

Moretti
CRIME FAMILY

deceptive
UNION

I V Y D A V I S

Deceptive Union

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE MORETTI MAFIA

BOOK FOUR

IVY DAVIS

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CHAPTER 1

Antonio

The sound of bone crunching is loud in my ears. It almost drowns out the sound of the crowd cheering me on. The man I just punched in the face—some guy named Stinky Sam—staggers back, blood gushing down his nose. My knuckles sting from the impact, but the tape wrapped around them helps take some of the pressure off.

I stay light on my feet as I jerk out of the way as Stinky Sam comes barreling back toward me. He misses me by an inch, running headfirst into the net around the fighting ring. His head bounces against it, and he falls back. The crowd boos at the pathetic display. And here I thought Stinky Sam would be a worthy opponent. I guess not. He'll earn me a few grand after I win this fight, enough to keep me paying rent until I can schedule another fight.

That's the thing with earning money from fight rings—I have to let my body heal enough before I go again. I can't risk losing. My reputation hangs in the balance. Since I lost everything—my family, my power—the only thing I have left is the reputation of the Moretti name. Even in death, my father is helping me.

The minute Stinky Sam falls onto the ground, I pounce on him. He groans as my knee digs into his chest and my arms wrap around his shoulders, preventing him from attacking me. He struggles for a moment before slumping in defeat. The three pounds of his fist onto the ground signal he's given up. I've won this round.

The crowd cheers as I stand up and soak it in. I've been working in fighting rings for the past five years, ever since I was forced to flee my home. My uncle Franco tried to kill me to take power, and I've been on my own ever since because I couldn't risk seeing my family again and putting them in a position of danger.

Stinky Sam stands up and shakes my hand. Even though I won, he still shows a good sportsmanship about losing. "Good fight," he says, his voice muffled from his broken nose. "You land one hell of a punch."

"Thanks. You, too."

He huffs. "You're not the one with a broken nose." He staggers off the stage and heads toward the locker rooms. I take another moment to soak in the crowd's praise. This is my only form of family now. It's a lonely existence, but I've tried to find comfort in it.

The referee motions for me to get off the stage as the next round of fighters approach. I give him a smug smile, then get down, where I'm instantly swarmed by women in short, tight skirts and crop tops. Fight rings only draw one type of woman—those looking for danger.

"You did great, Antonio," a blonde says to me. Her shade of hair is similar to my own, a dark, sandy colored blonde. When I first started fighting, all the men around me saw me as the pretty boy. I had to take the time to show them just how wrong they were. I proved I was more than a handsome face. But even though I had to prove that to the men, with the women, my good looks have come in handy. It means I never have to go home alone to my empty apartment, devoid of family. Their bodies distract me for a few hours before they leave.

"Thanks," I respond. "What's your name?"

"Joanna." She has curves in all the right places and a wide smile that makes me wonder what she can do with her mouth.

"Well, Joanna, if you want to meet up later, let me know."

“Oh, I do.” She runs a finger down my bare chest. “Where should we meet?”

“Out front. But I need to have a shower now.” I take one step toward the locker room when a brunette steps in front of me.

“Care to have company?”

“And who are you?” I eye her up and down, which makes her smile demurely, even though none of the women who frequent this place are exactly “demure” women.

“Kelli. So, care for company?”

I shrug. “Sure.” I grab Kelli’s hand and head to the locker rooms. I don’t even look back to make sure Joanna is still there. I know women like her; she’ll still show up later, even though I’m about to fuck another woman in the showers.

The locker room is exactly as you’d expect; a slightly smelly place where naked dudes roam. As a huge man passes by with his cock hanging out, Kelli blatantly stares.

“If you like that,” I say into her ear, “then just wait until we’re alone.” She giggles when I spank her ass and motion her toward the showers.

“Antonio Moretti?” a man’s voice asks.

I pause, watching as a young man, around my age, maybe slightly older, approaches me. Unlike my lighter hair and complexion, this man is all dark. Dark brown hair, tan skin, dark eyes. “Yes?”

Kellie looks at me impatiently, and I hold up a finger for her to wait for me. She pouts.

“I’m Killian Brennan,” he says, holding out his hand. I shake it. “I’ve seen you in here fighting for quite some time. And I have to say, you have a great work ethic. There’s a passion to you that isn’t in all these other men.”

Big John, one of the fighters, grunts as he walks around Killian and grabs his bag. Killian ignores him and continues speaking. “I’ve heard your family name. The great Moretti

family. It's interesting your uncle is in charge when your father used to be. Shouldn't that role have gone to you?"

My hackles instantly rise at his line of questioning. "Did my uncle send you?"

Killian steps back, raising his hands in surrender. "Not at all. I'm here of my own accord. You see, I'm in the process of growing my empire. The Irish have been ruled by Patrick O'Connell for a long time now, and I'm looking to take over. I thought we could join forces and take back power for ourselves."

I eye Killian over. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. I'm a young man like you. I don't have many prospects in this city. And neither do you. Your uncle has a staunch hold over all the Italians in New York. He owns most of the ports and is in charge of a lot." He lowers his voice. "Drugs, guns, you name it. But isn't that supposed to be your legacy? I'm offering that we put together any influence the two of us have and take down your uncle. You'll be in control of this city, and in turn, you'll be able to help me take down O'Connell, and I'll be in control of the Irish. And boom." He claps his hands together. "A beautiful partnership is born. What do you say?"

"I say I have a date in the showers."

Killian looks over in Kellie's direction and frowns. "Looks like your date has left."

