the first time ever, the warmth of his hand stroked my feverish skin.

He tore his mouth away. “Fuck. I promised to take care of you and here I am attacking your mouth.”

With my heart still hammering against my ribs, I breathed, “I’m not complaining.”

His mouth twisted wryly. “Be right back. Don’t move.”

Cesar grabbed his duffel from the floor and disappeared into my bedroom. I heard the rush of water. He was serious about running me a bath, but now he left me with this ache between my thighs.

When he emerged from my bedroom, something visceral changed in his bearing. His gaze was heavy-lidded, and he approached me ... stalkingly. “You’re such a good girl. I was expecting to see you defy my instructions and I was looking forward to turning your ass red.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “If you think spanking is my kink, think again.”

He threw back his head and laughed. I couldn’t help admiring the strong tanned column of his throat. The kind of bronzed skin that didn’t come from a bottle, but hours spent under the sun. Pulling me from the counter and still chuckling, he yanked the shirt over my head. “Kick off your shoes,” he murmured by my ear.

“You know we can do this in the bedroom right?”

“Somehow it’s sexier to do you in the kitchen.”

Wait. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry. “So we fuck first ...”

Still chuckling, he tsked. “You’re so talkative when I’m trying to seduce you.”

“But I—”

His mouth came down on mine, shutting me up. When my arms circled his neck and my fingers tangled in his hair, digging into his skull, he grunted his approval. He unzipped my jeans and yanked them under my ass before he held me close, letting me feel the ridge of his erection. With his trousers and my panties the only barrier between us, I felt every inch of his arousal. Somehow he got my jeans tangled at my feet and he stomped them off, freeing me from their confines.

“Here?” I breathed against his mouth.

“I want to see you,” he murmured, dropping to his knees so he was eye level with my panty-covered pussy. He slipped his fingers on either side of my bikinis and tugged it down to expose my bare mound. “Fuck me.”

“I’d rather you fuck me,” I said with a nervous giggle.

“You make it so difficult to do the right thing.” Still focused on my pussy, he inserted a finger inside me. “Wet already.” He stroked, and then added a second finger. I undulated my hips to the pleasurable fullness stretching me, and he massaged my pubic bone with the heel of his hand while he continued to finger fuck me. “You’re sucking me so good, *cara*,” he groaned. “I can’t leave you like this.”

“No, you can’t,” I moaned.

At the first lash of his tongue, my hips convulsed. A fire raced down my belly and pulsed below my navel making me wetter. “Ahhh...”

“You’re so responsive,” he growled against my pussy, lifting one leg over his shoulder. I fell back against the counter, trying hard to brace myself on my elbows. My breaths came quick and ragged. Cesar descended into a frenzy, ravaging my tender flesh without mercy. Sucking on my clit, driving broad fingers in and out. I muffled my cries at the back of my fist, almost delirious. I came so hard, I saw stars. Cesar

kept going, unrelenting in his attack between my legs. I didn't know whether to chase the next lash of his tongue or twist away from the most intense sensation ever.

But he gave me no choice.

With a firm grip on my hip and thigh, he kept me open to him. I was reduced to a blubbering mess by the time he gave one final swipe with his tongue before lowering my leg. My ass slid from the counter. My limbs couldn't support me and threatened to send me to a heap on the floor, but he kept me up. The rip of a foil packet brought me back to my senses.

"The bath ..." I managed to whisper.

"Water's set to low," he muttered. "We'll have to hurry. I've lost all control."

The blunt head of his cock swiped at my pussy lips, and I shuddered. "Oh shit. I'm still sensitive."

"Quick and hard, *cara*," he warned. "Need to take the edge off."

He wrapped my left leg over his hip and punched forward.

I gasped. He was big, and despite how wet I was, my pussy fought against him.

He gave a strangled groan. "*Merda*. You're fucking tight."

He inched forward, and I tried to relax. Tried to exhale or inhale, I wasn't sure anymore. My inner muscles seemed determined to deny him entrance.

"Let me in, *cara*," he growled.

"I'm trying ..."

"Don't wanna hurt you." His forehead sank to mine. "Just relax."

I wanted to yell at him that he was too big. But that was too cliché. And he was arrogant enough as it was.

"I am relaxing," I gritted.

He withdrew and punched in again. "Fuck, that feels so good." Rocking back and forth, he finally seated himself to the

hilt. “Fuck, fuck ... you feel like heaven, *cara*.”

“Cesar... the water...”

His eyes flashed. “I’m buried balls deep and all you can think of is the bath?”

My mouth curved. “Well, I got mine ... oh my God!”

The bastard withdrew and thrust upward so deep, my whole body jolted, sending molten heat scorching a path from my clit and spreading to the tip of my fingers and toes.

As though he’d branded me.

Fisting my hair, he tilted my chin up. “I can give you more.”

And with our gazes locked in challenge, he proceeded to show me. He reared back and drove back into me hard. He maintained a fierce grip on my hair, so I couldn’t look away as he pounded into me in a merciless rhythm. Our lips would brush, and I tasted whiskey and impending heartbreak. Cesar took me higher and higher, and it was only when I fell apart in his arms that he let me look away. I cried out and shattered in his arms even when he ruthlessly plundered me over and over. There was no hesitancy, no second guessing, no gentleness in his touch. It was as though he knew how to work me, to command me, make me a slave to his fucking.

On a silent snarl, he bared his teeth, before a groan took over and he buried his face at the crook of my shoulder. I bore his weight—it felt like a surrender—but it didn’t take long for him to recover. I was swept up in his arms and he marched us to my bedroom.

CHAPTER

Eleven

CESAR

Absolutely fucked.

That's what I was.

I was goddamned addicted when the first taste of her hit my tongue. I wanted to devour her for hours. I wanted to explore every inch of her body with my mouth, but my cock was roaring to make her mine. Any scruples I had left about letting go of Ava vanished the second her tight wet heat wrapped around my dick.

Carrying her in my arms, I stared at her, proud as fuck I put that sated smile on her lips.

Not so proud that I couldn't wait until she recovered from a hard night at the pub to fuck her. All my good intentions had flown out the window the second our lips touched.

The first time I kissed her in the kitchen, I managed to pull away.

I regrouped.

I walked it off by going into her bedroom to start the bath, reminding myself I should take care of her first. Then I saw her underwear among the heap of discarded clothes on the floor.

I picked up the panties and inhaled them like the sick motherfucker I was. My cock was already at half-mast when I

returned to the kitchen to see her still sitting on the counter. And when she sassed me, all my self-restraint unraveled.

I had to kiss her.

I wanted her surrender.

Fucking her couldn't wait.

And since I had her, I'd only taken off the edge and would be wanting to be inside her again soon.

I set her on her feet in the bathroom and walked over to the bathtub to shut off the water, thankful that the overflow kept up and didn't flood the floor. "Do you want anything in this?"

"The bath bombs are in that closet." Ava wobbled against the counter and laughed lightly, "I don't think my legs can hold me up yet."

I smirked, not feeling the least bit guilty for fucking her hard. Unwrapping one named *Peach fizz*, I tossed it into the hot water and sat on the edge of the tub.

She had her arms crossed in front of her, hugging her biceps.

Grinning lazily, I crooked my finger to call her over.

A flirty smile touched her lips, as she shuffled over and moved between my legs. Putting my hands on her shoulders, I asked, "Cold?"

"No. It's balmy in here." She raised a brow at me. "Just at a disadvantage that you're still completely dressed while I'm almost all naked.

I chuckled. "Let's remedy that." I unhooked her bra and let the last of her clothing fall away.

She rolled her eyes. "Cesar."

At the first sight of her tits, I sucked in a ragged breath, automatically reaching out to cup one, letting my thumb flick a nipple.

"Cesar!"

“How could I have neglected these beauties?” I let my tongue dance around the outline of a rosy peak.

“You’re the devil.”

My other hand instinctively sought the juncture between her thighs. Wet again. I was going to lose my goddamned mind. She moaned. My cock began to harden. I hoped after I’d had her, I’d regain a semblance of sanity. Somehow in the back of my mind that was wishful thinking. I’d never reacted to a woman like this before. With Ava, I never tried to understand why.

I set her away and nodded to the tub. “Get in.”

Before I fuck you again, I didn’t add.

“Are you joining me?”

I wasn’t fond of baths and certainly hadn’t shared one with another woman, but I shrugged. “Sure.”

After helping her into the tub, I headed into the bedroom and discarded my suit jacket and draped it neatly over the armchair. I peeled away the rest of the clothes, folding them carefully. I prowled back to the bathroom completely naked.

Her mouth parted. “Wow, you should go to the gym. You need more muscles.”

That sarcasm.

Her tits which I worshiped a few seconds ago, peeked above the water. Following the expanse of skin, my eyes drifted to her elegant shoulders. Hair piled high on top of her head, the delicate arch of her neck reminded me where minutes ago I’d muffled my roar after the most intense orgasm of my life.

“Cesar?”

“Sorry,” I smiled. “I can’t get over how beautiful you are.”

Her face, already pink from the heat of the water, reddened. She scooted forward when I stepped into the tub.

My fucking balls were not happy with the boiling water, but after they pressed against Ava’s back, I couldn’t say they

were complaining. More like happy as fuck.

Cradling her between my legs was oddly satisfying, and I couldn't resist planting a kiss on her shoulder. Soon, my mouth was trailing up her neck. Goosebumps appeared over her skin, and she trembled against me.

"Did you even hear what I said?" Ava's chiding tone broke me from my trance.

"Sorry. All this exposed skin is distracting."

"Well, I hope you're interested in my mind as well as my body."

There was sarcasm in her tone, but I couldn't detect whether it was humor or anger. "I wouldn't go through all this trouble if all I was interested in was fucking you."

"We always seem to ruin a moment, don't we?"

"We?" I arched a brow even when she couldn't see it.

She laughed briefly. "Okay, probably me. But I was thanking you again for putting Eamonn's back on the Hell's Kitchen bar scene."

"It's probably why I didn't pay attention," I murmured. "No need to thank me. O' Toole's was all hype. I just gave it to the more deserving restaurant that's all."

"So, was Ruth Ellis really your friend in high school?"

"Yes."

"I loved how she did the review that didn't sound like a review at all."

Chuckling, I said, "I read it while I was waiting for you at the pub. She does have a talent for storytelling."

"She framed it like a noir thriller. A visit to a mob boss's lair. Didn't that reflect badly on trying to change your family image? Did your uncle like that?"

I stilled. "What are you saying about my uncle?"

"Come on, Cesar, let's not dance around the subject. It's known on the streets that your uncle is the boss now."

“No comment.”

“I’m just glad you and Paulie are out of that life ...” she paused. “But you’re truly never out, are you?”

“Are you fishing for information?” My voice was tight. I looked around the bathroom. Did her brother put a bug in here thinking I was going to be so careless with my words? Despite the heat of the water, my blood ran cold. Would Ava be complicit in trying to trap me? No.

She sighed. “Are we ruining the moment again?”

I hugged her against my chest. “We just have to sort things out, that’s all.”

“Things that you’re not willing to share,” she pointed out. “And that’s all right. One night of sex doesn’t mean you owe me anything—”

My arms tightened around her, not liking how this conversation was going. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“This attraction between us. No recriminations. We have tonight. You don’t have to tell me your secrets. I don’t have to tell you mine, although I have a feeling, I’m at a disadvantage because you seem to know more about me than what I know about you.”

I could barely see through my temper because I couldn’t get past what she was saying ...that she was only giving me one night. I shouldn’t have started with her until I’d accomplished my objective in New York. But it didn’t take a genius to know it was a losing battle. I needed Ava by my side so I could focus on my other goal.

“I don’t think I made myself clear,” I gritted. “This is not a one-time fuck.”

“Well, how about an all-night fuck?” she teased. I didn’t like how those words came out of her mouth either.

“Let me spell it out for you, *cara*. I foresee many nights with you. Weeks. Months.”

“I’m not sure I’ve made myself clear either, but I get it,” she replied. “I get it more than you realize. I grew up with three brothers. I understand men regard sex and relationships differently from women. You relate love to sex.”

“I haven’t said anything about love,” I bit out.

She froze, then water splashed as she struggled to get away from me.

“Where are you going?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she snapped, standing. “I’m not ready to let this bath go to waste because of your insensitive remark.”

What she did was sit on the opposite end of the bathtub so she could face me.

“I don’t like having this conversation when we’re not face to face,” she added. “I’m already at a disadvantage because I’m naked.” Her cheeks were still flushed, but given the way she glared at me, it wasn’t from sex or from the bath.

“The words didn’t come out the way I intended.”

“No, I get what you meant, Cesar,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting you to declare undying love just because we had sex.”

“Neither do I want you insinuating I don’t give a damn about you,” I shot back.

“But it’s not love. I’m not naïve. What you said was uncalled for and is insulting to me. As if I’m trying to force you to say the L word. Or as if I need that to continue having sex with you. All I’m saying is, I’m more aware of the male psyche because I’ve grown up with brothers.”

I doubt her brothers had gone through an obsession like mine. I was aware of Charles’ love affair with Sofia Rossi. They were young and I was sure the romance lost its luster when the reality of jail time and an unexpected pregnancy hung over their heads.

“Understood.”

“And I insulted you, too, when I treated you like a one-night stand.” Her shoulders slumped. “I’m either too exhausted or too relaxed to think about this tonight, but we’ll have to figure out boundaries if we’re going to continue.”

I bit back my retort. If all it took was to keep her exhausted and relaxed to stop her from overanalyzing my intentions, then I knew of a pleasurable way to do it.

“So Cesar isn’t an Italian form of your name,” she said. “Isn’t there supposed to be an ‘e’ after it?”

“My mother preferred it without.” She was obviously trying to change the subject. “Cesare was a mouthful with that extra emphasis at the end.” I grinned. “Is Ava Irish?”

“It depends who you ask.” She laughed. A pleasant sound that reverberated around the bathroom and lightened the tension between us. “But our names have nothing to do with us being Irish.”

“No?”

“Mom’s favorite past time was movies,” she continued. “That’s why we don’t worry about her when she’s holed up in the house by herself. Even before she had Sean, movies dominated her life. She’d even go to the theater by herself. Dad didn’t like that. She has a collection of Betamax and VHS tapes.”

“Ah.” I was beginning to see where she was going with this.

“So, Sean ... was Sean Connery. Charles was Charles Bronson, and Robert was Robert Mitchum.” I grinned. “Mom’s favorite actress at that time was Ava Gardner. Unfortunately, I didn’t turn out to be the bombshell she was.”

“You are to me,” I told her.

“I still don’t get you.” Her eyes lowered shyly.

“Are you close to any of your brothers?”

“I am closest to Robbie.” A smile curved her mouth. “Charles and I fought a lot when we were kids and he usually made me cry. Robbie was the one who dried my tears, put the

band aid on my scraped knees.” Her face brightened. “Speaking of movies, I remember there was a home theater at your house with the whole movie projector and popcorn cart.”

My chest tightened. “My brother Lorenzo.”

“Oh.” Her eyes grew contrite. “I’m sorry. Paulie hated to talk about what happened, and you don’t have to.”

I forced myself to smile. “I’ll tell you about him one day.”

“Okay.”

“So what are your plans after college?” Steering the topic away from the landmine of my life was a good idea. “Run the restaurant? Expand?”

“These last two nights of great business give me lofty goals.” She hitched her shoulders. Then she proceeded to tell me about said lofty goals until the water got cold and forced us out of the tub without ruining another conversation.



Ava

A pressure between my legs forced me out of the sands of sleep and I opened my eyes to a dark head between my legs. Cesar avidly sucked on my clit, keeping my thighs wide apart with his broad shoulders while pressing down on the top of my pelvis with the heel of his hand.

This man was an expert in oral sex.

I arched and dug my heels into the mattress, threading his thick hair with my fingers, fighting against pulling at it, trying not to interrupt his focus on my pleasure. Thick fingers filled my channel, and something nudged at my sweet spot. Blinding rapture spread from my center and cascaded down my legs, making my toes curl. “Oh ... oh...” I moaned, wanting to squeeze my knees against his head, trying to chase those waves of addictive sensations.

I was still spiraling from how hard I'd come when he crept up my body.

"Good morning." He smiled, mouth glistening with my arousal. Somehow that made me squirm even more.

"Hmm, I like that wake-up call."

His cock was hard against my sex, and I couldn't help admiring the stubble on his jaw, thicker in the light of the morning. He angled his body to reach for a condom.

I stopped him.