I glance over. "Shit." Kellie's flirting with Big John now. "Thanks. You made me lose out on a good shower fuck."

"I'm sure you don't have any issues with women. Antonio." He pauses. "I can call you Antonio, yes?"

"Yes. I'm not worthy of my family name yet."

"... Ok. Listen, Antonio, not many opportunities are going to come your way. Not when your uncle is so powerful. But I'm offering you an opportunity. Let's team up and take your uncle down. Let's restore the power that rightfully belongs to you."

Killian does talk a good talk, but can he walk the walk. Only time will tell, I guess. Even though I've built a good reputation as a fighter at the underground fighting ring, it isn't enough to get my father's old men to respect me as their leader. Not when Franco has been leading them for the past eleven years, ever since I was twelve. My father died, and I was too young to take over at the time, so Franco did. And when I turned eighteen, he tried to have me killed. If it weren't for my sister, Francesca, coming to save me, I'd have died.

After that, I left, and I haven't seen any of my family in years. My three older sisters sometimes call, but even that's risky. The rest of my family—the ones who still live with Franco—I haven't seen or heard from since I was eighteen.

“Ok,” I finally say. “What have I got to lose? I've already lost everything. If you're promising to help me take down Franco, then I say, let's do it. I'm ready for that bastard to die.”

Killian smiles widely as he eagerly shakes my hand. “Great. Looking forward to it. Here's my number.” He hands me a card. What kind of person carries business cards anymore? “You can call me anytime. Let's meet up soon and discuss more.”

“Yeah, I'll call.”

Killian claps me on the back and leaves the locker room. I slip his card into my gym bag before heading into the shower. Kelli isn't even in the locker room anymore, so no chance of getting a blowjob to help me de-stress.

Once I'm done, I slip back into my normal clothes, jeans and a t-shirt. I'm not one of those Mafia men who wear suits all the time, but that's more a matter of convenience. I live in the shittier part of New York City, and wearing a suit everywhere would just draw attention to myself. I can't wait for the day I take Franco down and assume my position as leader of the Moretti business. Once that happens, I'll wear a suit every damn day.

My hand roams inside my bag, searching for the most important thing to me in this world. When my fingers brush against the cool metal, I relax a bit. It's risky bringing

something of such great importance to a shithole like this, but I don't go anywhere without it.

I pull it out of the bag and slip it around my neck. My father's family pendant. The one I was given the day he died. An engraving of a wolf is on it, surrounded by the color red. It's the symbol of my father's power. It's the one thing Franco could never get from me, no matter how much he wanted it for himself.

This pendant is a reminder of why I fight every week in shitholes like this; I have to be there for my family. I have to take Franco down someday. I've waited five years since I was exiled after he tried to kill me, and I don't want to wait another five more.

I'm ready to end this once and for all. I'm wiser. I'm stronger. And most importantly, I have a fire within me that's burning to get out.

I give Stinky Sam a nod as I walk by him. He's bandaging up his nose, though I'm not sure how well that's going for him. His pained groans don't sound good.

Waiting outside the locker room is Johnny, my so-called manager. Essentially, he collects the money I won for my fight and gives it to me, though I know he skims some from the top. Johnny is the epitome of weasel—small, bug eyes, stringy hair. Despite his creepy appearance, he's remained by my side since I started fighting when I was eighteen with nowhere else to go. "Here, Tony." He hands me a wad of dollar bills that are stained with ... something.

"What's this?" I point to the stain.

"Just some beer." He shrugs. "Don't worry about it." He shoves the bills into my hands. Upon closer inspection, it's obvious the stain isn't beer. It looks more like blood. Well, this is a fighting ring after all ...

I sigh and start counting the money. "It's a few hundred short."

He smiles sneakily, not quite looking at me. "You know I need my share."

“Fine.” I don’t bother putting up a fight. I already expended most of my energy taking down Stinky Sam earlier. “But we agreed on one percent. That looked more like five.” I shove the money into my gym bag.

“Semantics, Tony. Listen, I’ve got you lined up to take on Big John next week. Could bring us in a ton of money.” He rubs his hands together like an old cartoon villain.

“Big John is huge. There’s a reason I’ve never fought him before.”

“So? That’ll make it even sweeter when you win. David versus Goliath. This shit just writes itself.”

I step out of the way as a man and woman slam into the wall next to me, making out like they’re trying to suck each other’s faces off. “Fine. I’ll fight him. But you only get one percent of my earnings.”

Johnny wavers, then nods. “Fine. Deal.” We shake on it. “Have a good night, Tony. Looks like you’re gonna have one.” He nods, and I turn to follow his direction. Joanna is still waiting for me. Thank fuck for that.

I approach Joanna, slinging my arm around her. “Ready to head out?”

“Ready.”

A few minutes later, we’re at my apartment. While my place is in a shitty part of town, the apartment itself is pretty well maintained. I pay a lot of money for it. It’s New York, after all. It’s not what I envisioned for myself, but once I take Franco down and take over the business, I’ll be raking in cash and can move to a better place, one closer to my family.

Joanna doesn’t mess around. She grabs my face and smashes her lips against mine. It doesn’t take us long to end up in my bedroom, where we fuck the night away.

“Whew, that was amazing,” she says, stroking her hands down my chest.

“I agree. It was.” The sudden silence after all our moaning almost hurts my ears. I grew up in a house with seven siblings.

I'm used to chaos and loudness. This quiet loneliness is almost deafening. Who knew silence could be so fucking loud?

"Well, I'm gonna go," she says, leaving me alone in the bed. "It was fun. Let's do it again sometime."