His expression grew alert. "You want me bare?"

"Of course not," I said. "I want to blow you."

Color heightened his cheeks. His nostrils flared. "You have a coarse mouth on you, and it's fucking turning me on."

I arched a brow. "You're not already turned on?" I playfully pumped my hips against his erection.

He fell to his side, rolling on his back, and groaned, "You'd torture the devil."

Surging up from my side, I immediately settled between his legs. "Turnabout is fair play. Scoot back."

He elbow-crawled against the headboard, and I rose to my knees. My other hand fisted him at the base of his shaft, and while keeping my eyes on him, I took him in my mouth. He was huge. What I couldn't fit in my mouth, my hand moved in corkscrew motion while I hollowed my cheeks. We may never see each other again after this morning but I was determined to leave my mark and not be a forgettable hookup.

"Fuck!"

The rough curse exploded from above me, and gratification spread from my chest and spurred me to suck him harder. Hmmm ... the thought of having this prime sausage for breakfast made me wet.

"Fuck," he muttered again. His hands were buried in my hair. "That mouth, *cara*. Take all of me. That's it. Good girl."

On the upstroke, I release his cock with a pop, still maintaining my grip on his erection. Then slowly, I let my tongue swirl around the head as I kept my eyes trained on him.

His hooded eyes glittered. “Christ,” he groaned. “You’re so beautiful. Finish me off, *cara*.”

The last statement was a command and a plea.

I swallowed him again, and his cock hardened to steel.

“I’m about to come,” he warned. “Ava ... stop now....”

I didn’t.

He didn’t try to pull me away, so I took that as a go ahead.

Hot liquid hit the back of my throat, and I wanted to own him as much as he owned me. I swallowed every drop of his cum, not allowing a single drop to escape my lips. He cursed me, and it made me hot. I finished him off with a seductive swirl of my tongue on the tip of his cock, then I licked my fingers like I had dipped my hand in honey. His eyes darkened, and I grinned.

Invigorated and triumphant, I threw myself beside him, stretching like a satisfied cat. I turned to look at him.

He was frowning. In fact, I would even describe his face as angry. Confused, I sat up. “What?”

He looked away. “Nothing.”

“Cesar,” I warned. “If we’re going to carry on having sex, you need to tell me what you want or don’t want. And you should tell me if you didn’t like the blow job, or if it was too personal to have me swallow.” I wasn’t an expert about men and their gunk, but I prided myself in giving good head. It was one way I kept my virginity for a long time while experimenting in my sexual awakening.

His attention returned to me, but his face was void of expression. “You’re very good at that.”

“What? Giving blow jobs?”

“Yes,” he hissed.

“And that’s a problem, how?”

He averted his gaze again.

“Wait a minute.” Putting together his reaction to my admirers the day before coupled with his other possessive acts and declarations, a heavy pit started to grow in my gut. “You’re jealous that I’m good at blow jobs?”

“It doesn’t make sense, I know,” he growled, jumping out of the bed like it suddenly caught on fire.

“Are you kidding me right now?” I yelled.

He snagged his pajama bottoms from the armchair and stabbed each muscular leg into it. “I’m going to use the bathroom in the hallway. We probably should grab breakfast somewhere before I drop you off at school.”

He left me seething with a pit in my stomach that had grown into a boulder. I didn’t think it was a big deal, but was he a traditional Italian guy who wanted a virgin for a wife? The night before didn’t bother him, but that was why they called it the cold light of day. Never did I give him any indication that I was as pure as *undriven* snow.

“Fuck him,” I muttered, getting off the bed to take a shower.

He must have dressed in the other bedroom, because when I found him in the kitchen, he was in his suit. It wasn’t the one he wore yesterday. How could he have a neatly pressed suit in his duffel?

“You kept your suit in your duffel?” I was pissed at him, but I was curious more. “Is it one of those wrinkle -free fabric?”

He had coffee already going, and paper bags from a popular fast-food restaurant were on the kitchen counter. After handing me a mug of coffee and taking a sip of his own, he said, “Eric dropped off my suit this morning with breakfast.” He studied me for a beat. “I want to apologize for my behavior earlier. I hurt your feelings and I didn’t mean to. I realize now how it might have come across.”

“Just so we’re clear. This was about the blow job remark.”

“Yes,” he gritted. “I was jealous.”

“I’m getting that.”

“Not once did I expect you to be a virgin. But you give amazing head—”

“I do.” I raised a brow. “And I’m proud of it. So what’s the problem?” I learned most of my tricks from a Cosmo article, but I’d rather choke on my coffee than explain myself to this prick. Why couldn’t he be as appreciative as Brad?

His fists clenched at his sides. “I’m very jealous when it comes to you.” He expelled a hissing breath. “The thought that there were men before me makes me want to erase—no, obliterate—every single experience you’ve had with them, so you’ll remember only my touch and my cock. Every hole in your body will remember only me.”

I inhaled sharply, mesmerized by the fierceness in his gaze, the near feralness.

His dark eyes searched my face, his jaw hardening before he pivoted away. Cesar paced the room, raking his hair with his fingers. “This has nothing,” he growled. “Nothing to do with you being a virgin or not.”

My logical mind was telling me to run or kick him out of the apartment, but instead, I was tongue-tied and fascinated by his absolute intensity. I needed to sit, so I took the chair in front of the counter. Grabbing the paper bag with our breakfast, I picked out an egg and ham biscuit. “Maybe we should eat while we talk? I’m still not sure what’s going on between us and I feel we need to set expectations.”

He turned and gave me a brief smile, before taking the seat beside me. “You’re talking like it’s business.”

“My test was on strategic management,” I replied.

Cesar chuckled, diluting the swirling storm between us. “You must have aced your test. Maybe if the restaurant business isn’t for you, you can join my team.”

“So you’re staying in the U.S. for good?”

He gave a brief nod.

My shoulders lightened. I didn't realize how heavily Cesar's stay in the U.S. bothered me. Everything he'd been saying suggested we were more than casual, but his admitting of this fact certainly made me less wary. "Paulie said you weren't sure yet. That you have businesses scattered across Europe."

"I do, but I have a reliable management team. I prefer making face-to-face deals."

He grinned at my dubious expression before expanding on what he meant.

"Board rooms, sitting behind a desk all day. That's not me." His eyes gleamed. "But I do like making money."

A question lanced at the tip of my tongue. I wanted to ask him if they were all legal.

"You have more questions."

My expression must have been obvious. "I do. But I'm not sure I have the right to ask them yet."

He nodded but didn't push. I guessed he wasn't ready to share either.

Baby steps.

I unwrapped the biscuit and took a bite, chewed, and then took a sip of coffee.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted milk and sugar with your coffee," he said.

"Just black," I replied.

"Do you like espresso?" he asked.

"Sometimes," I said. "Hope you're not like Paulie who I have to argue with every single time I drag him to a non-Italian coffee place."

"Not as bad," he admitted. "I hate a bad espresso though."

"Noted."

“We should try this place in New Jersey sometime,” he said. “It’s a bakery, but they have the best espresso and cannoli.”

My mind reviewed my schedule for the next few weeks. I was going to be crazy busy, and it was partly his fault. “I’m not sure when I’ll be able to have a proper date with you.”

As if reading my mind, he said, “The restaurant? I kind of brought this on myself, didn’t I?”

“You kinda did.”

He picked up my hand and kissed the back of my fingers. “I’m still glad I was able to help.”

“Some boundaries though,” I said. “I value freedom. I don’t want you dropping me off and picking me up from school all the time. I don’t like this chauffeuring around. Once in a while is fine, but not all the freaking time.”

He didn’t look pleased but gave a brief nod. “Anything else?”

“I can’t have you glaring across the room at my customers when I’m waiting tables and trying to make tips—”

“By flirting with them?”

“That wasn’t flirting. That’s Restaurant Hospitality 101.”

“I don’t like you smiling at other men.”

I rolled my eyes. “Get used to it.”

“Fine.” But I didn’t trust his ‘fine,’ judging from the hardening of his jaw. “But if they disrespect you.”

“I can take care of it or if they’re too stubborn, Charles can.”

“You have me. You don’t need your brother.”

Something in his eyes made me shiver. I had a feeling this type of work wasn’t new to him.

“Can’t have you jealous for no reason, Cesar. That’s bad for business.”

He sat back in his chair and sighed. “I’m finding out ... I’m very unreasonable when it comes to you. I’m working on it. You just have to be patient with me.”

I didn’t answer, finishing up my breakfast, and balling up the wrapper and slipping out the peach pie.

His large hand closed over mine. I was suddenly feeling very petite beside him.

“I’m truly sorry for acting like an asshole this morning.” His eyes danced with self-deprecating humor. “Please don’t deny me the pleasure of your class-A blowjobs. I’ll never be a jealous idiot over that again.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re forgiven.” But my face turned serious. “Don’t do it again. And just so we’re clear. Dates will be scarce. At times I might be too tired and just want to sleep. Is that okay with you?”

His eyes softened. “Don’t you remember the first night I spent here?”

I laughed. “Yes. How can I forget? Stalker.”

CHAPTER

Twelve

CESAR

After dropping Ava off at NYU, I watched her disappear into the building before I signaled for Eric to leave.

“You didn’t crash and burn this time, right?” he smirked.

“No.” I chuckled. “But, make no mistake, she’s no pushover.”

“Didn’t figure she was,” Eric replied. “She seems to know how to handle you.”

She did. My arrogant ass had met its match. But I couldn’t keep her in the dark about my business for long—both the legal and the illegal kinds.

Speaking of the illegal.

Checking my watch, I said, “They should be wrapping up the game at the Palermo House.”

Eric met my eyes in the mirror. “I stopped by last night after I dropped you guys off. I heard they were still going at it this morning. Johnny Luciano bowed out.”

“Christ, how much did he lose?”

“Three hundred large.”

“That’s got to hurt.” Luciano was my partner at the Pandora Resort in Las Vegas. A distant relative of “Lucky” Luciano—the father of modern organized crime—his name

carried a mobster nostalgia that made my high-stakes card games a coveted event to those in the know. Famous athletes, especially, were another draw. We didn't have trouble getting our choice of celebrities on board because competitiveness was a natural fit to these testosterone laden card games. Sometimes the pot could run up to a million dollars in a single hand.

A Neo Grecian brownstone in Brooklyn, Palermo House was one of the first properties I purchased after I discovered I had a knack for real estate investment. The rooms of the top floor were demolished and converted into a space for banquets. Uncle Jackie managed the bookings—birthdays, confirmations, baptism, and graduations—all important milestones for an Italian family. But they were no comparison to the obscene money made from illegal gambling.

The lower floors were renovated for transient bedrooms. Most of the gamblers didn't want to waste time going to a hotel. All they required was a place to crash for a quick nap, and then it was back to gambling. Some of them could go for the whole thirty-six hours. The rumor that casinos pumped oxygen into the rooms was a myth. The trick was to keep the area chilly and well ventilated.

While Eric parked on the streets, I shook off my jacket and strapped on a sidearm harness. Openly carrying was not allowed, even if we knew almost every mafioso had a weapon on them. We depended on good faith to keep the peace under the threat of being blacklisted. Drugs and prostitutes were prohibited in the building. We didn't need complications from that shit either. The rules were clear.

Two De Lucci soldiers stood by the front steps and gave us a nod to let us in. From there we took the scissor gate elevators to the top floor. Four flights up, we reached our destination.

Unlike the first night of the games when the players were dressed in their expensive suits, mingling around the buffet table and drinking expensive wine, this morning they'd lost the jackets and ties and had their sleeves rolled up. A few were sprawled on couches catching a nap while others were stuffing

their bellies with donuts and drinking coffee. Two tables out of five remained occupied.

All the guests in this game were expected to play. Unlike the ones invited to the underground casino I operated at a *castello* in Italy's Lake Como, they could bring their wives or girlfriends, but stringent background checks were done. The guest rooms of that castle had the amenities of a five-diamond luxury hotel. If this Palermo game was exclusive, then that one was elite, where the minimum bets started at a hundred grand, and there was no limit. A mansion or an oilfield could be on the line, and no one would bat an eye. From sheiks to Chinese businessmen, to Russian oligarchs, I offered the thrill of illegal high-stakes gambling to pad their ego.

"The Money Man." A voice called behind me.

Gritting my teeth, I turned around to see Tony Cap smiling like a shark and heading my way. Fuck. Behind him were two men in leather jackets. There wasn't any attempt to cover the tattoos on their necks. Russian organized crime.

Tony introduced his guests as Ivan and Anton Petrov. I needed to have a word with my uncle since these Russians were not on the invite list.

Handshakes were exchanged.

"Didn't see you last Sunday," I told Tony.

"I sent Silvio." His eyes were scrutinizing.

My face gave nothing away. "All's well with him then?"

"Haven't heard from him. I'm getting worried," he said, still watching me. There was a double meaning to that. Worry that his cousin was dead ... or worry that he'd turned.

I snuffed out scum like Silvio without second thoughts. Did that make me a murderous psycho like Tony?

Maybe.

I could live with that. "I told Jackie if I remembered anything more, I'd call him."

“One more thing,” Tony cut in before I could turn away. “We have something important to discuss with you.” He nodded to the uninvited guests. “Ivan and Anton are part owners of O’Toole’s.”

“So rumor is right?” My smile was derisive. “What are Russians doing owning an Irish pub? You should have stuck to a tea room or a vodka bar.”

The two interlopers scowled in a way that made me glad I had my piece on me.

“Not like you to stereotype, De Lucci,” Tony said.

“I don’t need the lecture,” I told him. “This is my card game. And they”—I nodded to the Petrovs—“were not on the guest list.”

Ivan smirked. “Oh, you owe us this.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

The other Russian nodded to Tony. “Show him.”

“Sure you don’t want to go someplace more secure?” Tony slipped a brown envelope from inside his suit and handed it to me.

Caught unaware, I managed to keep my face impassive as I casually accepted the envelope. I slipped out its single content.

A photograph.

Eric, who’d been quiet, looked over my shoulder. “Well, fuck me.”

I jerked my head for them to follow me. Turning right on the hallway, I stalked straight through French doors and onto a balcony. The brisk fall air needled at my skin.

I handed the envelope back to Tony. “I don’t know what you want to prove here. Surely I’m not the only man who has a taste for strip clubs.”

“True. But I imagine you don’t want Miss McGrath to know. After all, you left her apartment and went straight to that joint.”

A muscle jumped under my eye. “Having someone follow me, Tony?”

“We need you to stop sticking your nose in our business. The Gorski business.”

I raised a brow. “The De Luccis merely helped him out of a bind.”

“Because of that McGrath woman.”

“Paulie did it as a favor to a friend.”

Tony stepped into me. “And yet you’re the one chauffeuring her around. She’s a lovely girl, your Ava. Or is she just a passing fancy, hmm? You don’t care if she finds out about those lap dances?”

I imagined these three fucks already dead and bleeding on the floor with their brains blown out of their skull, but I couldn’t show how much Ava meant to me. Not without something to hold over their heads, and I’d be damned before I let these fuckers beat me at my own game.

I rarely lost my temper in front of people. They’d see that as a sign of weakness. That they’d gotten under my skin. By the time they see my rage it will be too late for them. My mind drifted back to Silvio streaming blood on my basement floor, rotting in pieces under the weight of a New Jersey landfill.

Instead, I emitted a harsh chuckle. “You got me there. I haven’t gotten tired yet of Miss McGrath.” I sighed. “So if you don’t mind holding on to that photograph longer, maybe I could use it later to break up with her.”

Tony swatted me on the back like I was his hero. “See this guy?” he told the Russians who were laughing with him. “You’re the man.”

Ivan said, “Maybe when you get tired of her, I can wet my dick in her cunt.”

Red ink bled into my eyes. It was a wonder I didn’t launch myself at the bastard. “I don’t like another man thinking about my girl. I don’t share.”

The Russian laughed, “But you said—”

“Italian men are possessive,” Tony cut in, throwing me a look. “Like a dog with a bone, ya know? They don’t want it no more, but don’t want anyone else to have a piece of it.”

“That’s right.” I clenched my jaw. One more derogatory remark about Ava, and I was calling a hit on this fucker.

“Ahh ...” Ivan grinned slyly.

“We have an understanding about Gorski, right?” Tony pulled the subject back to business. “Because ... we’re touchy about this. Territory, ya know? And respect. If it wasn’t Jackie, I would have taken offense.”

“I get it, Tony,” I gritted.

He gave an exaggerated series of nods. “Good. Good.”