"Yeah, let's." I watch her leave, knowing we probably won't fuck again. There are new women at the fighting rings every week. A new one to preoccupy my time. A new one to fuck. A new one to make me forget how fucking lonely I am.

The moment Joanna is gone, I get out of bed and start pacing my apartment. I check the fridge to find only old beer and some cheese. Fuck. I need to go grocery shopping. You'd think after five years on my own, I'd be better at remembering this. Usually, I get invited out to eat by the other fighters or Johnny or women. Not tonight, it seems.

I leave my apartment, glad to have an excuse to not remain there by myself, and head off to the bodega down my street. Once there, I grab some new beer, bread, meat, and some mayo. I can make myself a fucking sandwich at least.

The man behind the counter gives me a tired nod as he rings my groceries up. I grab a cold sandwich from the deli section and add that to the list. At least I can eat on my way home.

I'm eating my cold sandwich as I head back to my apartment when I stop. I can't go back in there. The silence is too loud, and the loneliness is too crippling. I miss my family. I know I shouldn't do what I'm thinking, but I need to see them.

I end up at the nearest subway station and take a train to the nicer part of the city. Much nicer. We're talking five-star hotels and multi-million-dollar brownstones. The part of the city where I grew up.

Thankfully, it's a warm summer's evening as I walk over to my old home. The brownstone is just as I remember it, elegant and sophisticated. The epitome of wealth.

I stand across the street and observe the house. The front room's lights are on, and I can see directly into the living

room. My younger sister, Mia, is on the couch, scrolling through her phone. She's nineteen now. An adult. I'm shocked Mom hasn't made her get married yet. My two older sisters, Emilia and Gemma, were married when they were eighteen. Mia looks a lot like our father, her dark hair sprawling around her. She doesn't even look up as the twins, Lucia and Luca, now ten, run past. They also have my father's dark looks. Mom found out she was pregnant with them about a month after my father passed away. I always thought it would make her happy to have that last memory of him, but she never seemed that happy with the twins. They were more of an obligation than a happy experience.

Behind them comes my mom. Giulia Moretti. Even though she's now fifty, she still looks young with her wavy blonde hair and unblemished skin. I always noticed how other men looked at her, including Uncle Franco. I hated it. I just wanted to protect her and make sure she was ok.

But now, we haven't even spoken in five years. Not since the day I said goodbye in the hospital.

IT WAS the night of my eighteenth birthday, and Franco decided I couldn't be alive anymore because I posed too much of a threat to his rule. So, he had two men drag me out of the house and brought down to the docks, where they shot me. I managed to escape before they could get in a killing blow, but it was only because my older sister, Francesca, came to save me. It was a surprise. Fran was always the shy one of the family, and we were never that close, but she showed a lot of strength that wintry night. She helped me get away and took me to the hospital. Now, she's married and living in LA, the same place Emilia and her husband live. I never thought I'd miss her, but I do.

After I was patched up at the hospital, my mother came to see me.

“Antonio!” She rushed to my side and immediately began peppering kisses against my face. “You’re ok. You’re ok.”

“Ma. Ma.” I gently pushed her back as I slumped against the hospital bed. “I love you, too.”

She smiled sheepishly as she took a seat next to me. “Francesca told me you were all right. I’m so happy you’re alive. I can’t believe Franco did that to you.”

“You can’t?”

She frowned. “I never thought Franco would try to kill his own nephew. His brother’s son! I should have tried harder to keep him away from you.”

“There wasn’t much you could do, Ma. Franco has all dad’s men. He’s one of the most powerful men in New York. There wasn’t much you could do after he moved in.” That was the thing; the day after my father died, Franco moved into our house as if he were trying to be my dad, Riccardo Moretti. It set everyone on edge, and even years later, that tension never dissipated.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re all right. But I’m not sure what we’re going to do about Franco. When you come back home, he’ll go after you again.”

I inhaled deeply, resolving myself to tell my mom what I needed to say, even though I didn’t want to say it. “I’m not coming back home.”

She scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re my son. The rightful ruler of the family business. You’re coming back home.”

“Ma. No.” I grabbed her hand before she could pull away from me. “If I go home, Franco will just try to kill me again. You just said that. That’s why I need to leave.”

She was shaking her head before I was even done speaking. “No, no, no.”

“I need to leave for the safety of you and my siblings. I need to leave for the safety of myself. I can’t go back home,” I

added in a softer voice. Mom began to cry. “And once I’m gone, we can’t really talk anymore.”

She whipped her head up to glare at me. “Don’t even say that, Antonio Moretti. You’re my son. I can’t live the rest of my life without you.”

“You won’t, Ma. I’ll come back, and when I do, I’ll take down Franco for good. But until then, I need to go off on my own and gain some power. I won’t stand a chance against Franco otherwise. And we can’t talk because that would just put you into danger with Franco. You need to understand.” I squeezed her hand tight even as she tried pulling away. “Tell me you understand.”

“I hate this,” she whispered angrily.

“I know. But what other choice do I have?” I knew the moment I said those words she understood.

“I love you, Antonio.”

“I love you, too, Ma.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “Are you going to at least say goodbye to your siblings?”

“No. I can’t. Franco is out there looking for me. I need to go.”

“Cecilia won’t be happy that you didn’t say goodbye.”

A pang of guilt flashed through me. “I know. But I have to do this now.”

With a final kiss to my head, Mom stood up and walked away, understanding I needed to go at this alone.

AND ALONE I STILL AM.

Watching my family through the window and remembering my goodbye with my mom makes me feel lonelier than ever before.

And when *she* enters the room, I almost lose my resolve. Cecilia. My sister. The one I was always closest to.

We could almost be twins for how similar we look. At just two years younger than me, we were always tied at the hip growing up. We fought over stupid shit, but we also comforted each other when times got hard, like right after our dad died. At twenty-one, she should definitely be married now. I wonder why she's still at home, un-married. When it came to my three older sisters, my mom was desperate to marry them off. And she succeeded. All three are happy with their husbands. Emilia with Marco, head of the LA Mafia. Gemma with Viktor, head of the Russian mob here in New York. And Francesca with Leo, Marco's second-in-command.

Is the reason Cecilia isn't married yet because of me? Is our mom putting their lives on hold because she's waiting for me to come back home?

Cecilia kneels on the floor and bows her head over the couch. Even though I can't hear her, I know she's saying a prayer. My family was raised Catholic, but Cecilia is the only one who seemed to stick with religion. The rest of us would probably be seen as heathens in the eyes of the Lord. I know I definitely am.

I'm desperate to ask Cecilia how she's been. Last I saw her, she was crushing on her personal guard, Theo. Nothing else mattered.

But now, watching her, there's a heaviness to her shoulders I've never seen before. I wish I could do in there and tell her everything will be all right.

And then Franco enters the room. Everyone tenses, even Mia once she manages to look up from her phone. At nineteen, she's too obsessed with the damn thing. Mom subtly puts herself in the way of Lucia and Luca. The two ten-year-olds stop chasing each other and listen to whatever Franco is telling them. I can't read his lips. Whatever he's saying remains a mystery to me.

For just a second, his eyes look up, and I swear, they meet mine across the street. I duck behind a tree and take a deep

breath before looking back. He's walking out of the room now, toward the kitchen and not the front door. I release my breath slowly. He didn't see me.

I'm getting fucking paranoid.

With one last look at my family, I walk away, back toward my quiet apartment, all alone.

MY PHONE RINGS when I return home. It's Viktor, Gemma's husband and the head of the Russian mob. We've stayed in contact, reaching out every now and again. Back when I was fourteen, he beat the shit out of me, and it created this strange bond between us. He really shouldn't be reaching out to me, though, because he made a deal with Franco years ago to work together.

"Hey, Viktor," I say, sitting down on my couch.

"Hey, man. I'm calling because Gemma wanted to see how you were doing."

"She couldn't call herself?"

"You know it's hard," he says in a quieter tone. I know it is. It's hard for me, too.

"Well, I'm fine. As usual. And also, as usual, I don't need your help, Viktor, so don't even offer it. I'm not putting my sister at risk, and neither should you. I don't want Franco going after her."

Viktor chuckles. "He already tried going after her after we got married. The man is relentless. Of course, you know that. Just thought I'd reach out and try. If you ever need anything, you know who to call."

I thank him and hang up. It's too hard talking to my brother-in-law. His offer of help is tempting, but I need to go at things my own way. I need to make my own alliances and my own deals. I need to show my father's men I'm worthy to take over once I kill Franco for good.

I eventually go to sleep in my empty bed and dream of only blackness.

A WEEK LATER, I'm facing off against Big John. I promised Johnny I would, and it would net me a lot more money than usual. So, here I am, taking on a man twice my size. Shit, even his head is bigger than my thighs, and I work out, so I'm not exactly scrawny. I have muscle, just not bulging ones. Mine are more toned and compliment my body like a dancer rather than a fighter. I use my speed to win.

The crowd goes wild as Big John lunges at me. I duck out of the way at the last second before his fist can connect with my jaw. The crowd boos. They want to see blood, and they want to see it now.

Big John lumbers toward me, and I keep skipping out of the way, barely managing to keep myself from getting hit. When John pumps out his arm, I use his body weight against him and grab his arm, jerking him to the side so I can land a punch to his stomach. He grunts and doubles over. I slam my elbow into his face, making him drop to his knees.

Before I can step out of the way, John grabs my leg and pulls me forward, making me fall onto my back. I land with a huff. The crowd cheers so loudly, it hurts my eardrums.

John gets on top of me and lands a blow to my jaw. Shit. That'll bruise. But when he brings his fist down again, I grab it with my hand. He grunts as he tries driving his hand down, but I push back, keeping him at bay. While he's distracted, I slam my knee into his balls.

That's a winning shot right there.

John groans in pain and rolls off me. I take that opportunity to roll onto him and land a triple punch to his face. His head slams against the ground, and he's knocked out cold. I stand up and bow to the crowd as they cheer me on and I'm announced the winner.

I don't bother heading for Johnny right away as I get off the stage. He'll need time to collect our money. As usual, I'm surrounded by gorgeous women looking to fuck. But my eyes land on Killian off to the side, and I excuse myself from the women, who groan in disappointment, and head over to the Irishman.

"Killian." I shake his hand.

He nods toward the stage. "Good work up there."

"I know I haven't called, but I wanted you to know I'm ready. Ready to start plans. Ready to set things into motion."

"I love to hear that. Let's go out for a bite and talk."

After I get dressed and collect my money, Killian and I go to a café around the corner. "So, I was thinking," he says as he takes his seat in the hole-filled booth. "That if we want to go after Franco, we need to strike hot and fast before he can react. He needs to not see us coming."

"I agree."

"So, what I was thinking—"

"Excuse me." An older man interrupts us. He's probably in his fifties, judging by his light hair that's graying at the temples and the frown lines around his mouth. "I don't mean to intrude. But I saw you fight tonight," he says to me. "I'm Pavel Petrov."