“What’s going on here?” A voice spoke from the opening to the French doors.

Jackie stood there with Luciano, my partner in the Pandora Resort.

“Nothing,” Tony said and gave me hug. “Your nephew and I talked about Silvio that’s all.”

My uncle glanced at me for confirmation, and I merely shrugged.

“Got something to discuss with you too,” Tony addressed Jackie.

“I need to make my appearance on the floor,” I told them and made my exit.

“Catch you later, nephew.” Jackie was still frowning as I passed him, feeling his eyes trail me.

I walked back inside with Luciano while I signaled Eric that I was fine, letting him know he could blend in the background while I mingled with the rest of my guests.

“Hard to be half-in and half-out, huh?” Luciano said.

“What’re you talking about?”

“That,” he signaled over his shoulder. “Heard they’d been after you to join the *family*.”

That was partly true. But after Lorenzo's death and the aftermath, Pop had his come-to-Jesus moment. With the feds bearing down on organized crime with the power of RICO and its endless predicates, he didn't want another tragedy to fall on his children. And he promised Mamma we would have a normal life. Did he frown on my illegal activities? Of course he did. But his criminal heart was secretly pleased.

It was the demon inside the De Luccis.

"We're born honorable," he told me once. "But De Luccis have demons. It's almost a curse. We could never be the nine-to-five husbands who go home to their wives in time for dinner. We get restless. Your Mamma knew this when she married me."

"Cesar?" Luciano broke through my thoughts.

"Sorry." I smiled at my friend. "Heard you're down three hundred grand."

He winced. "I was going to come see you before I went back to Vegas."

"The resort doing okay?"

"Yes. Yes. That rock band you told me to hire?"

I tensed. "What about them?"

"They're really good. We could put them in our front act soon."

The collar of my shirt grew tight. I yanked at it. "Good. You're the manager. I trust your judgment. Listen, I need to check the bank."

"Of course. Of course. Good turn out."

"Thanks, Lucky." I itched to get away from him.

"Any time you need the Luciano name."

It was a miracle I managed to crack a smile as we said our goodbyes. I did not regret what I did. I'd lived my life without getting caught and I had no intention of breaking that streak. And did it really matter? It wouldn't change anything. But

something akin to fear corkscrewed into my chest—a feeling I could lose everything.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

AVA

As the days turned into weeks, Eamonn's finally settled down into brisk levels of business. The pub was definitely on the rebound and back in the black. Additional personnel were hired to man the front of the house, the kitchen and the bar, and for the first time ever, I didn't have to work on a Friday. And there was no school.

Cesar and I were finally going to have a weekend for ourselves. I was excited.

We'd fallen into a routine. I either went to school or the pub in the morning. He did whatever he did during the day, and then, in the evenings, he picked me up.

I stretched on the bed with a smug smile on my face. Another routine was Cesar waking me up with morning sex. Frequently it would start with his mouth giving me the most exquisite oral pleasure. Sometimes, it would start with him slipping inside me from behind and make slow, gentle love to me. Our evenings were usually for unwinding, sometimes in front of the television, and frequently ended in sex. In the two weeks since we'd started this relationship, we hadn't spent a single night apart. Cesar had moved some of his things into my closet. In fact, he didn't have a duffel anymore because he had everything else he needed at my apartment.

Clanging of pots and pans reached my ears. My man was preparing me breakfast.

My man.

A silly smile curved my lips. He didn't like being called boyfriend. He said it was too juvenile.

Another yawn escaped me, and I decided to quit daydreaming and join him in the kitchen. He'd prepared breakfast once before. He was an expert in making frittata. I brought home chopped vegetables from the pub, so I didn't feel too guilty about not helping him cook.

After freshening up and wrapping a robe around my pajamas, I headed to the kitchen. I caught Cesar in profile. He usually walked around in his boxers and nothing else, but he'd been mindful to put something on ever since the morning Mads came up with the kids and having not heard them come in, emerged from the hallway bathroom naked.

This time his pajama bottoms were slung low on his hips and he was shirtless.

Sexy as hell whether he was in a suit, half-naked, or fully nude.

One would say I was hopelessly infatuated with Cesar De Lucci.

“Good morning.” I hugged him from behind and he hugged me in return. He kissed the top of my head and nudged me toward the coffee maker.

“Get caffeinated.”

I did as I was told. The other morning, he was running late for an appointment—although I wondered what appointments he would be having at six-thirty since he was his own boss. I didn't have a class until ten and I could have just used the train. He argued that maybe I could help out a bit at the restaurant, and that he and Eric could come by and take me to class.

I mean ... what the hell? We'd had this argument about him chauffeuring me around all the time. It was convenient, sure, but not when it stole three hours of extra sleep.

However, the biggest transgression of that day was that he made me leave the house without coffee.

But this morning Cesar made up for it with the way he woke me up. It wasn't a hardship either to sit in the chair with my mug of coffee while I leisurely ogled his glorious ass. Because of how busy the past two weeks had been, I didn't have the time to reflect on what we were as a couple. We didn't talk about the future or where our relationship was going. We hung out at home and left the apartment together. He didn't always wait for me at Eamonn's. Sometimes he'd disappear somewhere and then return close to the end of dinner service. I was thankful for that at least ... not having him glare at my male customers and affect my tips.

Interestingly enough, it was during sex when we were the most open, and I was most vulnerable to feeling something. At first, I attributed this to my fear that no man would measure up to him again. As for Cesar, it didn't matter if he fucked me hard or slow, there was always a fierceness in his gaze each time he possessed me and told me I was his.

I shivered at the memory.

"The frittata should be ready soon." He put the platter of bacon in front of me beside my keychain. Why were my keys on the counter and not where I left them on the console table at the entrance to the apartment? Wait a minute. It was my keychain, but the configuration of keys was different. My building and apartment keys were missing and there was an unfamiliar one on it. "What's this?"

"I bought a row house in Greenwich Village. We can move in next week."

I addressed the second anomaly. "Where are my keys?"

The kitchen timer dinged, and Cesar simply smiled at me before turning away to tend to the frittata. Grabbing a towel, he opened the oven and pulled it out, laying it on a trivet.

"Cesar," I pressed. "Where are my keys?"

"I gave them to Eric. He's making duplicates."

"What?" It was too early for my blood pressure to rise.

“Have some coffee.” He pushed the mug toward me.

“Caffeine isn’t going to make this question go away,” I snapped.

“Don’t you think it’s easier?” he said, eyes glittering. “I practically live here anyway.”

“It’s been two weeks,” I groaned.

“I get frustrated when I want to buy you things and bring them in here while you’re busy with school. What if I wanted to surprise you with a romantic home-cooked dinner?”

“Damn you,” I muttered. “You can be a psycho yet sound so sweet.”

“I don’t see what the problem is. You trust me, don’t you?” He frowned. “If you have questions, all you need to do is ask.”

Raising my mug, I took a sip. “Oh my God. This is so good. New beans?”

“Guatemalan,” he replied. “I stopped yesterday at my friend’s beanery.”

“You should make the coffee in the mornings from now on. You always make it better.”

Cesar started to serve me a slice of frittata. He was so obviously buttering me up for something. “Okay. What else did you do?”

Taking his time in serving me bacon, he made me more anxious.

“What else did you do?”

He glanced up. “We’re having dinner with Pop tonight. Paulie and Carlotta are going to be there.”

A weight settled on my chest. “Are we ready for that?”

“Aren’t we?”

“We’re that serious?”

His mouth tightened. “I’ve been serious about you from the beginning.” Irritation flashed through his face. “When will you get that through your damned head?”

“Whoa, there, buster.” I glared at him. “I’ve been busy. I haven’t really stopped to think about our relationship.”

“And you’re overthinking it right now. Shouldn’t we just go with the flow?”

“Oh, you mean go with the flow, like you directing traffic?” I nodded to the keychain. “I didn’t think we’re at that point yet.”

He muttered a curse, grabbed the Irish whiskey, dumped a shot into his coffee, and took his seat in front of me.

“Am I annoying you enough that you need to drink so early in the morning?”

“You’re not annoying me,” he growled. “I like the taste of it in my coffee.” He paused. “Sometimes.”

“Like when you’re irritated.”

“Stop being so juvenile about it.”

My eyes narrowed. “That’s not being juvenile, but for the record, you *are* older than me by eleven years.”

We glared at each other.

“Is my age bothering you?”

“No!”

“Good. Because I don’t give a fuck.”

My mouth fell open.

“Eat your breakfast,” he barked.

“Well, I’m not sure if I want to now.” I put my knife and fork down. It turned out I had my limits with his bossiness and I let him know it.

His eyes pinned me to my chair. His jaw was so tightly clenched, I was afraid he’d damage his teeth. “Ava,” he said quietly. “Please eat.”

An apology bubbled up my throat, but we were both in the wrong. “Truce?” I offered.

A slight smile touched the corner of his mouth as he nodded. Those half smiles of his did me in. I loved his maturity. With Brad, sometimes we ended up in a shouting match, but with Cesar he always knew when to pull back. I'd never had an argument with him that devolved into pettiness. A battle of wills, yes, but nothing idiotic. Although I was sure when we got more comfortable with each other we'd have those days.

"You're the master of frittata." I forked the eggy breakfast into my mouth. "You could make this blindfolded."

"This is only the second time I've cooked this for you. The time-consuming part is chopping the vegetables. The rest is throwing it together in a pan."

"Where did you learn how to cook?"

"Ma taught me before I left for Harvard. Making sure I'd still eat healthy and not indulge in junk food. But when I was in Italy, I stayed for a while in Calabria with my friend Gio. He's the cook in the family. Way better than his wife. We chatted about business in the kitchen and he put me to work."

"Well, lucky me." I was almost done with my first helping.

Cesar nodded to the pan and cut another piece. "More?"

"Yes, please."

I could tell he was gratified I liked his cooking. There was a certain satisfaction on his face. It didn't apply only to food, but anything he did or bought for me. It was like he enjoyed taking care of me. That did a number on my heart. The truth was I was probably more than infatuated with Cesar. But growing up with brothers, I tended to have their logical minds and was wary about emotions. I hadn't analyzed my feelings yet. It was as though there was a wall, but I was also getting dissatisfied with the status quo.

Two weeks. Was that enough time to take this to the next level?

I was impatient to see him again each night even when I'd just seen him that morning. The sex was smoking hot, but even simply cuddling on the couch, watching a sitcom or a talk

show gave me something to look forward to in the evenings. When Cesar could tell I was running on fumes, he'd make me come with his mouth and then let me sleep. One time I caught him jacking off in the shower. That was one of the hottest things I'd ever witnessed, especially when my name rolled off his tongue as he came.

“Mind sharing your thoughts?” He finished his breakfast and was sipping his whiskey-spiked coffee.

“I was thinking how far we'd come in two weeks. So, Greenwich Village huh?”

“Yes. I've secured office space in Midtown and will be moving part of my company there. Just headquarters.”

I rimmed my coffee mug with my finger. “You never said what you do besides real estate and investment banking. You hinted that you did a lot more.”

“Casinos. A few resorts.”

“Oh?”

His mouth curved. “I don't run them. I'm more of a silent partner.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes.” He watched me closely. “But I'm not sure you're prepared to hear them.”

I swallowed. “They're illegal.”

He didn't answer me.

Illegal then.

I exhaled a breath. “Okay. I didn't grow up in a vacuum from organized crime. I mean my own Dad is in jail for racketeering. I understand this life more than you know.”

“You didn't mind it when your dad used you for an excuse to do his collections?”

“Lounging in the sunroom and being served snacks sure beats working at Eamonn's. You saw me as Paulie's annoying little friend though.”

His eyes gleamed. “If I’d known you’d get me under your spell this way, I would have come back sooner.” He looked away. “But maybe it was a good thing that I didn’t see you when you turned eighteen.” A muscle ticked at his jaw.

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t have been ready.”

“And you think I’m ready now?”

“Oh, you are.”

I laughed. “Wait a minute. Ready for what?”

“You’ll see.”

My heart pounded. Surely he didn’t mean what I think he meant. But then again, it wasn’t unusual with Italian marriages. I was wondering if he’d ever considered an arranged marriage before, and I almost asked him, but I didn’t want to give him the wrong idea that was what I was expecting.

And I nearly forgot what I was going to ask him.

“What?” An arrogant brow arched.

“Are you involved in drug trafficking?”

His face darkened. “Absolutely not.” He actually looked offended.

“How about loan sharking?”

“No. Have I lent money before? Yes, but the rates were reasonable. And I never shot anyone’s kneecaps or smashed their fingers because they weren’t able to pay me back.”

“Murder for hire?”

“No. But understand I wouldn’t hesitate to protect what’s mine with any means necessary.”

Like Silvio. Surprisingly, I had no problem with that.

“Okay. This is a biggie, and I want you to be honest with me. I don’t think you’d be involved in it. I mean, if I ever find out you were ... past, present, or future. I’m done. This is non-negotiable. I could usually—”

“You want to know if I’m involved in human trafficking,” he said dryly.

“How ...”

He stood up, cleared our plates, and dropped them in the sink. Afterward, he took the seat next to me and covered my hand in his. The pull of his gaze demanded my attention.

“Don’t you realize yet, Ava?” he said. “We grew up in this life, but we also share the same values.”

“I wouldn’t say extortion is a positive value,” I said bitterly.

“Your father and brother acted on orders.”

“From your dad.”

Cesar nodded. “He also worked for the Rossis. Understand if it wasn’t us, it would be another boss. It’s about territory. We were the lesser evil. That’s why Pop encouraged us to pursue legitimate businesses because without financial power and influence in the higher echelons, the De Lucci family would appear weak.” He exhaled a heavy breath. “Especially after Lorenzo.”

“Paulie wasn’t straightforward with what happened ... if it was a hit from within the family or outside.”

He stared at me steadily. “He committed suicide.”

My blood ran cold. “What?”

“There were rumors about it among the Five Families, but only my parents, Uncle Jackie, and Paulie know the truth.”

And now that included me. I didn’t move. I didn’t know what to say. Cesar had bound me to him irrevocably by revealing this secret.

“My brother witnessed an atrocity committed in front of him and did nothing.” Cesar’s jaw clenched. His eyes bled with something close to madness. “The murder of a child and a pregnant woman. It was a joint task between our two families. This idiot husband owed money to us and was about

to turn federal witness.” His smile was bitter. “I was with him when Lorenzo took his own life.”

“Oh my God, Cesar,” I whispered.

“His last words to me were about making sure Paulie didn’t become a made man.” A flash of anguish crossed his face, and his eyes closed briefly. When he opened them, they were back to the alert glint that I was so used to seeing in them. “I left for Italy soon after. I wanted to learn the inner workings of the La Cosa Nostra, ‘Ndrangheta, and the Camorra mafia.”

“That’s what you did in Europe? Ingratiate yourself into criminal organizations without being a soldier but just an associate?”

“Yes. I found ways to be indispensable while still retaining autonomy. Did I need to be careful in handling the bosses? Yes. They were full of ego. But I gave them the highest yield for their money.”

“You launder their money. How is that different if the source is drugs or from human trafficking.”

His gaze bore into mine. “It’s complicated, but it’ll make sense.”

Not good enough.

“Ava.” Sensing my urge to pull away, he tightened his grip on my hand. “I need you to trust me for a while longer.”

The earnestness etched on his face settled the turmoil inside me, but I still had to ask, “Why can’t you tell me now?”

“The less you know, the better.”

It was a rollercoaster, this anxiety rising up once more. “Cesar,” I whispered. “I don’t want you to go to jail.”

“It’ll be fine.”

Those were the same words Dad said before he and Charles left for their final job.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

AVA

The first time I'd been at the mansion on Staten Island was when I was twelve. I was fourteen when Mom discovered Dad's subterfuge. By then I'd become close with Paulie and continued to be a guest at their gatherings. The last time I entered the mansion through its grand entrance was the year I turned seventeen, the year Dad and Charles went to prison. Staying away from the De Luccis became a form of self-preservation, of coping with the heartbreak of losing two important men in my life, of lessening my guilt, and repairing my relationship with my mother who was convinced I would end up a gangster.

Over the years Paulie and I stayed in touch, met up for lunch or met up in a club. I attended his engagement party at his uncle's house. But I was never a guest at the mansion again. It was by choice. Paulie invited me plenty of times. I refused. Deep down I felt it represented everything that tore my family apart. Interestingly enough, I'd changed my tune.

Maybe Mom was right. I couldn't separate myself from the lure of dark and dangerous.