I almost spit out my sip of water at his name. Even Killian looks impressed.

Pavel Petrov works in the Russian mob, but he's not exactly Viktor's employee. He's sort of a separate entity who does his own thing and is left alone. I've heard his name around town. He has a reputation as a rich man who stays out of trouble but likes to invest in projects. He always expects a return, though.

"Mr. Petrov." I shake his hand. "What are you doing here?"

"I followed you from the ... establishment," he says, lowering his voice and looking around at the only waitress left

in the café. She sits at the counter, chewing gum and reading a magazine. “I saw you fight. It was miraculous. You were like a demon, hell bent on destroying your opponent. It was admirable. May I take a seat?”

I scoot over for him to join me in the booth. “Is there a reason you’re here talking to me?”

“Yes. I know you’re Antonio Moretti. I don’t know who you are,” he says to Killian. The Irishman opens his mouth to speak, but Petrov continues. “I have a proposition for you, Antonio. You have spirit. I like to see that. I’m also in the business of growing a strong empire. And I’d like to see you at the top of it.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re a Moretti. You have your father’s fire. I’d like to give you money to help you achieve the power I’m sure you’ve been looking for.”

Killian and I exchange a look. “What’s the catch?” I ask Petrov.

“I have a daughter in need of marrying.”

And there it is. “Uh, I’m not really the marrying kind.”

“Not even for millions of dollars? I want to see my daughter married to a man of high standing, and I’m offering the chance to help get you there. This marriage alliance would help protect both of us. What do you say?”

“I say I’d need to meet you daughter first.”

Petrov gently pats the table. “Done. I’ll set up a meeting so you can meet Nina. Just think of all the things you could achieve, Antonio, with my backing.”

It would be a lot. If I had Petrov’s support, I could surely take down Franco for good.

“Here’s my number.” He writes it down on a napkin and slides it over to me. “I’ll call you when the meeting is ready to go. Trust me, Nina would make a great wife. And it’s a small price to pay for power.” He slowly gets out of his seat and leaves the café.

“I ... wasn't expecting that,” Killian says. “So, where does this lead you and me?”

“I'm still interested in working with you. But it's nice to have options.”

Killian chuckles as he gets up. “Keeping it honest. I like it. Just be careful with a man like Pavel Petrov. He has so much money to throw around, he doesn't know up from down. I'm not going anywhere, Antonio. You and me? We're the same. Men looking for a chance in life. Be careful with a man who would just give his daughter away like that.” He snaps his fingers.

“I'm willing to do anything to take back the power that belongs to me.”

Killian gives me a side-eye before he starts walking away. “That's what worries me.”

I watch him leave, not bothering to pay attention to his words. I'm starting to make a name for myself so much so that Pavel Petrov wants to make a deal with me. That's the miracle I've been waiting for.

I guess now all I have to do is meet my potential wife. Then all my dreams of power will come true.

CHAPTER 2

Nina

“**N**ina, come here,” my father’s strict voice rings out. I look up from my sister’s math equations, and we share a glance.

Anna makes a face. “What does he want now?”

“I’m not sure. But he doesn’t like to be kept waiting, so ...” I nod at her homework. “I’ll be back soon.”

Anna sighs, setting her chin on her hand and looking bored out of her mind. I remember what it was like to be thirteen and doing math homework. Not fun times. Now, at twenty, I no longer have math homework to worry about. My life has taken a different turn. I’m a young woman, expected to get married and pop out tons of babies before I lose the ability to do so. It’s been written in the cards for me ever since my father sat me down when I was around Anna’s age and told me that exact fact.

I walk through our elegant sixtieth-eighth-story condo that overlooks Central Park and head for my father’s office. After I knock on the door, he tells me I can open it. His office is larger than the room Anna and I share. It used to be the master bedroom, but my father insisted on having it turned into his office.

Pavel Petrov, the kingmaker himself. I’ve heard the rumors about my father—how he supplies money to men to help them gain power in New York. I don’t know all the details, just enough to surmise my father is involved in shady business. With silver hair that used to be blond, he’s a striking figure in

his suit. His cheekbones are so sharp you could cut your hand on them if you touch his face. Maybe that's why my mother hasn't so much as looked at him in long time.

I share the same look as my father. Platinum blonde hair that's almost white at times. The same striking features I've always been a little insecure about. I wanted to be soft curves, not harder lines, and that feeling has persisted into my adulthood.

"Yes, Father?" I ask, not stepping into his office. He hasn't officially welcomed me inside yet.

"Nina, I have some news I need to share with you. Take a seat." He points at the chair across his desk. When I do sit, I note how uncomfortable the chair is; all hard bones and no softness. Unlike my father's high back leather chair that looks the epitome of plush, this chair is meant to be uncomfortable. He doesn't like to have people stay in his office for long. Personally, I just think he likes to intimidate people.

"Nine," he continues, steepling his fingers under his chin, "I've made a deal to secure you with great power someday. You're going to get married."

I let out a shaky exhale, trying to keep my face composed. I knew the day was coming when my father would make an arranged marriage for me. I was just hoping I'd have more time. I don't want to leave Anna alone in this place.

He chuckles darkly. "Don't look so upset, daughter. You'll be marrying Antonio Moretti. He'll make a good match for you. I've set up a meeting to happen later today. Thought you should know."

"Today?"

He squints his ice-blue eyes at me. "Will that be a problem? Did you have other plans today? Something more important than your future, perhaps?"