Every time I thought Cesar was a typical well-mannered rich dude, Silvio was a reminder of my man's savagery underneath his civilized skin.

As the Maserati roared up the driveway, the garden lights of the estate's manicured lawn illuminated the grandeur of the

De Lucci residence. Once again, I was a guest.

Cesar skillfully maneuvered the powerful vehicle with one hand while his other one held mine, our entwined fingers resting on his lap. Meanwhile I was still getting used to dating a billionaire.

Buying a car seemed to be a spur of the moment thing like making a choice from a dinner menu. That morning, Eric dropped us off at a European car dealership in New Jersey. Cesar was known to the owner who personally attended to us. We test-drove a couple of cars including a Ferrari, but the Maserati was all Cesar. Classic. Rich. Understated power. The kind that wasn't bragged about or loud but would strangle you in its grip when you least expected it.

We spent the remainder of the day in Manhattan. I was hyperventilating when Cesar dragged me into Tiffany. I only calmed down when it was evident we weren't heading to the ring section. My calm didn't last because Cesar wanted to buy me a complete set of jewelry and it took me almost thirty minutes to convince him not to drop two hundred grand on a ring, bracelet, and necklace.

Still, sixteen inches of blazing diamonds adorned my neck.

It was a compromise.

My head was still spinning from the extravagant purchase.

Cesar parked the Maserati beside a Porsche I recognized as Paulie's.

"Who else is here?" I asked.

"A few relatives," he responded.

Dubious of his statement, I jerked my head to the row of expensive sports cars lining the driveway.

He laughed, getting out of the car. "Some of those are Paulie's. He didn't want Carlotta to see. Coming around to get you."

When he helped me out of the Maserati, I said, "Really? I can see that Porsche as his style, but not the others."

“Okay, maybe we have a few more couples in the mix.”

It turned out to be three more couples, so he wasn't exactly lying. They were cousins and their spouses—his Uncle Jackie's children.

“Jackie's running late,” Paulie told his brother. “He said we should start without him.”

“Trouble?”

“He didn't say.” My friend's eyes landed on me. “My brother treating you well?”

Cesar stiffened beside me.

I leaned against Cesar to give him reassurance. “Of course.”

Paulie grinned mischievously. “Because if he isn't, you can be my *goomar*.”

“Fuck off,” Cesar muttered.

His brother burst out laughing. “You're gone for her, aren't you?” His face turned serious. “Pop wants a word in his office.”

“Now?”

“Yes. I reminded him that dinner is in fifteen minutes, but in case he forgets ...” Paulie looked at me again. “Kindly remind him. Cook is a bit miffed because we've been ordering catered dinners, and he's felt useless.”

“Cook is still here?” I asked. Giuseppe “Cook” Franchi had been their chef since I could remember. “I didn't see him last Sunday.”

“He went on strike, but Pop had a chat with him the other day.” Paulie started walking away. “So, chop, chop. Let me check on Carlotta before she pisses him off.”

Cesar gripped my elbow and led me to the other side of the mansion. As many times as I'd visited this place, that part of the house had been off limits. I guessed that was where most of the family businesses were conducted until the mafiosi

became wary of the wire taps. I wondered if they did regular sweeps.

He rapped on the door before opening it without waiting for an answer. A lean man stood by the window looking outside. He turned to us.

I didn't get to see Riccardo De Lucci up close that Sunday, but as Cesar and I walked further into the room, he met us halfway. I was struck by how the passage of time had aged him. He was a far cry from the formidable and robust man I remembered from my teens.

My surprise must have shown on my face.

The older De Lucci came forward, reached out and encompassed both my hands in his. "Look at you. Cillian's daughter. All grown up and so beautiful. I understand why my son is so bewitched." His mouth quirked up in humor. "I, on the other hand, have grown older and frail."

The past eight years had put deep grooves around his eyes and the corners of his mouth. His hair, still thick, had more shocks of gray than black. His face was narrower, more gaunt, and the smile he greeted us with didn't reach his eyes and seemed permanently etched with sadness.

"I hope you'll feel better now that Cesar is home," I blurted.

His hands tightened on mine before dropping away. "Make him stay."

"Paulie's kids keep him busy," Cesar said. "Right, Pop?"

"Ah, yes." He backed up and perched on his desk. "They are what you call lifelines." He sighed. "But my heart is still broken." His gaze went to me. "The De Lucci curse of loving only once skips some of us. It's a curse because we obsess. I have it. Paulie and Lorenzo, bless his soul, seemed to have been spared because they routinely fall in and out of love. But Cesar here ..."

"Pop," the man beside me warned.

His dad chuckled. “Anyway, how is Cillian? I didn’t want to put you on the spot at dinner.”

“You don’t know?” I couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

He gave a long sigh. “You have the right to be mad at me.”

“Initially. Maybe,” I replied. “But my father and brother made their choices. Now, unless you held a gun to their heads and forced them to be your associates, this mess is on them too,” I huffed. “But in response to your question, I haven’t seen Dad in over a year. He’s in the Illinois penitentiary. I do talk to him sometimes on the phone, but it’s been months. If you’re worried he’s going to talk—”

“Cillian and Charles are loyal,” Riccardo cut in. “I’m not worried about them. I know you absolve me—”

“It’s not a matter of absolving.” My conversation with Cesar this morning came back to me. “It’s a matter of what I am willing to accept. Cesar and I laid our cards on the table. He said there was more he had to tell me, but he wasn’t ready.”

“Don’t fuck this up like I did, son,” Riccardo told Cesar.

“Not a fucking chance,” he replied fiercely.

His father regarded me carefully. “De Lucci and McGrath—we have a lawlessness in us that needs to be fed, but the people in our life tempers us. That’s what Teresa did for me. I failed with Lorenzo. Cesar, thank God, is stronger than any of us and is willing to do whatever is right to protect the family.”

Cesar took a step toward his father and put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, no more self-recriminations, remember? It’s bad for your heart.”

His dad muttered, “My heart is permanently broken. It’s hopeless.”

“How about this?” I said. “How about we join the others for dinner before we break Cook’s heart?”

Panic stole the melancholy expression from Riccardo’s face so fast, I almost burst out laughing.

“*Merda*,” Riccardo exclaimed. “You’re right. I can’t afford to piss him off.”

A few minutes later, the three of us entered the grand dining room. The table could seat a dozen couples. Housekeeping staff in uniforms buzzed around the seated guests and refilled their water glasses or brought them their drinks.

One of the couples stood, their faces brightening when they saw Cesar and me.

“Cuz,” one of them exclaimed. “I’m Michael,” he told me. “Jackie’s son. This is Rowena, my wife.” His eyes gleamed with mischief. “I heard you caused trouble for the Rossis.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Cesar growled.

Michael put up his hands. “Nothing. Just something my dad was grumbling about, but he was amused.”

“That’s a beautiful necklace,” Rowena exclaimed. “Tiffany?”

I almost forgot about the pavé diamonds on my neck. I was staring at Rowena’s complete set of earrings, necklace, bangles, and rings. “Yes.” I smiled demurely. Demure wasn’t really a good look on me, but I promised myself I would be on my best behavior.

“Take your seats,” Cook ordered, brusquely cutting by us, followed by a server carrying a silver platter of cold cuts, cheese, and olives. “The soup will be served shortly.”

Riccardo took his place at the head of the table, while Cesar and Paulie were seated facing each other. I was facing Carlotta.

She nodded to me coolly. At least she didn’t ignore me.

Her face lit up when she turned her attention to the appetizer. “I love Cook’s antipasti platter.”

“Oh boy,” Rowena was sitting next to me and mumbled, “The food at the Irish dinner was spectacular.”

“Don’t tell Cook,” I laughed.

As Cook lowered platter after platter of his creations, I had to agree with Carlotta that it was really good.

After finishing the escarole and meatball soup, I told Paulie, “I can’t believe you had to cater out the Italian dinner. No wonder Cook is pissed.”

“What I told him.” His wife rolled her eyes. “You should wait until you taste the Lobster Fra Diavolo.”

One thing I knew about the mafiosi, this pricey crustacean always featured on the menu. It might be a status symbol, but I was sure either they got them for free or at a good price because they controlled the Fulton Fish Market.

“It was for fifty people,” Paulie defended. “I didn’t want him overwhelmed.”

“He can handle it,” Carlotta said. “He handled our engagement party all right.”

Was that why Paulie’s wife was mad at me? Because of Cook? Maybe she wasn’t the Wicked Witch of the West after all.

One dish followed the other.

Arugula Parmesan Salad.

Veal Piccata.

Lobster Fra Diavolo.

I was so engrossed in sampling the food, I didn’t mind that Paulie, Cesar, and his dad were discussing business. “Maybe Tommy and Cook could collaborate on a dinner?” I suggested.

“Maybe your engagement party?” Riccardo said.

A piece of lobster lodged in my throat. I started coughing, wracked with panic that I was about to die by lobster in the middle of dinner with Cesar’s family.

Cesar pounded my back. “I should’ve gotten you a ring from Tiffany instead.”

Swiping the glass of wine in front of me, I downed its contents before casting him a glare. “Not helping.”

“You okay?” he asked, using his finger to catch the wayward tear rolling down my cheek.

“Fine.”

He sighed. “We need to give you that lesson on how not to gulp wine.”

Everyone at the table laughed.

“Mea Culpa, dear.” Riccardo grinned.

Cook stepped into the dining room. “The filet mignon—”

A disheveled Jackie barreled into the room. “Evening,” he muttered and then whispered in Riccardo’s ear whose eyes slowly widened and then narrowed.

“Just now?” Cesar’s father looked at his brother.

“Yes.”

“Sunroom,” Riccardo ordered, looking at Cesar. “You too.”

“Pop,” Paulie said. “Everything all right?”

Jackie looked at Michael. “You too, son.”

“Cook,” Riccardo said. “Serve them the steak. Don’t wait for us for dessert either.”

“Yes, boss.”

CHAPTER

Fifteen

CESAR

“The feds raided Gorksi’s and O’Toole’s,” Jackie announced when we entered the sunroom. “Tony Cap and Ivan got away, but the rest of his crew were arrested.”

“What were the feds looking for?” Michael asked.

All throughout, I maintained a neutral expression, eyes on Jackie as he reported what he knew. “Heroin,” he told his son, then turned to Pop. “I didn’t tell you this, but Tony Cap’s been bragging how he was bringing in the drugs.” He paused. “Frozen fillets.”

“How?” Pop asked.

“Fillets of fish are wrapped around the brick,” my uncle replied then looked at me. “Gorksi stores them. That’s why he has less space for his legitimate products.”

“That’s why he’s short on his deliveries.”

“Yeah. Big shipments coming in.”

“Do we know how the feds found out?” I asked.

“No,” Jackie said. “I think it’s Silvio. The timing of his disappearance is fishy.” Then he snorted in mock derision. “Pardon the pun.”

“This is not good.” Pop started pacing. “That means the feds are handing out indictments and doing another big sweep.

Merda.” My father looked at me. “You should cancel your card game. The one two weeks from now.”

I shrugged. “Whatever you’re comfortable with, Pop.” I glanced at my uncle. “What do you think?”

“Not good to risk it.”

Something else was making me come out of my skin. I hated loose ends. “Do you have any idea where Tony Cap could have gone?”

“I don’t know any of his safe houses. He probably has the Russian with him.”

“Do you think it’s also Silvio?” I asked.

“Maybe. He’s just gone. Like I said, fishy.”

“Don’t accept any communication from Tony. We keep our head down,” Pop snapped. “Look. I know you’re acting boss, Jackie. We need to make it official, but, right now, it’s best not to call attention to ourselves.”

“I agree. They shouldn’t have aligned themselves with the Russians,” my uncle said.

My father’s eyes held Jackie’s a second longer. “You’re straight with me, right? No heroin is being pushed on our garbage routes?”

“Yes. Yes. I told him we wouldn’t do it.” Jackie turned to me. “Ava’s brother ...”

“We’re not involving Ava,” I growled. “With Tony Cap at large, anything could go wrong.”

“Can’t forget about it either,” Jackie challenged. “Her brother is with the U.S. Attorney’s office that okayed the raid.”

“Is she in danger?” I gritted.

“Tony could use her for retaliation.”

“I’ll talk to Giovanni,” Pop said. “As boss of the Rossi Crime family, he can declare the McGraths off limits.” He glanced at me. “They’re family. They’ve always been family.”

“I’m taking Ava home,” I informed them.

“Yeah,” Michael agreed. “Dinner’s over. Nothing like a raid to fuck up the evening.”

I couldn’t agree more. Whenever the feds took action, it wasn’t just one crew or one family. It could be a sweep of the Five Families.

By the time I returned to the house, the guests had migrated to the living room where the widescreen TV was reporting the raid on O’Toole’s.

Popular Irish restaurant closed. Reported mob activity. Several people arrested.

Ava turned huge anxiety-stricken eyes toward me. “Is this what’s going on? Any of you involved?”

I shook my head. “Let’s go.”

“Cesar.”

“It’s not us. Rossis.” I hurried her over to get her coat.

“Then why are we leaving?”

“Because this might be a bigger dragnet,” Paulie chortled.

“Why do you look so happy?” Ava snapped.

“Because the Rossis are assholes,” my brother replied.

“Hey!” Carlotta poked his chest. “My stepmother is a Rossi.”

“And so is my niece,” Ava said. “But they don’t recognize her, so I agree. They’re assholes.”

Carlotta rolled her eyes. “This is such a screwed-up family.”

“Italian gangsters usually are,” I muttered.

Pop, Jackie, and Michael remained in the sunroom, probably strategizing their next move. I was only dragged in because of my card games and my relationship to Ava. Maybe I should have waited for my end game against Tony Cap before pursuing Ava but once we were in the same city, she was difficult not to approach.

“Later, Bro,” Paulie waved as he backed away with his Porsche. I bundled Ava into the Maserati and followed my brother down the driveway and away from the mansion.

This was fucked up. I glanced in my rear-view mirror.

“You’re on edge,” Ava commented. “Are the feds coming for you, too?”

I shot her a brief glance. “Why would they come for me?”

“Because of that other business you didn’t want to tell me about?”

“Don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry?”

“Forget about it,” I said. “I’m more concerned about Tony coming for you because of your brother.”

Ava dragged in a ragged breath, and I muttered a curse, my hand snaking out to grab hers to assure her. “I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s a long shot that he’d come after you.”

“I think so too,” she said softly. “Robert is not even handling mob cases. Just white collar.”

I hated to tell her that the mafia had infiltrated Wall Street. “See? Nothing to worry about.”

But when we arrived at Ava’s brownstone, a cruiser was parked on the street. Two uniforms were patrolling the sidewalk. I double-parked right in front of the building entrance.

“Are you sure you want to park that Maserati on the street?” she asked.

“The car is the least of my concerns right now,” I told her.

“I’m sure those cops are just a precaution. Maybe some form of protocol for the employees at the SDNY.”

“I’m going to drop you off and then park,” I told her.

“Isn’t this going overboard?”

“This thing’s too hot right now. Let’s play it safe, *capisce*? I’ll come get you.”

“Jeez, Cesar, it’s ten feet to my door.”

“I’ll come *get* you,” I repeated.

“Fine.”

I got out of the sports car and rounded the vehicle. Checking the perimeter, my eyes found Eric who signaled to me. That gave me a measure of relief.

Helping Ava out of the car, my arms wrapped around her and I hurried her to the door.

“Hey, you can’t double park,” the cop yelled.

“I’m escorting Miss McGrath to her apartment and then I’ll take care of it.”

“Hurry up.”

We started up the stairs.

“You’re scaring me, Cesar,” she said.

“It’ll be fine,” I insisted.

When we entered her apartment, I quickly checked the rooms and closets, making sure no one was lying in wait. Ava was right. I was just being paranoid, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

“I’m going to park and be right back.”

“Are you sure the Maserati will be fine outside?” she repeated her earlier question.

I thought of Eric. “Yeah.”

Cupping her face, I kissed her. “Lock the door. I have keys.”

She shook her head rolling her eyes as if remembering our conversation this morning.

After the door closed behind me, I hastened down the steps and exited the building. I caught sight of Eric at the end of the block. Getting behind the wheel of the Maserati, I drove to the corner. He got in, and I continued driving.

“What the fuck happened?” I seethed.

“Like we suspected. There’s a leak in the New York task force.” The Organized Crime task force was a joint NYPD operation between the U.S. Justice Department and the Bureau.

“Who?”

“Kennedy.” The FBI agent.

“Has he been arrested?”

“No.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“No one can find him.”

“Think he’s with Tony and Ivan?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s not good enough,” I growled.

Eric angled his eyes at me. “You need to chill. I’ll see if my contact has more.”

“Fuck. All right.” I parked the car at the corner, and we both got out.

There was a thrilled look on Eric’s face as he slid into the driver’s seat. “Man. I wouldn’t mind taking this baby for a spin.”

“Not a scratch on it,” I warned.

He shot me a cocky grin, making me wonder if the sports car would be safer parked on the Brooklyn streets than in his hands.

When I returned to Ava’s apartment, my ears picked up a male voice coming from her bedroom. My blood ran cold. The washing machine was running, so I couldn’t make out the words.

Fuck.

I carefully shut the door and crept into the kitchen where I stashed a .45 in one of the overhead cabinets. People were going to die if Ava got hurt. I was easing along the side of the hallway when she came out of the utility room.

“What the hell, Cesar!” she screeched. “Why do you have a gun?”

Confused, but still on full alert, I grabbed her and shoved her behind me. The voice had faded just as I turned into the room. Relief flooded through me when I’d determined the sound source.

The answering machine. A red light was blinking.

I lowered the gun. “I heard a man’s voice when I came in. I thought you were in trouble.”

“The phone rang, but I was so mad at myself because I forgot to put the laundry in the dryer last night.”

Walking over to the nightstand, I played the message.

“Seriously.” She shoved me aside and planted herself in front of me, blue eyes sparking in annoyance. “We may have a relationship, but we need some boundaries ...” Her rant faded when she recognized the voice coming from the machine. My own hackles rose as I absorbed every fucking word.

“Hey, Ava. Long time, no hear, sweetheart ... It’s Brad. All’s going well with the band, and now that we’ve settled in, I realized something ...”

My molars ground hard.

“I miss you. I fucking miss what we had. I was selfish. I shoulda asked you to come with me. I didn’t want to ruin your education, and that’s why I didn’t.”

Motherfucking piece of shit liar.

“But you should be graduating soon, right? I have a break coming up ... I really want to see you. To talk. Please let me know. I miss you and I still love you.”

The bastard rattled off his number, and it took much restraint not to rip the wire from the wall and shoot the machine to pieces. Ava wasn’t helping my mood either. She stared at the device in complete silence. Meanwhile I clenched my fists, one of them around a gun.

“*Ex-boyfriend?*” I spat.

She turned to look at me and sank to the bed. I couldn't even pretend I wasn't pissed. The day started so well, thinking I was making progress with Ava about who I was, and this was just another fucking problem I had to deal with.

“Yes. Brad.”

“The guy in the boy band,” I sneered.

“Rock band.”

I tucked the gun in my suit. “So he wants a second chance, huh?” I couldn't stand the wariness on her face and stalked out of the bedroom. I needed a drink. I opened the cabinets where I'd stocked my liquor, grabbed a bottle of Glenlivet and poured it into a glass. I tossed it back and let the burn push the fury down my throat.

Fucking Brad.

Sensing Ava behind me, I growled, “So you're giving that fucker another chance?” I turned to face her.

She had her arms wrapped around her biceps, and her eyes were shooting sparks at me. “I wasn't, but now I'm wondering if he's a better option than the jealous asshole who's wielding a gun in my house.”

“It's for your protection.”

“You brought a gun into my apartment without telling me.”

My jaw clenched. Might as well come clean.

“I put it in the upper cabinet.”

“My niece and nephews come in here.”

“You think they'd be checking the cabinet at the far corner?”

“That's not the point, Cesar!”

“No. The point is you should tell your ex to lose your number. You're with me now.”

“Brad and I are friends!”

“You just told me he was a fucking better option. He chose Vegas over you. He chose money over you.”

Her face turned white. Good. She needed a reminder of how that loser packed up and left her at the first sign of more money.

But the accusation and outrage in her eyes seemed directed at me, and that pissed me off even more.

“You’re mad at me?” I sneered. “For telling you like it is?”

“I never told you he went to Vegas,” she whispered.

The whisky threatened to back up my throat. “Fuck.”

She backed away.

I tried to soften my face, but I was still enraged by that sniveling fucker wanting to get back in her pants.

“How long?” she asked. Her eyes were so blue, so wide, and so translucent that I was seeing myself in them the way she was seeing me. A scheming bastard.

“I—”

“Don’t deny it,” she screamed. Her eyes filled with tears. Was she crying over that son of a bitch? Damn her. “You said this morning you had casinos in Vegas. Does one of them happen to be the Pandora Resort?”

My silence confirmed everything, and I tried not to flinch under her condemnation.

“How long did you plan this?”

I slammed down the glass, and she jumped.

“Six months,” I snarled and stalked toward her.

Either she was too stunned to move, or she was challenging me. She didn’t back away and I managed to grab her shoulders. Lowering my head, I enunciated, “And I regret nothing.”

As if waking up from a trance, she crossed her arms and broke my hold. “Don’t touch me!”

“This changes nothing.”

“This changes everything!” She ran to the living room, putting the couch between us. Somehow that made me crazier.

She thought to run from me?

“You’re a psycho.”

“That’s right,” I said. “And I don’t pretend otherwise. You said it this morning.”

“I was joking,” she yelled. “But how, when?”

“Does it matter? The moment I saw your picture, I swore you were going to be mine. You’ve occupied my every single thought. I couldn’t even touch another woman.”

Her expression changed; her eyes became unfocused as if her mind was racing. “What happened six months ago? Why did you have my picture?”

I exhaled an irritated breath. I didn’t want to explain myself because either way I did it, it didn’t make sense except I was obsessed with her. It would only frighten her by listing out what I was willing to do to have her. “I was planning a return to the States to settle. I had my private investigator collect everything surrounding my family. Who had grudges, who had associates. The McGraths naturally came up on our radar.”

“And you happened to see my picture?”

“I think I fell in love with you then.” I hadn’t been planning on saying the words. The words just came naturally.

“Love?” she spat. “Love doesn’t manipulate. Because let’s face it, Cesar. That’s what you did!”

“Because I aim to win. I aimed to win you.” Why couldn’t she see this? “All I did was dangle a lucrative career in front of him.”

“It was a lot of money.”

“It was money well spent if it took him out of your life. And he *is* staying out of your life,” I gritted.

“You have no say in that.”

A red haze fell across my eyes. “No say?” I prowled forward. We were circling the couch like idiots. Impatient, I vaulted over the furniture and snagged her around the waist.

She struggled. “Let me go!”

“Never!” I snarled in her ear. “Not until you accept that what I did was for the best. Think, Ava. Think! I just proved that he wasn’t worthy of you.”

“You didn’t think how that made me feel? That I was so disposable over his career?” She sobbed.

What had I done?

“You ruined my self-esteem.”

I breathed into her neck. “I hope I’m giving that back to you now.”

“All you thought about was you. How you felt! That’s not love! That’s being selfish.”

Turning her around, I kneeled in front of her, needing her to see that she held everything I was at the tip of her fingers.

“I love you, Ava.”

“Your love is ...” she panted. “Your love is ...”

“Is what?” I prompted huskily, staring up at her, my hands slipping under her dress to cup her ass, bringing her closer. I kissed her belly and then lower where I hoped I could find the evidence that she still wanted me. I inhaled and I could smell her. Her arousal. All through our fight, she still wanted me. From one globe of her glorious ass, my hand slipped inside her panties, fingers stroking her slit. Her wetness coated their tips. I was getting rock hard.

“Demented,” she whispered.

A corner of my mouth tipped up. “I love you. I want to fuck you. Remind you you’re mine.”

Slipping a finger inside her, I kissed the fabric that was covering her pussy.

“Cesar,” she moaned. “Sex won’t fix this.”

“What is there to fix?” Without waiting for her reply, I flipped her onto the couch on her back. Her gasp was music to my ears and my erection became steel. I shoved her thighs

apart and wedged my hips. With my arm in between us, I slipped a hand inside the waistband of her panties. Grinding the tip of her pubic bone with the heel of my hand, my fingers stroke her drenched folds. I leaned closer. “The second you let me inside your body you became mine. Permanently.” I inserted two fingers and pumped. Her mouth fell open, her back arching.

Her eyes flashed with need and indecision.

“Tell me you get me, *cara*,” I growled.

“I can’t concentrate when you’re ... oh God!” she cried.

Enthralled with watching her come on my fingers, I was driven to make her addicted to my touch, to need me like I was her next breath, to love me with the same madness that consumed me. Ava McGrath was mine, and I was never letting her go. I’d killed for her. There was nothing I wouldn’t do to keep her.

“Tell me what you need,” I said hoarsely. “Mouth or cock?”

She was shaking her head. “This is so wrong. I can’t.”

“You want me, *cara*.” I stopped bearing down on her pussy. Her hips squirmed beneath me trying to resume contact with my hand. I could smell her desperation. “All you have to do is ask.”

Her eyes flashed open. “Damn you.”

“Cock or mouth?”

She sank her teeth to her bottom lip. I wanted to kiss that damned mouth, but there was only one way to remind her that I was it for her.

Fuck her senseless with my tongue, and then own her with my cock.

“Both,” she whispered.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Just fuck me, damn you!” she snapped.

I tore her panties off, and my mouth was on her. I was feral. The more she babbled my name incoherently, the more I attacked her with my tongue, consuming every last drop that fell on it. It wasn't until I heard her scream my name and the gush of her arousal drenched my mouth, that I eased back. But I was only getting started.

I was going to fuck her hard, fuck her so deep, that my mark would be imprinted in every part of her. Her body, her heart, her fucking soul. Dragging her to the floor, I opened her wide, shoving her right leg up so her knee was bent close to her ear.

I drove inside her, stretched her with my girth, sinking all the way to the hilt in a single thrust. My mouth slammed on her lips and swallowed her cry. I was barely holding on to my control, feral possessiveness leaked from my pores.

Mine!

“Mine.” Tearing my lips away, I stared down at her. “It drives me crazy when I think of another man’s touch on you. I need to erase that.” I pounded her fast and hard, reveling when she clung to me. The base of my spine tingled with my impending release, then it exploded up my back so that it sent me driving in one last time. I planted deep. My neck tensed. And I grunted my release. It wasn't until she grew slippery around me, a warm slickness coating my cock, that I realized I hadn't worn a condom.

But my brain didn't panic. Instead, an overwhelming sense of ownership roared through me. I collapsed on top of her. I didn't withdraw. I even pushed deeper if that was possible.

“Cesar... oh my God!”

She tried to push my weight away, but I refused. She felt too good, and I was still reeling from the satisfaction of coming inside her. I continued to rock inside her. An instinct of wanting my cum to stay embedded and take root and have consequences. To distract her, I reached down between us and strummed her clit and her inner muscles clenched and milked me some more. Her moans were a fuel to my lust.

Finally, I propped up on my elbows and her accusing eyes didn't even make me flinch.

I felt no guilt. Not when it came to making her mine.

“You didn't wear a condom.”

I lifted my head, eyes narrowed. “I'm clean. You're on the pill, right? I've seen you take them.” And I wanted to throw them away, but I hadn't become that depraved yet.

“Yes! Unprotected sex is something to be discussed.”

I sighed, pulling out, and helped her up. I smirked when I saw the evidence of my possession trail down her legs.

She punched me on the shoulder. “You think this is funny?”

Claiming her bare tamed all the aggression inside me. “Ava,” I grumbled. “Can we discuss this tomorrow?”

I sank into the couch and dragged her across my lap.

“Ugh, I've got your semen all over me. I'm going to mess up your trousers. They look expensive.”

“Fuck my pants,” I growled. “This has been a long goddamned day. Can we go to bed?”

“And we're going to shove this ... this stalking, this bribery, this Machiavellian scheme that you perpetuated in the drawer?”

Hugging her close, I murmured. “There's no escaping me. You know that.”

“I should be calling the police on you.”

I swallowed a smile. “Tomorrow. I promise, I'll answer your questions.”

“You said that this morning.”

“Just a little bit more time, Ava. I don't want to put other people in danger.” I was serious about that last statement.

She must have sensed the earnestness in my plea.

“Okay. But I don't think I want to sleep beside you.”

She was grasping at some form of resistance.

I stood and carried her, marching to the bedroom and straight into the bathroom, settling her on the counter. I ran a towel under warm water and then proceeded to clean her legs. Not too much though.

“You missed a spot,” she said, but there was an amused glint in her eyes.

“I want you to wear my cum when you go to sleep tonight.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re such a caveman.”

Tossing the towel into the sink, I captured her chin. “And you’re my woman. Brad is history. I’m erasing that message. You’re not going to speak to him again. *Capisce?*”

“I have the right to be outraged with what you’ve done,” she retorted.

“I have a solution for that.” Snatching her from the counter, I walked back to the bedroom and dropped her on the mattress. I immediately deleted the message, then I proceeded to undress her.

Afterward, I started taking off my clothes.

“Maybe you should sleep in the other room. I think I might accidentally kick you off the bed.”

That sass. Made me only want to prove her wrong.

Her need for independence was dictating this. I peeled off my shirt.

The heat in her eyes couldn’t be disguised. “This is so unfair,” she muttered.

I unbuttoned my jeans and shoved them off. My erection hadn’t fully gone down yet. Just as well.

Completely naked, I crawled into bed with her.

“I need to brush,” she announced. “And wash this makeup off me.”

“Later,” I mumbled, dragging her into my arms and burying my face into her hair. “I need to hold you.”

“We’re going to fall asleep, and I’m going to wake up—”

“Quiet.”

“Dammit, Cesar.”

“Maybe I should wear you out some more.”

“I’m still wearing your cum on my coochie.”

Smiling into her hair, I didn’t say anything. Just gave her a squeeze.

Her chest expanded and deflated in another sigh, but she finally grew silent. I wasn’t sure who fell asleep first. All I knew was tomorrow ... tomorrow I would tell her everything.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

AVA

I woke up to my mouth dry like cotton and my eyes scratchy as hell. Flipping on my back, I noticed the space beside me was empty. I thought I dreamed Cesar kissing me on the forehead and telling me he'd be right back.

Rolling further to the side of the bed, I squinted at the bedside clock. It was six-thirty on a Saturday. My eyes moved to the floor where I was certain he stripped our clothes and dumped them in a pile. As an afterthought, that was unlikely since that was not in his nature.

I found them folded neatly on the armchair in my room.

The events of last night came crashing back.

The revelations.

The outrage.

The high that followed.

He said he loved me with a desperation that made my heart yearn to say it back. But I was so overwhelmed in processing everything, I didn't get a chance. Now, I wanted to shout it out to the rafters.

A silly smile formed on my lips. I rolled to face the empty side of the bed again and grabbed his pillow and hugged it to me, burying my nose and inhaling his scent I couldn't get enough of.

I wasn't frightened of Cesar's obsession.

He'd stalked me for six months. I wasn't imagining the feeling of being followed. I wouldn't be surprised if he engineered the way I ended up catering the dinner at his house so our paths would finally cross.

My only worry was the raid. Was there more to it that he wasn't telling me? Was there a possibility of him getting thrown in prison?

I forced myself to get out of bed. I stared down my front and grimaced. My freaking caveman. I washed my face and brushed my teeth before stepping into the shower, praying for more clarity.

I blamed Cesar for my self-esteem issues, but a clearer picture was forming in my head. I didn't even try to change Brad's mind. I even encouraged him to take the job. It wasn't only the guilt of a missed opportunity that was hanging over my head, it was because if Brad had stayed, that would mean a deeper commitment.

I wasn't ready for that at all.

But with Cesar everything was different. I'd never fought against my feelings for someone this hard because somehow I knew the hurt I'd experienced with Brad would be a blip compared to the carnage of a breakup with Cesar. My sexy Italian consumed me. Something in his madness answered a longing in my soul. The man was intense, psycho-level intense. It should be wrong. The signs that he was a controlling asshole was all there, like his insistence on dropping me off and picking me up from school. Even that first time when he stood outside my window staring up at my apartment, I wasn't creeped out.

I craved his utter possession.

By the time I dried my hair and dressed in a pair of velour sweatpants, a giddiness took over with how much I wanted to tell Cesar I loved him. In the kitchen, I found his note posted on the coffee machine, saying he'd be back to take me out for breakfast. He didn't specify the time, and I exhaled an

annoyed breath because I was anxious to take our relationship to the next level.

My lips twitched. Saying “I love you” to each other was definitely the next level.