I gulp. "No." I hate how quiet my voice comes out. "No, I had no plans today. I just wasn't expecting it to be so soon. That's all."

“Well, now, you know. You’re dismissed.” He waves a hand at me to leave the room. I get up slowly as if I’m in a daze and walk back into the kitchen where Anna is still working on the same math problem.

“I don’t understand what ‘x’ is supposed to be? Math makes no sense at all,” she mutters, dropping her head onto the paper on the table.

I take my seat next to her, not saying anything. My father just made a decision that will change my entire life, and I wasn’t consulted at all. He just assumes I’ll go along with it, and the sad reality is, I know I will. It’s always been my duty to do this. Even if I hate it.

“Nina?” Anna asks, drawing me out of my reverie. “What is ‘x’ supposed to be?” She shakes the paper full of math equations at me.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, staring down at the table. “Go ask Mom.”

Anna huffs. “Mom’s taken one of her sleeping pills. She’s no help.”

“Well, Anna, try. I can’t help you with everything, you know? Not forever.”

She raises one blonde eyebrow. “Why are you being so weird?”

“I’m getting married.” The words don’t even sound true to me. It’s like I’m speaking a foreign language.

“What? When? How? You’re not even dating anyone.”

“You know that’s not how that works, Anna.” I step my face into my hands, resisting the urge to cry. “You know Father makes these decisions for us.”

“Well, it’s stupid.”

I turn to her in a flash and grab her shoulders. “You can’t say things like that around Father. You know that. We have to listen to what he tells us to do, or ...”

“Or what?” she challenges.

“Or ...” The memory of a belt buckle and the sound of a woman who wasn’t my mother in my parents’ bedroom. My father coming out of the room and seeing me ... undoing his belt and ... I push it away before the memory can go any further. I’ve never told Anna any of it. My mother doesn’t even know.

“Or nothing,” I finish. “Just don’t get on Father’s bad side, ok? I’m meeting the man who will become my husband later today. That’s what Father just told me. I don’t even know how to feel. Shock. Upset.” *Relieved*. If I don’t have to stay in this house any longer, it would actually be quite nice. I just worry for Anna. She hasn’t experienced the things I have, and I’m scared that if I have to marry and move out, Father will set his anger onto her.

“Well, you can still help me with my homework in the meantime.” She waves the paper at me. “I know you want to ...”

Not really, but Anna needs my help, and I’m willing to offer it. So, math homework it is.

I FIND MY MOTHER, Elizabeth Petrov, lying in her bed, not even moving. “Mom?” I rush to her side and put my fingers to her pulse, relaxing once I realize she’s still alive. “Mom?” I gently shake her.

She blinks her eyes and turns to me so achingly slowly it’s painful to watch. “Nina?”

“I just wanted to let you know I’m leaving for a few hours. Father has set up a meeting for me to meet ...” *My future husband*. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I just wanted to let you know.”

“Oh. Ok, good.” Her eyes glaze over.

“How many did you take this time?” I whisper, nodding at the pill bottle on her nightstand table.

“Not many,” she says, her words slurring. “I’ll be fine. I just need to sleep. Make me proud, Nina.” She pats my cheek before turning over and promptly falling asleep. She looks so fragile. Her skin is taut over her bones, and her blonde hair is brittle. She used to be so pretty, but that was before I discovered my father with another woman. Things haven’t been the same since.

I give her a pat on the back before heading out. Father is waiting for me by the front door, impatiently checking his watch and tapping his foot. “What took you so long?”

“I wanted to see Mom.”

“Your mother is fine.” His eyes rake over me. “That’s what you’re wearing?”

I look down at my simple pink summer dress. It’s pretty and elegant but understated. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I just expected better from my daughter. This is your future husband, after all.”

“Do ... do I need to go change?”

The way he sighs, so full of disgust, makes me duck my head in shame. “No. There’s no time. Let’s go.” He doesn’t wait for me to follow as he heads out the door. I have to scramble to keep up.

Father barely looks at me as our driver takes us to my father’s favorite restaurant. It’s expensive and French. The diners are expected to dress somewhat nicely, and most importantly, it’s expensive. That last part is worth mentioning twice. My father is made of money, and he likes to flaunt it.

We take our seats at an intimate booth in the back and wait.

“What does he look like? This Antonio Moretti?” I ask.

Father skims his eyes over the menu even though he always orders the same thing. A duck confit with lamb on the side. He’s huge into eating meat and doesn’t believe in vegetables. When the waiter, a young man with an easy-going smile, Father orders without waiting for our guest to arrive.

“The duck confit with lamb on the side,” he tells the waiter.

“I’ll have the ratatouille,” I order. Maybe it’s partly in defiance to my father, but I love ordering vegetarian or vegan dishes. He can’t force me to be just like him. Father gives me a frown after I order.

“You should have had the duck,” he tells me. “It’s the best meal here.”

“I’ll try it next time.” I say that every time, and I never do.

Father turns to look at the door, and his eyes light up as he waves someone over. I look to see who it is.

It’s a young man not much older than me with sandy blond hair and great bone structure. Honestly, he’s gorgeous. He has a boy next door look with a slight edge that’s fascinating. I wonder who he is and quickly get my answer when my father introduces us.

“Antonio, this is my daughter, Nina. Nina, Antonio Moretti.”

This is the man my father wants me to marry? I always expected it to be some man thirty years my senior who only wanted to grope my breasts, but Antonio is much younger and much more handsome than I’d expected.

Antonio stops short when he sees me, his eyes widening. I feel flush and embarrassed and want to ask him if I have something on my face when he gives me a large smile.