Turning on the television, I searched for news on the raid the day before. Maybe it would shed light on my boyfriend’s activities.

But there was nothing. Just another drug bust in the Bronx.

My phone rang.

“You awake?” It was my brother Robert.

“I am now,” I answered shortly.

“I’ll be right up.”

“Wait—”

He hung up.

I was not in the mood for company. There was too much going on in my mind and in my heart to let anything else inside. I had only enough space for Cesar.

Apparently my brother couldn’t wait at all. A series of quick raps indicated an urgency. Cesar’s invitation to move in with him was getting more and more appealing.

The second I opened the door, my brother barreled in.

“Good morning to you too,” I said dryly.

“Where’s De Lucci?”

“He’ll be back for breakfast, but he didn’t specify when.”

Robert started pacing the length of the living room with a brown envelope clutched in his hand. The trepidation in my gut increased.

“Coffee?” I probably shouldn’t offer him any more caffeine. He was agitated, mumbling curses, and I believe I heard “Italian bastard” in his litany of grievances.

“Great job on the raid yesterday,” I ventured.

He glared at me. “Not my case.”

“What do you have there?” I forced myself to ask because my instinct of self-preservation was telling me to choose ignorance.

“I want to skin that bastard alive.”

“Cesar?”

“Yes.”

“What did he ever do to you?” I asked warily.

“Not me.” The expression on his face morphed from anger to sympathy and my apartment suddenly turned chillier.

“You said he’s not your case,” I whispered, my mouth suddenly dry. “What’s that?”

He clasped my shoulders. “How serious are you about this guy? I mean. You just met him what, two weeks ago?”

“What’s going on Robert?” My voice came out shrill.

He blew out a breath. “The feds who were working on the heroin case were also keeping eyes on the De Luccis, including Cesar. They know he’s dating you.”

“Okay ...what’s in that envelope?” If they didn’t arrest Cesar the night before, would that mean they have him on a different charge? Was he making a deal? Was that where he was right now?

Exhaling another breath, my brother handed me the item in his possession. “Those are dated. One could say they were faked. But what if they weren’t?”

I extracted photographs from the envelope, and my breath hitched. The first one was Cesar going into a strip club.

“Is this one of his businesses?”

“No. That strip club belongs to Roxanne Romero. I’m not sure if that’s her real name.”

A cry escaped my lips when I saw the last two pictures. A redhead greeting Cesar in an intimate way. And in the last one, the same woman held his hand and led him into a room.

I checked the timestamp. It was three nights ago. One of those nights he dropped me off at the pub and returned later.

The coffee roiled in my stomach and my pulse thundered in my ears. "I think I'm going to be sick."

I shoved the photographs back at him and rushed to the hallway bathroom. I hadn't eaten anything, and I puked coffee until I ended up dry heaving. My vision blurred as tears rolled down my cheeks. Whether it was because of my heart shattering into a million pieces or me throwing up, I wasn't sure. But I was certain of one thing. My feelings for Cesar were real. There was no doubt I'd fallen in love with that bastard. Because why else did my insides feel so shredded, so gutted with eviscerating pain.

My mind raced. He fucked me last night without a condom!

All the while seeing someone else? He was depraved and he was possessive, but he never guaranteed I was the only one, did he?

A hand rubbed my back.

"I'm so sorry to spring it on you like this, Ava," Robert growled. "If he were here right now, I'd strangle him with my bare hands."

"How could he do this to me?" I sobbed.

My brother scooped me into his arms. Suddenly I was fifteen again and crying into Robbie's chest over a boy. We sat on the floor of my bathroom for a while. My brothers and I may butt head over things, but if I was hurting, they'd always been my rocks. My heartbreak echoed all around us. He let me cry without saying a word until I was exhausted.

Exhausted and furious.

I pushed away and stared at Robbie. "Sometimes he had meetings at six-thirty in the morning. You think he's there right now?"

My brother looked at me, reading my mind. "I don't think it's a good idea."

“Robbie,” my voice cracked. “I need to know if he’s with her right now.”

He tried to talk me down from charging into a New Jersey strip club. He suggested waiting for Cesar to come back to slap the pictures in his face. But I couldn’t remain passive about this. Somehow I knew that bastard was going to spin this to his advantage and make me look like I was the one who’d lost my mind. I had to catch him in the act even if it wrecked me. He’d grown up in a culture where having a wife and a *goomar*—a mistress—were expected.

Well, that son of a bitch was about to get a dose of the McGrath wrath.

It took me ten minutes to get ready. Robert drove because I was too distraught. As the sign for StarLite Lounge appeared, I realized I didn’t have a game plan. I didn’t even know what I expected to see or wanted to see. A part of me wanted to see Cesar’s Maserati so this complicated relationship could be over, but my foolish heart wished it wasn’t there. That there was an explanation. That this was all a big misunderstanding.

This was no big misunderstanding.

The Maserati was parked a few spots beside the entrance. The Maserati that I helped him pick out yesterday. If it was possible for my shattered heart to break all over again, it did. Did he let that Roxanne woman ride in it too? Cesar didn’t fuck me this morning like he usually did. Was he reserving his lust for *her*? Did she have his heart?

“That’s his car,” I whispered. “The Maserati.”

“Son of a bitch,” Robert growled.

I had so many questions, my head spun. My jaw hurt from clenching it too hard. My hands were clasped so tightly, my fingers became bloodless and cold. But that was the only way I could deal with the sharp pain in my chest, to keep my tears at bay and retain my composure. I had cried enough on the bathroom floor. I didn’t want to shed another tear over him.

StarLite Lounge was a twenty-four-hour strip joint with open parking space surrounding the establishment. Our car

coasted easily into its lot from the main road. Robert slowed the vehicle behind Cesar's sports car and glanced at me. "You sure?"

"Yes. Let's just get this over and done with."

My brother pulled into an empty slot directly behind Cesar's car. He hadn't fully stopped when I was shoving out of the vehicle.

"Dammit, Ava. Wait."

A black SUV parked horizontally behind our car, locking us in. Eric got out and around toward me. "Ava."

"Is he in there?" I demanded.

"It's not what you think."

"What the hell am I supposed to think?"

"Wait for him."

"You called him? You warned him I was coming? Afraid that I'll catch him getting his dick sucked?"

Eric winced, but that was enough to set me off, and I charged into the strip club, leaving the guys cursing behind me.

I must have made an entrance because the men sitting around the stage glanced at me curiously. My eyes swept around the room. There were smaller stages for exclusive lap dances. And then I saw him.

He was briskly striding down a hallway with a redhead that wasn't dressed for stripping, but it was obvious they came from private rooms at the end of the hall.

Cesar's face was grim. Angry even.

I stood transfixed as if the lights of a freight train had blinded me and I was waiting for the pain to flatten me.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he roared, grabbing my arm to lead me back outside.

With superhuman effort, I yanked free of his hold and, before I could stop myself, I punched him in the face.

“Fuck,” he growled.

Shaking my hand, I was still vibrating with rage. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

“And you!” I stabbed my finger at the redhead. “Did you know he was sleeping with me too? Huh?”

The redhead smirked. “Of course.”

“Shut up, Roxy!” Cesar snapped. But by then, Robert lunged at him. However, Cesar, with amazing skill, managed to block the blow coming at him. Given my brother was a boxer, that was quite impressive. Robert kept punching, and I realized Cesar wasn’t even fighting back, just blocking the blows, but frustration marked his face.

“Stop it!” I yelled. Eric finally waded in and pulled my brother away.

“*Cara ...*” Cesar took a step toward me.

“Get away from her, asshole,” Robert shouted.

“We’re over, you cheating bastard. Get your things out of my apartment and leave my fucking keys behind.”

I spun away and hurried out the door, but Cesar caught up with me again.

“Leave me alone,” I cried, but he had engulfed me in his arms.

“Never,” he swore. “You’re mine.”

I laughed like crazy. We stumbled outside with me still trying to get away from him. “Get back to your ... your ... I don’t even know what to call her.”

“I’ll explain ...”

I managed to break free again and kicked out, not knowing where my foot landed.

Cesar grunted.

Scrambling in the direction where Robert was parked, I realized I couldn’t leave without my brother and he was still blocked in by Eric’s SUV.

I looked over my shoulder, seeing Cesar limping after me, but then my blood turned to ice as a suspicious black vehicle rolled slowly behind him.

A barrel of a gun slid out the window.

What I did next could be called idiotic.

I ran back to him. "Watch out!"

He glanced over his shoulder; his body already coiled for action. "Get down!" he roared.

"Motherfucker!"

A cracking sound ripped the air.

Time slowed.

A force slammed into me, and my body jolted in pain as we hit concrete. Breath left my lungs as gunfire and shouting erupted around us.

Cesar was shouting at Eric, his body eased off mine, and I realized he was returning fire.

The parking lot swarmed with men in black.

But I was struggling, my vision dimming.

A loud screech of a vehicle sounded in my ear.

Pain throbbed in my abdomen. Oh my God, it burned.

"Ava?" Cesar's horrified gaze hovered above me. His gaze dropped and then returned to my face. "You've been shot!"



Cesar

Ava's right hook stunned me. Not with pain. One could even say delight. Fuck, I was definitely wrong in the head, but she was not escaping me. I tore after her retreating form and caught up with her outside the strip club.

I grabbed her arm, spinning her around. “Let me explain ...”

An unholy pain winged my groin, but I had no time to check the damage. If she’d injured me enough that I couldn’t have children, I sure as fuck wasn’t going it alone. She wasn’t having another man’s child. Mine or nothing. End of story.

She spun around, fury written all over her face, but when her eyes looked over my shoulder, the terror in them sent icicles through my veins. “Watch out!”

I jerked my head to the left and saw a flash of black. An instinct to protect had me surging forward to be her shield. “Get down.”

We crashed to the ground, gun already in my hand, levering above her and twisting to shoot.

Eric dashed out of the strip club shooting at the car. The black sedan burned rubber.

Men in FBI flak jackets swept in front of me and Ava and started yelling at the vehicle occupants to stop.

It screeched and rammed into parked cars.

“Ava.” I leaned over her, fear choking me. Her eyes were an ocean of confusion.

A red map spread rapidly across her lower abdomen.

“You’ve been shot!”

Her eyes rolled back and closed.

“Stay awake, *cara*.” My fingers trembled as they checked her breathing and pulse. “Eric!” I shouted. “Call 911.” Should I move her? How hard did we hit the ground?

“Already did. On their way.”

“That’s my sister,” someone shouted. “Let me the fuck through.”

So much blood. I focused on Ava, lifting her shirt to check the wound. “Hold on ...”

“Drop your weapon!”

Fuck. I gritted my teeth and lowered my gun to the ground
“I’m with—”

Hands hauled me to my feet and somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered the script. Frustration gnashed inside me. “I can’t leave her,” I snapped to the person arresting me.

My brain couldn’t communicate the plan to my muscles. Every instinct bellowed not to be separated from my woman. The blood in my head blocked every sound except the roar in my ears. When the pandemonium of the parking lot returned, I was face-down across the hood of a car, my eyes still riveted on Ava’s unmoving body.

“I can’t leave her.” My anguish ripped the air while rage vibrated through every cell in my body.

“Stop fighting, Mr. De Lucci,” one of the feds rasped in my ear. “If you want this to go easier—cooperate, dammit.”

A coppery taste saturated my tongue. My molars ground together because of my inability to get to her. Handcuffs snapped behind me, and I was led out between parked vehicles.

Eric was in handcuffs as well.

They finally allowed Robert through, and he leaned over his sister, but when he saw me, the hatred on his face made me flinch.

“I’m gonna kill you, fucker,” he shouted, but he didn’t leave Ava’s side.

“Stay with her,” I said. “Tell her—”

“You’re out of my sister’s life, you son of a bitch.” He staggered to his feet and jabbed a finger in my direction. “We’re throwing the book at you. You’re rotting in jail, motherfucker.”

“Come on, De Lucci.” The fed who snapped the cuffs on me led me briskly to the waiting police cruiser, making a fanfare of loading me inside it. Eric was put into a separate vehicle.

This fucking show had gone on long enough. It was time to end this.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

CESAR

A man in a suit and glasses walked into the room. His gaze landed on me and then at the wrecked chair by the wall—a victim of my frustration. The man was Trent Beckett, the lead prosecutor of SDNY.

He sighed and glanced at Eric—a federal agent and my partner in this op to contain the Five Families of New York. “Does De Lucci need some anger management classes?”

“Fuck you, Beckett,” I growled. “Cut me loose. It’s been four goddamned hours.”

“You already got word that Miss McGrath is fine and has been discharged, right? I made sure my people kept you updated.”

“And I appreciate it ... except I need to see her with my own eyes.” Ava had a flesh wound, but she had a mild concussion from when I tackled her to the ground. The bullet passed through my side and hit her. I didn’t realize I was bleeding because I was wearing my suit jacket and adrenaline had numbed the sting.

“Soon. I just have a few documents for you to sign. You’ve become our most valuable asset, De Lucci.”

“This is a *partnership*,” I reminded him. I trusted Beckett more than anyone else in SDNY, but there was nothing like spelling things out before I signed anything, so I reminded him

some more. “I do not work for you but with you. I want to avoid a bloodbath. I’ve seen it happen in Italy, and we’ve seen it here. I don’t want to lose what family and friends I have left. I don’t want to see businesses get shuttered because this power struggle among the mafia ranks is getting out of hand. There’s no stopping organized crime. There’ll always be someone willing to take over.”

“We already know that. We’ve been playing catch up since the indictment of the Five Families in the eighties.”

“I can only offer to help control them.”

“I like your other term better, Cesar,” Eric said. “Pest control.”

In spite of the impatience simmering inside me, I had to smirk at the term. Tony Cap was on life support and not expected to survive. The SDNY was throwing the book at his Russian friend as well.

“The U.S. Attorney General is offering a fair partnership. We do realize there’s a need to operate illegal businesses in order to be a credible associate to the mafia, but we couldn’t allow it to go without oversight.”

My mouth tightened. “I hope you’re not suggesting the government gets a cut.”

Beckett’s brows furrowed. “That’s a ridiculous assumption. I’m actually offended.”

I glanced at Eric who was controlling a grin and shaking his head. “Just want all bases covered.”

The prosecutor shrugged. “Make sense.

“And Roxy is done,” I told him. “You’re letting her go.”

“Her new identity is waiting for her.”

“Good. She’s selling the strip club to an associate of the New Jersey crime family.”

“Sure you’ll have no problem with the Mafia Commission on this?”

“No. One of my subsidiaries is handling the sale. All are on board.” I wasn’t about to say my father and Jackie confirmed this to me. The Commission did meet to approve the deal. New Jersey was going to kick over thirty percent of their profits to the Rossis. None of the mafia know that Roxy was about to disappear. “Are we done here?”

He pushed a folder toward me. “Just need your signature.”



Ava

“It’s been three days, Ava. The poor man has been on our doorstep from sunup to sundown.”

I glared at Mom. “Call the cops.”

“We’ve reported Cesar six times in the last seventy-two hours. Even the police feel sorry for him now.”

“I thought you hated him.” I was laid out on the couch in my mother’s house across the street from my apartment. I wasn’t allowed to watch TV or read or do anything really because of my concussion. Mom was a tyrant about it, too, which was why I was bored out of my mind.

She sat beside me and massaged my feet which I had tucked underneath a blanket. “Oh, I was furious at first. All of us were. But Robert’s boss pulled him aside yesterday and asked that we give Cesar a chance to explain. Whatever Mr. Beckett told your brother certainly changed his mind.”

“Why can’t Robbie just tell me?” I huffed in a shaky breath. What happened at the strip club was the lowest of low. I was appalled at how willing I was to risk my life for that cheating bastard. I’d been hanging on to my lapse of stupidity as a form of self-preservation because the scaffolding holding my broken heart together was threatening to buckle. But it was damaged beyond repair. I would forgive almost anything, but

not cheating. And yet despite it all, I still loved him. Heaven help me, I did.

From the first floor, we heard the door open and close. Unlike our brownstone, the entrance to this one was on the ground level where there was a sitting room, a dining room, and a kitchen. The second floor had three bedrooms and the family room which had been my hideaway for the past three days.

I tensed. Like me, Mads and my brothers had the keys to Mom's house as we frequently ran errands for one another. But it was the middle of the day, my brothers should be at work and my sister-in-law wasn't the best defense against Cesar.

"Mads, is that you?" Mom asked.

"It's Robert." Two sets of footfalls plodded up the stairs.

"Who's with him?" I whispered.

Mom walked toward the landing and peeked over the half wall that served as a divider between the staircase and the rest of the second floor. Her shoulders rose and fell, before she turned and gave me a look.

My brain didn't have time to process her body language before Robert appeared. Right behind him was Cesar, so achingly handsome, it hurt to look at him especially while I was laying bitter and battered on the couch.

"Why is he here?" I flashed accusing eyes at Robert. "Since when do your sister's wishes come after those of a man you swore you'd murder before letting him near me again."

"Hear him out," my brother told me.

Transferring my displeasure to Cesar who was approaching me like I was a wounded animal, I said, "The doctor told me no stress and you're stressing me out."

"I'm here to relieve it," he informed me.

"A magic penis is not going to fix this."

Cesar's mouth twitched.

He thought I was being funny?

My brother gave a strangled groan. Good. Served him right for betraying his only sister.

“Do you drink tea, Mr. De Lucci?”

My ex-lover held my eyes for a second longer before he turned to my mother. “Call me, Cesar, please. And tea would be great.”

“I’ll help you,” Robert muttered to Mom.

Oh, they were abandoning me? Cowards. But I wasn’t showing this bastard that I couldn’t handle him without my family.

He took another step forward. “How are you?”

“Fine. No thanks to you.”

A distraught look momentarily crossed his face, but it quickly disappeared. In the three weeks that I had been around Cesar, I noticed he didn’t like showing vulnerabilities. “It wasn’t safe around me.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“That’s why I left you at the apartment,” he growled, closing the distance between us and sitting at the edge of the couch Mom had occupied earlier. “You shouldn’t have followed me.”

“Oh, and I was supposed to ignore the fact that you are a two-timing jerk?”

He stared right into my eyes. “I never cheated on you.”

“Really? I suppose the times you disappeared down the hallway with that Roxy woman you were what? Playing patty cakes? Maybe that’s your kink?”

His hands, which were on his lap, curled into fists.

“Just ... say your piece and get out of here.” *Get out. Get out. Before I break down and cry you cheating bastard.*

“Not without you.”

The tenuous hold I had on my broken pieces collapsed under the weight of my pain. “What the hell do you want from

me?” My tearful demand reverberated in my skull. “Dammit.”

He swept to my side, kneeling in front of me, grasping my hands, his eyes wild and fierce. “Are you all right?”

“It hurts to yell.”

“Then maybe you should stop being mad at me.”

I powered through the throbbing in my brain and glared at him.

“I never cheated on you,” he repeated. “Roxy is an informant for the feds.”

My mind did a cartwheel even as my stupid heart started to hope. “Wh-what?”

“I’m helping the Justice Department. The StarLite Lounge is a high-end strip club that caters to an elite clientele. There are rooms that allow privacy and a secret entrance where high profile guests like politicians could enter without being seen.”

He answered the question in my eyes. “I knew I was already being followed. I didn’t want to add to any suspicion that my intent in the club was anything else.”

“How is Roxy involved?”

“She owns the club and she’s been feeding valuable information to the feds regarding organized crime in the Tri-state areas. They installed a direct and secure computer access to the SDNY so she could forward any wiretap instantly. Mafiosi love to party and they loved hiring Roxy’s girls.”

“Is the SDNY blackmailing her to do this?”

“No.” Regret etched Cesar’s face. “She was Lorenzo’s mistress.”

My lips parted. I didn’t know what to say.

“She was deeply in love with my brother even when he was engaged to Sofia Rossi.”

I knew this story. Charles and Sofia happened after Lorenzo died, that was why it was a non-issue with the De Luccis.

“Roxy was devoted to my brother even when she knew he didn’t consider her fit for marriage. After he died, she wanted vengeance on the life that destroyed him.” Sensing my opinion about his cheating starting to change, he got up from the floor and sat beside me. “She had dirt on almost all the high-ranking mafiosi. She wanted to take them down. But her luck is running out, and Tony Cap is getting suspicious of her. She wanted someone to carry on the work.”

“You.”

“Yes. The feds were aware of my work in Italy.”

“Wait. Are you talking about the former boss of the Cosa Nostra—Sal Ribisi?”

His jaw tightened, eyes losing focus as if remembering a distant memory. “I had covert connections to Italy’s judicial system. One of my closest friends was a prominent judge that had declared war on the Cosa Nostra.”

“The judge who died in a car bomb three years ago?” That was big news in *The New York Times*.

“Yes. My intel didn’t reach his security in time.”

“Oh, Cesar. You felt responsible.”

He nodded briefly. “And I have insider information that Tony Cap sent his explosives expert to aid the Cosa Nostra.”

“So, you got Ribisi and Tony Cap.”

He smiled grimly. “More will come.”

“So, what exactly are you telling me?”

“First, I never cheated on you.” His right hand reached out and his fingers brushed away the tears I didn’t know had fallen down my cheeks.

I smiled briefly. “I think I got that now.”

“Second, I’ll be staying in New York, but I can’t promise all my businesses will be legitimate.”

I glanced toward the staircase. “Are you sure—”

“They’re already listening.” Cesar smiled.

“Told you.” I heard Robert mumble followed by a rattling of porcelain against silver.

Cesar and I shared a chuckle. The vise around my skull seemed to have eased and so did the pressure in my chest. Not exactly the magic-penis effect but eliminating the mind fuck that polluted my thoughts and heart was an overwhelming balm to my soul.

Mom and Robert appeared, carrying a tray for tea and assorted snacks.

“So that’s what Beckett was alluding to? We’ve got some assets in the mob?”

“Partners,” Cesar answered, but we continued to gaze into each other’s eyes. Exchanging a knowing smile. Unspoken thoughts. Unspoken feelings.

“Hmm, are we intruding here?” Mom teased.

I looked her way and grinned. “Well ...”

Cesar leaned in. “And third, you’re coming home with me tonight.”



When Cesar meant home, it was his six-story, nine-thousand square-foot row house on Tenth Street in the Gold Coast area of Greenwich Village. It was only an eight-minute walk to NYU and the Washington Mews. Fifth and Second were on either end of the block.

The entrance led straight into a kitchen that was meant for entertaining and raising a family. One end of it led to a dining room showcasing the biggest dining table I’d ever seen while the other end led to an eat-in-kitchen.

Thank God there was an elevator to use for a quick tour.

“Do you like it?” Cesar asked when we had settled on the second level called the parlor floor. A butler’s pantry separated the library from the living room which opened to a balcony overlooking Tenth Street. A grand piano and a vintage

turntable stood on opposite ends. I wasn't new to luxury houses in Manhattan having been in one as a friend's guest or a server for a catering job, but I'd never envisioned myself living in one. This airy space with its thirteen-foot ceilings and intricate crown moldings immediately relaxed me after having spent three days in the toxic prison of my mind. It was like floating from a nightmare into a dream. I pinched myself. I never envisioned having a billionaire for a boyfriend.

“Ava, are you okay? Is your head hurting?”

I was sitting up, legs fully stretched across the comfiest cream leather couch with a soft blanket that smelled new. Cesar's concerned face came directly into view when he sat beside me. Admittedly, I still held an annoyance toward him because he didn't look like a man who'd camped out in front of Mom's brownstone for three days. His damned suit was still wrinkle-free, and he had a healthy tanned color, not exactly the look of a man wasting away from his attempts to win back the object of his undying love. However, it must have been the lighting in Mom's house because I could see the redness in his eyes and the smudges underneath them.

“No. I just can't believe how beautiful this place is. The attention to detail.”

Cesar tipped his chin to the heavy tome on the coffee table. “It's in that Manhattan architecture book. It was built in 1901. But don't look at it now. Bad for your concussion.” He sat beside me. “Sure you're okay?”

“Physically, I'm fine,” I raised a brow. “But we have things to discuss.”

He shrugged. “Ask away.”

“This isn't about your deal with the Attorney General's office.” He'd explained more of his partnership with the SDNY on our way to Greenwich Village. “But we do have unfinished business to discuss.”

His eyes turned wary. “I'm not sure ...”

“The night before the strip club shootout? We had our biggest fight.”

His face darkened. “I thought we agreed we wouldn’t mention that fucker again.”

“No, we agreed we were going to discuss what you did the following day, except miraculously, you had one of your six-thirty appointments.”

“That wasn’t premeditated. Tony Cap and Ivan were at large, and Roxy was concerned.”

“That’s okay. I’m not saying you planned this and I’m not saying you were delaying it hoping I’d forget it. Obviously, Roxy was important and, no, that’s not me being passive aggressive. All I’m saying is we still need to talk about Brad.”

“How about we don’t?” Cesar snapped to his feet and started pacing in front of the coffee table. “What else is there to discuss about him anyway?”

I sighed. Maybe I was just trying to rile him up to avoid what was really bothering me. “Remember when I said my self-esteem took a hit because of what you did?”

He stopped pacing and glanced at me with a face etched in remorse. “I hate myself that I did that to you, but I still don’t regret getting him out of your life.” He threw up his hand. “I don’t know. I saw strength in you. I wasn’t thinking of its effect, just that I wanted him gone.” He rambled some more and started pacing again. “But you’re right. I was selfish. I was blinded by my obsession. And ... fuck, Ava.” He returned to my side and sat beside me again. “I don’t know if I should apologize for something I don’t regret.” He grabbed my hands in his. “Because you deserved better.”

“And you’re saying you’re the best man for me?”

“Damned straight, that’s what I’m saying.”

The arrogance. An imp took hold inside for me. There was a lesson to be learned by one Cesar De Lucci. “You’re right about my strength. My self-esteem took a hit, but I promised myself I wouldn’t be put in that position again.” I extracted my hands from his, which he reluctantly relinquished, drummed two fingers on my lips as if in deep contemplation.

Cesar's brows drew together over his narrowed eyes. "What do you mean?"

"How can I trust what's between us, Cesar?" I asked. When the question passed my lips, I was surprised how sensible it sounded, given it hinged on what happened between Brad and me. "How can I trust that what you're currently feeling for me—now that you've experienced it—you won't look for it elsewhere once the newness of it fades? What if another woman affects you the same way I did in the beginning?"

"I'm trying very hard not to lose my temper, *cara*," he spoke between clenched teeth. "What you're saying is nonsense, and I very much want to throttle you."

I shrugged. "You should absolutely try and control your temper. I have a concussion. I shouldn't be stressed."

His eyes slitted further. "You're playing me."

"Why would I do that?"

"To get back at me about Brad—fuck, now you made me say his name."

"Are you saying I'm vindictive?"

"Vindictive, no. But woe is the man who underestimates you." Suddenly, he smiled, and in my concussed brain, it appeared devious. He snapped his fingers. "But I have a perfect solution to our problem."

Yep, I didn't trust that smile, and there was a sense of foreboding that I had walked into a trap. But, still, my competitive streak won out. "Oh, I wanna hear this."

"We get married."

My mouth gaped.

He released my hand, clasped my face and planted a possessive and forceful kiss on my open mouth. Then he jumped up again and disappeared into the butler's pantry. He leaned back behind the partition and said, "This calls for a celebration, but you can't have alcohol. So, Coke?"

“Cesar!”

He grinned at me and continued pouring our drinks.

When he walked back into the room with a glass of amber liquid and a slim glass of cola for me complete with cocktail straw, I was ready for battle. For good measure, I grabbed the soda because my mouth had turned dry, and I foresaw a long discussion.

Recovering from my shock and suitably hydrated with caffeine and sugar, I yelled, “We are not getting married!”

“Marriage in my family is forever,” he informed me, taking his seat beside me once more. His right hand rested on my hip, giving it a squeeze. “There is no divorce.”

“You can easily get a mistress. That’s common enough. And I won’t stand for it.”

“For made men, yes, but I’m not one. But,” he took a nip of scotch. “That’s a valid concern.” Cesar lowered his glass on the coffee table and leaned forward, staring at me intently. “Pop was faithful to my mother. And I have a feeling Carlotta would castrate Paulie if he even thought of having an affair.”

“I’m not sure what to think of her.”

“She’s exactly what Paulie needs,” he smiled. “But I don’t want to talk about my brother. We can have a prenup.”

I raised a brow. “You’re going to sign over half your assets if I catch you with another woman?”

He looked amused. “So mercenary.”

I relaxed against the arm of the couch. He didn’t seem perturbed. That was a good sign I was worth more than his money.

“How about,” he started as if testing the words on his tongue. “You get everything if I so much as show interest in another woman.”

“You would do that?” I croaked.

“There’s nothing I won’t give up for you, *cara*,” he said huskily. “Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

My heart almost pounded out of my chest preventing words from taking form. Because I knew deep inside me that what he said was true. His actions to win me bordered on psychotic. This was a man who ran an empire, who measured his next step with precision, but when it came to me, he willingly put himself at my mercy. There was nothing logical about his actions when it came to me.

Emotions choked my voice. “We’re fools to rush in like this.”

His eyes flared. “As it was meant to be.”

Something echoed in my head. A familiar refrain. “Did we just quote Elvis?”

He chuckled. “I believe we did.”

“I don’t want a prenup,” I cried. “I don’t want to start our marriage without trust.”

“Then we don’t,” he growled. “It’s you who keeps fighting me on this and you’re driving me crazy, and I’m not good with words, but maybe ...”

He rose from the couch again and walked over to the corner where the turntable stood. It didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for. I spied the album cover.

When the first strings of Elvis Presley’s “Can’t Help Falling In Love” came on, a rush of tears spilled down my cheeks. This was our song. Every word of it was our unspoken ones. A bubble burst around my heart, my love for him soared.

He returned. A solemn expression on his face to the tempest rioting inside me. “Are you able to dance slowly?”

I nodded, still overwhelmed.

He held out his hand. I took it. And together, we walked to the center of the parlor and began to sway to the King’s rich baritone.

Cesar’s eyes glittered with determination.

“I love you so fucking much,” he rasped. “This is once in a lifetime for me. I’m not letting you go, and if I have to fight

you every day so you'll never leave me, so be it.”

“I'll never leave you,” I whispered. “And if you try to leave me, you'll have a fight on your hands because I love you, Cesar.” The words I'd been yearning to tell him finally rushing past my lips. “So, so much.”

A fierce expression crossed his face. “You're not taking that back.”

“Neither are you.”

“Never,” he swore with conviction before lowering his head to capture my lips in a long, sweet kiss. Afterward, as we continued our slow dance, staring rapturously into each other's eyes, we continued to murmur our words of love and devotion.

My giddiness made me dizzy, but I trusted Cesar to catch me when I fell.

Epilogue

AVA

June 1996

The square-shaped diamond on my finger winked with dazzling brilliance. Soon it would be married to a gold band that would bind Cesar to me forever. I sat in the limousine, my stomach tied in knots, waiting for the signal that it was time for me to enter the church.

I exhaled a breath, flustering the veil covering my face.

A large hand covered my own and squeezed.

“Second thoughts?”

I glanced over at my father and effused a small laugh. “Don’t let Cesar hear that.”

The driver of the limousine snickered. So did the U.S. Marshal sitting beside him.

“Just trying to break the ice,” Cillian grinned. “I was thankful that regardless of how your mam felt for me, she had been sending me news clippings of you ever since news of the engagement broke. I know a real thing when I see it.”

He gazed at me meaningfully, reminding me of our conversation before heading to church. Cillian had great respect for Cesar’s dad. One of the reasons he admired the

man was his faithfulness to his wife despite the permissiveness of mafia laws when it came to mistresses.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I whispered.

Dad’s mouth trembled, and his eyes glistened. “Now don’t make a grown man cry, sweetheart.”

“We missed you at the rehearsal dinner yesterday.”

He glared at the back of the U.S. Marshal’s head. “I didn’t want to waste my twenty-four hours of freedom by sleeping.”

“Judge’s mandate, Mr. McGrath,” the marshal muttered.

Dad transferred his attention back to me. “If they gave me only one hour, walking you down the aisle would be how I’d spend it. It’s symbolic, you see, making sure I hand off my daughter to a good man who will take care of her.” He sighed. “God knows I messed up.”

“Hey,” I chided. “None of that now. And don’t make me cry and ruin my makeup or Mads is going to murder both of us.”

As if on cue, my sister-in-law and matron of honor rapped on our window. I powered it down.

“The wedding planner is arguing with security, but she sent me to get you. Talk about a charged atmosphere in church.”

“That’s what happens when you’ve got the Five Families on the guest list,” my dad said. “One paper called it the explosive wedding of the year.”