“Nina.” He extends his hand to me, and I take it. The moment we touch, a flash of electricity passes through me. Antonio bends down and kisses my hand, making me blush harder. No man has ever made me feel this way before.

My father has had parties where I’ve been ogled at, but no man has ever kissed the back of my hand. It’s strangely gentlemanly.

“You have manners,” I tell him as he lets my hand go.

“I learned it from my mother.” His eyes darken for just a second before lighting up again. “Mr. Petrov, you didn’t tell

me your daughter is ... so beautiful." I have to look away from him; otherwise, I'd get lost in Antonio's eyes forever.

Father puffs his chest out with pride. "I told you this would be a good idea, didn't I? Sit down, Antonio. Let's chat."

Antonio slides into the booth next to me, and the heat from his skin makes it hard for me to think past that.

"So," Father says, steepling his fingers under his chin. "I propose you two get married. I think you could be a powerful man one day, Antonio, once you take over as head of the Moretti business. I'll be willing to help. But I need assurances, and one of those assurances is marriage. I want my daughter to be just as powerful. It's her worth. It's my worth as her father. If you two get married, we could cement an alliance that could make us both incredibly powerful men."

"You're willing to take that chance on me?" he asks as the waiter brings my father's and my food.

"Did you want something, sir?" the waiter asks Antonio.

Antonio scans the menu for a moment, shrugs, then says, "The frog legs, I guess." He hands the menu to the waiter with an incredibly charming smile. "Never had them before. There's a first time for everything."

Father grunts as the waiter walks away. "First time for everything, you say? I like that motto. Seeing as you've never been married before, this could be a great first time for you."

"Why me?" Antonio asks. "I'm not the one who's in charge of the Moretti business at the moment."

"I know. But you're a man I can help shape."

Antonio sits back in his seat, crossing his arms. "Ah. I gotcha. So, you're looking to control everything, is that it? Turn me into your little puppet, and you control all the strings."

For a moment, my father looks angry, but it passes so fast, I'm not sure Antonio even notices. But I do because I've seen that look on his face before.

“Not at all,” Father finally says. “You would be in control. But I would expect certain privileges, yes. Like a seat at your table. I’d have a word in your ear, and you would listen to me. You ultimately don’t have to take any advice or suggestions I give, but just having more power would make me happy. As I know it would make you happy.”

“So, why the marriage alliance?” Antonio asks, flashing me a quick glance. Though his eyes linger on me for a second too long. I’m not necessarily complaining.

“Because,” Father says, cutting into his duck and taking a bite, “it would ensure trust. I wouldn’t marry my eldest daughter to just anyone. Only someone with potential of greatness is worthy of her.” He points his fork at Antonio—a little bit of duck is still stuck to the utensil. I take a sip of my ratatouille, ignoring my father. “And you, Antonio Moretti, are someone who has greatness in you. This alliance would benefit all three of us. What do you say?”

“I say ...” Antonio scrunches up his face. I’m waiting for his answer when he turns to me. “I want to hear what Nina has to say about all this.” I startle at his words. So does my father.

“What does my daughter’s opinion matter?”

Antonio shrugs. “Because, if we’re to be married, I’d like to know what the other half of that equation has to say about this.” He turns to me. “So, Nina, what are your thoughts?”

I can feel my father’s eyes boring into the side of my face. I want to tell Antonio I don’t exactly want this, that I’d rather take my sister and get out. But I know that’s not my reality, and no matter how much Antonio may respect my opinion, he’s not the one who gets to make decisions for me.

My father does.

And he wants me to marry Antonio.

So, there’s only one answer I can give. “Are you a kind man?” I ask.

Antonio looks surprised for a moment before nodding. “I don’t hurt women, if that’s what you’re asking. I have no desire.”

I inhale shakily. “Then ... if my father thinks it’s a good idea for us to marry ... then that’s what I think we should do.”

Father nods, pleased with me, and I let out that breath I’d been holding in.

Antonio looks between my father and me for a moment with a question in his eyes before he nods as well. “Ok, then. If we’re all in agreement, I think this marriage could be a good thing. I’m ready to take back my family business.”

Father raises his glass to Antonio. “And I’m ready to help you.”

The clink of their glasses sends a chill down my spine.

FATHER DOESN’T LET Antonio and I talk much over dinner, and soon, we’re saying goodbye, and I’m walking away from the man who’s going to become my husband.

“You did good in there,” Father says to me on the car ride home. “Make me proud, Nina.” That’s the same thing my mother said to me earlier, and yet, I feel like both my parents are talking about different things.

When we arrive back at our home, a man is waiting outside our front door. He has strikingly dark hair and handsome good looks, even though he’s closer to my father’s age than mine. There’s something familiar about his face, but I can’t quite place it.

Father approaches the man with ease. “Franco. What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure things are going according to plan.” He briefly glances at me before turning back to my father. “With—”

Father holds his up his hand. “Yes. It is. Speak no more of it. You have my assurances. Everything is going well so far.”

Franco huffs. “So far. Keep it that way, Petrov. I don’t want this plan of yours messing up.”

“Not at all. Now, if you would excuse me. I’m tired and ready to go to bed.” He brushes past Franco and unlocks the door, motioning me inside the house.

“I’m trusting you, Petrov,” Franco growls. His entire demeanor is off-putting.

“Yes, yes. Now, go back to your own family while I spend the night with mine.”

The last thing I see is the man, Franco, looking me over in a way that makes me feel so exposed just before my father shuts the door.