“Don’t remind me,” I mumbled. Cesar and I were tempted to put ‘R.S.V.P. at your own risk’ on the invitations. We sent out five hundred, and more than four hundred responded that they were coming.

“Well, come on then,” she said, opening my door as two bridesmaids swooped forward to assist me from the limo in my bridal gown, exquisite in its swirling layers of ivory tulle and organza. I was glad I picked a sweetheart neckline, because with the veil covering my head, it was less stuffy. As I squared my shoulders, my gaze roamed the cathedral steps

peppered with guests in teal and gold, the motif of our wedding.

“Oh God, this is really happening.” I pressed a forearm over my stomach feeling it go queasy.

“I sure hope so,” one of the bridesmaid’s piped in. There were fifteen of them—three from my side and twelve from Cesar’s. Apparently, for Italians, every cousin’s single daughter had to be a bridesmaid.

“You look lovely,” I told the young woman.

“I can’t wait to walk down the aisle,” she told me. “Salvatore is my groomsman.”

I rolled my eyes towards Mads who hitched her shoulders.

My dad murmured in my ear. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s a Rossi.”

Cameras flashed and questions were shouted as the NYPD officers and the additional hired security held back a throng of reporters and curious onlookers. The dramatic bronzed doors of St. Patrick’s Cathedral loomed before us.

“Ready, sweetheart?” my dad asked.

I glanced up at him. “I’m ready.”



Cesar

I could hardly breathe as Ava glided down the aisle. Resplendent in her ivory gown, the veil added a mystery spurring my hunger to see her beloved face. I hadn’t seen her since the day before. Damned tradition dictated I shouldn’t. Paulie was making side comments beside me. I think he was teasing me about my unwavering focus on my bride.

But did I give a fuck? No.

Because all I could see was her.

Not the crowd of black, white, blue, and gold that filled the pews.

All I could hear was the song in my heart that beat for her.

Not the wedding march blaring from the organ's nine thousand pipes.

Cillian needed to walk faster.

I must have moved anyway. There was murmuring and hushed laughter while Paulie chuckled behind me.

"Impatient," he told the padre.

I could see traces of Ava's beautiful face behind the shimmering veil which I wanted to rip from her head.

"You're supposed to wait up there," Cillian told me with amusement. "Give me a second longer with my daughter."

Our eyes met in silent understanding. "I got it from here. I promise to take good care of her."

Cillian nodded. And the second he transferred her hand to mine, that was it.

Our future was sealed.

"You're beautiful," I murmured.

"You look dashing yourself," she answered.

"Hope you're ready for a lifetime with me, Miss McGrath." Soon to be Mrs. De Lucci. I helped her up the steps to the altar.

"Is that a promise?" Even through her veil, her voice sounded like the twinkle in her eyes.

"It's my vow."



"You're a beautiful bride," Nonna told my wife. "You did good, Cesar."

“I think so too.” We started making the rounds of relatives, friends, and associates after the dinner and toasts. I couldn’t wait to show off my wife. The word ‘wife’ proudly rolled off my tongue.

“You’ll make beautiful babies. Look at that one.” Nonna nodded to where Ava’s niece was being inspected by the Rossi boss. “I’m glad Giovanni got his head out of his ass and acknowledged his granddaughter.”

“Kelly doesn’t need him,” Ava told Nonna. “The McGraths have enough love for that girl. And now she has the De Luccis too.”

Nonna nodded in approval. “Of course she does, dear. You should come over to my house with little Kelly. I’ll teach you a few of my secret recipes. Cesar’s favorites.”

Merda.

“I would love that,” Ava said. “I—”

“*Cara*,” I interrupted. “I think your mother needs a word.” This was partly true. I had spied Branna glancing worriedly at us. “Nonna, we’ll come by again later.” Maybe next Christmas. I hurried Ava away.

“Your grandmother is delightful,” Ava told me. “I can’t wait to learn some of her recipes. Maybe we can open an Irish-Italian restaurant.”

“Unfortunately, Nonna isn’t the best cook. Why do you think we always had an excuse not to go to her house when she’s the one cooking dinner?”

“And I thought you were just holding out until marriage before you had her unlock the recipe vault.”

I grinned. “Can’t have you disillusioned before you marry me.”

“Sneaky.”

“And better not bring Kelly with you,” I added gravely.

“Why?”

“You’ll have the little one promised to one of the Five Families by the end of the day.”

“What?”

I was saved from answering when we were intercepted by Ava’s family. “Are you doing fine?” Branna demanded.

“I’m fine, Mom,” Ava said. “But, oh God, my feet are killing me. I want my Keds.”

Brushing the hair from her brow, I chuckled. “I’m thinking we should have eloped.”

“Man, I’ve been to huge weddings, but this one is something else.” Robert’s gaze scanned the ballroom. “The feds would love this crowd.”

“I doubt if anyone would talk business here,” I said. “Your employer probably has the place bugged.”

“Soon to be ex-employer.” Robert grinned. “Can’t wait to start my new venture.”

Ava’s brother had resigned from the SDNY to open a private investigation firm. With the rise of white-collar crime and with the mob getting into Wall Street, he could make more money doing it. He wasn’t bitter that my marriage to his sister had sparked a conflict of interest because in order to maintain my level of partnership with the SDNY, Robert could never work on the organized crime cases and that would limit his career. In fact, his resignation worked to my advantage in gaining the trust of the mafiosi.

“I can give you all the dirt.” Sean winked at his brother.

“Hey, you guys having your own party here?” Paulie came over and draped an arm around me. “Congratulations again, bro,” he said. He bent forward to look at Ava. “If this fucker doesn’t treat you right, and I think I speak for all the men here —” He glanced at her brothers. “We’re going to have a family meeting and straighten him out.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ava quipped.

I wrapped my arms around her. “No, you won’t. You have a problem with me, you talk to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Paulie and I were just teasing you.”

“Are you causing trouble here, *amore mio*?” Carlotta came over with Pop and Ava’s dad. I was glad Cillian had someone to talk to, seeing that there was still tension between him and his sons and Branna. He and Pop had been catching up all evening.

“Me? Trouble?” Paulie said. “I’m surprised a fight hasn’t broken out yet. Someone should throw the first punch.”

“Irish and Italians, all hotheads and both love their alcohol,” Robert agreed. “Something’s definitely wrong.”

“Right?” Paulie said. “What’s wrong with everyone?”

“Everyone’s on their best behavior, that’s what.” Branna glared at Paulie. “What’s wrong with you?”

My brother laughed with glee. I had the urge to punch him.

“Mom’s coming out of her skin,” Ava laughed. “She’s not used to so many Italians.”

Her mother turned her glare on my wife. I didn’t know why I hadn’t seen this before. But there was a reason why Ava and Paulie were best friends. When they were together, they had no filter. It was as if they fed on each other’s penchant for trouble.

Carlotta clapped her hands. “We need a family pic.” She glanced at Ava and frowned. “Someone is missing.”

“Charles,” Ava said.

“He’s off showing Kelly to Giovanni Rossi,” Ava’s mom said with displeasure.

I turned to Robert. “And where’s your wife?”

It was Branna who answered again. “Doing her matron-of-honor duties. I’ll go grab her and round up the kids.”

The wedding planner came over. “It’s time to do the couple’s dance.”

“Oh my God,” Ava moaned. “We probably should have done that before dinner. I don’t think I can take another step.”

“I got you,” I murmured in her ear. I grinned when she shuddered against me. I had plans for my wife tonight and didn’t want her exhausted. I was ready to strip her out of that damned virginal wedding dress. My eyes grew heavy. Maybe I should fuck her wearing it instead.

“Hey, save that for later.” Paulie nudged me and laughed.

“Fuck off,” I told my brother.

“Did I hear pictures?” Mads rushed toward our group with her two boys in tow.

“Mom went to look for you,” Ava said.

“She went to fetch Charles.”

All eyes went to where Mrs. McGrath was stalking toward the Rossi table. The noise in the ballroom might have dropped a notch.

“Oh, boy,” Cillian murmured. “I can just imagine her spearing Giovanni with the blue-eyed freeze.”

Paulie clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Looks like Mrs. McGrath will be drawing first blood of the evening.”

Christ. Not something I wanted to deal with on my wedding day. The headline “Groom’s mother-in-law stabs Rossi Family boss with a steak knife” flashed through my head.

Ava squeezed my hand. “Don’t worry. She’ll keep a lid on it.”

There were varied sighs of disappointment and relief in our group when Ava’s mother returned with Charles and Kelly without any incident.

“Ava, Cesar.” The wedding planner tapped her watch. “First dance.”

“Pictures!” Mads shouted.

I could feel a headache coming on. I think I’d had enough of this wedding.

There was clapping and hoots from our guests when the De Luccis and McGraths posed for impromptu pictures in the middle of the Plaza Hotel ballroom.

I gritted my teeth, getting more irritated by the second and wanting to escape with my Ava.

But when the photographer was rearranging our group, I glanced at my bride, and all my aggravation faded. Ava was chatting animatedly with Pop, and for the first time in a long time, he looked happy, so genuinely happy that his smile lit his eyes.

I couldn't even describe the emotion that rolled under my chest, but it reminded me of what this crazy day was all about.

Family. Mine had just gotten bigger. That made me smile.

The first strains of a familiar ballad surrounded us.

As the soloist sang the words to our love story, I led my wife to the dance floor.

And I slow danced her into our new life together.



Ava

“Found another one!” I yelled from the bathroom.

It was wishful thinking to believe Paulie, of all people, wouldn't pull a prank on my wedding night. Adding in my brothers, Cesar and I were still looking for alarm clocks at two in the morning. After our repeated attempts to leave the party to sneak up to our suite, Robert and Sean kept finding ways to keep us in the ballroom.

Paulie and Charles had suspiciously disappeared.

I didn't see them when we danced the Tarantella and Mads was seriously the best sister-in-law and matron of honor. She shoved my Keds at me before we began the traditional Italian wedding dance. By that time the guests were well into the

blessings of the open bar and the champagne had gone to my head, coalescing my whole sentiment into “who gives a fuck if the bride wore sneakers.” Afterward the whole wedding entourage seemed to have invited themselves to our suite. For a few horrific minutes, I had visions of them expecting Cesar to wave a bloodied sheet as proof of my virginity. However, tabloid photographs of Cesar and me leaving our Gold Coast row house early in the morning, frequently in blatant displays of affection, didn’t leave any doubt about the state of my hymen.

Cesar quickly dispatched the people in our suite under threat of dismemberment and declared this with his serious scary face.

And just when we were about to dive into lusty times, the first alarm clock went off. I was glad Paulie wasn’t within reach then because I’d never seen Cesar so psychotically pissed. I mean he could give Vesuvio a run for its money with the way he erupted over the phone at Paulie.

My husband appeared at the entrance to our luxurious white and gold bathroom, holding the wireless to his ear. “Six. Ava just found the sixth one. You swore on your first born there were only five.” A vein bulged on Cesar’s temple. His teal blue tie was loosened, and the top buttons of his vest and dress shirt were partially undone, exposing that provocative tanned throat I fixated over. I bit my lower lip. Did he know how sexy he looked? I loved my hot-blooded Italian husband. His eyes darkened when he saw my expression. “Oh, you’re going to blame Charles for sneaking one over you. How about I pull the plug on the European deal?”

I could hear Paulie panicking on the other end of the line. “*Alright, alright!*” was mumbled together with an intelligible string of sentences.

Cesar straightened from his lean and walked back to the living area. I followed my husband, curious to see where my friend had stashed the last of the alarms.

He extracted one from behind a figurine in the entertainment cabinet. “This better be the last fucking one,

Paulie.”

Cesar was listening to his brother, but his eyes were riveted on me. And the way he was looking at me sent a shivery sensation down my spine, because I knew that look. That was the look when all self-restraint had left him, and I was about to be the recipient of his sexual frustration.

“Good,” he growled into the receiver, “because I’m about to fuck Ava in her wedding dress.” He ended the call, tossed both phone and the last clock on the couch before prowling toward me.

I gulped. “Maybe you should calm down first. Have a drink.”

His hands hit my hips, his head lowering. “There’s only one way to calm me down, *wife*.”

I felt the “wife” right between my legs. He backed me into the bedroom, the back of my knees hit the bed, and I was falling, bouncing on the mattress once, it knocked the oxygen out of my lungs. I barely recovered when layers of tulle were flipped over me and my legs were shoved apart. The cool air wafted over my thighs before my husband’s hot hungry mouth latched onto my pussy.

“Ahhh!” I yelled. He was as ravenous for me as I was for him. The night of separation fueled our need. Everything that followed after built to this second. Our vows joined us in front of God and family. The reception was a haze, but this moment was when everything became real, stripped down to an instinct that made us live and breathe and love. And nothing was more real than the orgasm that ripped through me. He held my pelvis down and continued to eat me while I writhed and became a blubbering mess, a slave to his touch. I didn’t know how tightly wound I was until he freed me with some serious tongue fucking.

His huge body surged up, and he loomed above me. There was no mistaking the feralness of his gaze. “Tell me you’re ready, *cara*.”

I hooked my legs around his impressive ass.

Cesar didn't wait and drove into me hard. He thrust and grunted, swallowing my cries in a brief forceful kiss, but the pace of his pounding made it impossible to keep our mouths connected. I stretched around him and yielded to his powerful strokes in complete surrender.

At one point, he adjusted his body so his mouth was beside my ear. "All mine," he said harshly. "All fucking mine."

"Yours," I whispered back.

He grabbed my hips and fucked me at a frantic pace with an edge of desperation. Fire scorched me everywhere, and I exploded again with my second orgasm.

"Never let you go," he continued to pound. There was an unspoken threat in his eyes, not for me, but I suspected it was directed at anyone who would attempt to take me from him. That was how expressive his eyes were at that moment.

I'd never seen Cesar's face so naked and raw.

Burying his fingers in my hair, he bucked into me in staggered thrusts before he squeezed his eyes shut and grunted. Warmth spread into my core. Finally, he planted deep, and the convulsions of his body sent similar quakes through mine.

When his eyes opened, serenity reflected in them. Meanwhile, I arched against him, not quite dislodging his cock inside me. I wasn't quite ready to let him go, but his girth reached places deep inside me ... oh boy. Ripples of pleasure had my inner muscles contracting around him.

"Fuck, that feels so good," he groaned, shuddering against me.

I welcomed his weight even when I knew he was holding back a little. Finally, he rolled off me and onto his back. I turned my head in his direction.

He had propped up on an elbow, staring at me in a way that made my toes curl, my heart race, and my breath catch. Gone was the serenity in his eyes, and in its place burned love and absolute devotion.

His handsome face came closer, and against my lips he whispered, “I love you, Ava De Lucci.”

“And I love you, husband.”

*** The End***

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed Cesar and Ava’s story, please consider leaving a review. It’s much appreciated.

Can’t get enough of Cesar and Ava? Download these two short stories, [Valentine Surprise and A De Lucci Summer](#).

Afterword

I wrote De Lucci's Obsession as a challenge to myself. I wanted a complete book with all the angst, thrills, and feels in a shorter format. The idea came to me when it became frustrating to look for a quick read at night and every book I was interested in was over 450 pages long. I enjoy quick, sexy reads as well, but usually, I would crave more plot. This book was supposed to be a novella, but I adored Ava and Cesar so much, it grew into a short novel. Still, I was ruthless with my revisions, cutting any dialogue or descriptions that didn't move the plot forward. I hope you all enjoyed my experiment into shorter fiction.

As usual, I have an excellent team behind me.

Big thanks to Geri, who beta read the first draft and fell in love immediately with Cesar and Ava. I wasn't sure if you would tolerate Cesar's obsessive alpha nature, but you fell in love with this couple as much as I had.

Huge thanks to my beta reader, Sue. Your comments and insights are invaluable to my never-ending growth as an author. I can always depend on you to correct my massacre of certain English idioms. I am so happy that this shift in sub-genre didn't faze you and you continue to enjoy reading my work.

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To my Very Important Paige readers, thank you so much for your support in every project I undertake. I love and appreciate all of you.

Thank you to the book community—Bookstagrammers, BookTokkers, and Book Bloggers everywhere who continue to read, review, and share my book.

And most of all, thank you to my darling hubby and lovable Loki. To the hubby—he who knows that when my head is full of my characters, not to expect a response to his questions about dinner, but still makes I am fed. And to Loki, who lets me hug him when my characters stress me out. “Authoring” would not be possible without your loving and unconditional support. I love you both to the moon and back.

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* All series books can be read as standalone