CHAPTER 3

Antonio

“So, how did it go?” Killian asks the following day as we head into the nondescript building that houses the fighting ring. The roar of the crowd is loud even from outside. I’m not fighting tonight, but I like to go and check on the other fighters to watch my future competition. Though, hopefully, with Petrov’s help, I won’t need to be busting my ass in fighting rings to earn money. I’ll soon have my family business, which was always rightfully mine. Uncle Franco is going down. I’ll make sure of it.

“I’m getting married.”

He stops in his tracks so suddenly a pair of women bump into him, giving him death glares. That is, until they see how handsome Killian is, and their glares become looks of appreciation. “Just like that?”

I shrug. “Just like that.”

We arrive in the main room, which has the biggest fighting ring. It’s the one I always perform in. The one I always win in. Hordes of people surround the fighting cage. Some screaming for blood. Some screaming for mercy. In the fighting cage is Big John and some other buff guy I don’t know.

“You just met the girl last night,” Killian says as we take our seats in a back booth. “And now you’re going to marry her?”

“Yes.” I flag down a waitress. She saunters over in booty shorts and a tight crop top that showcases her nipples through the fabric. “Two beers.”

She nods, gives me a wink, and makes a show of sashaying her hips over the bar. I don't blame her. She needs to make good tips, and the men there love when the waitresses show off their bodies.

"You just met her!" Killian says, drawing my attention back to our conversation.

"I did. And she's beautiful, man." I lean onto the table. "You should have seen her. Nina. A beautiful name. A beautiful face. There are worse people to marry."

"You don't even know her. She could be a horrible person for all you know."

"She could be. But getting back what belongs to me is more important. Saving my family from my uncle is more important. Franco took over when my father died, and he tried to rule my family with an iron grip. My mom, who was always cheerful when my father was alive, became sullen and depressed after he died, and she became even worse after Franco moved in. I know he hurts her," I add in a lower voice. "I'm not sure how, but ... I think he's hurt in ways I can't even comprehend. And my younger sisters and brother still live with him. I need to save them from him. I should have taken charge after my father died, but I was only twelve. Now, I'm an adult. It's my time. It's my turn. And Petrov is offering good money to help me. I can't pass that up. And if that means marrying his daughter to save my family, I'll do it in a heartbeat. Even if she was the most grotesque and vile person on the planet. I would still do it." I finish, sucking in a deep breath.

Killian stares at me a moment before shaking his head, a slight smile on his lips. "Wow, Tony, that's admirable." We've only known each other a week, and Killian is already calling me by my nickname. There's a trust between us. "I get it now. But be careful. Petrov's offer seems almost too good to be true."

"Is it?" The waitress plops down our beers and asks me if we need anything else. I wave her away. "I have to get married to a woman I don't even know," I say after the waitress leaves.

“I’m having to sacrifice my life of bachelorhood for this. His offer isn’t coming without any costs.” I take a huge swig of my beer.

Killian holds his beer in his hands. “True. I just ... I don’t know, Tony.” He rubs the back of his neck. “There’s just something about Petrov I don’t quite trust.”

“Are you just salty he didn’t know who you were?”

Killian frowns. “No. And I resent you asking me that.”

The crowd boos when Big John overtakes the other burly guy. Killian shakes his head and turns back to me. “Listen. I want to work with you, man. I want us to gain influence together. I’m still in if you are. This Petrov thing won’t interfere with me.”

“Good. I don’t want it to. I can work with both of you. And besides, when you see how much Petrov can help us, you’ll be taking back your words.”

“I’m down for you to prove me wrong.” He holds out his glass. “To gaining power.”

“To gaining power.” We clink our glasses together.

I HAVE no time to waste so I arrange a meeting between Killian, Petrov, and me later this week. I have a plan to take Franco down, and I need help getting it started.

We meet at a steakhouse a couple of blocks from my apartment. Petrov is waiting when I arrive and gives me a nod when he sees me. He frowns when he notices Killian. “I thought this was between you and me,” he says as Killian and I take our seats at the table.

“Yes. But Killian and I have already made a deal to work together, and I don’t like going back on my word. You’ll help me gain my family business back, but you’ll also be helping Killian.” I grab my menu and start perusing the food.

Petrov huffs. “I didn’t make a deal with him.” He nods at Killian, who’s reclined in his seat, looking way too smug.

“If you want us to work together,” I say, setting my menu down, “then you also work with Killian. It’s a fair deal, I think. I’m marrying your daughter. It’s a win-win for all of us.”

Petrov looks between Killian and me before sighing. “Fine. Just don’t fuck things up,” he tells Killian.

He raises his hands in surrender. “I won’t. I was raised as a good Irish Catholic boy. I know how to stay in line. But you need to do the same.” The men glare at each other.

“No fighting,” I say to break the tension. “Let’s all agree to get along. Petrov, I wanted to talk to you about getting to know Nina a little bit better before we marry. I think that’s only fair.”

“All right.” Petrov takes a sip of his red wine. “That is fair. Nina has been asking questions about you. You two have my permission to talk more before you get married.”

“And when that’s supposed to be?” Killian asks, leaning forward. “I still think an arranged marriage is a little strange.”

“It’s perfectly normal to me,” Petrov says in a monotone voice. “I was thinking by the end of this month,” he says, switching back to his normal self. Killian blinks in confusion. “No time to waste, don’t you agree?”

“I do,” I say. “I’m willing to do what I need to.”

Petrov smiles slowly. “That’s what I like to hear.”

A waitress comes by, asking for our orders. So different from the ring. This waitress wears a simple black t-shirt and black pants. It’s surreal to me how different two worlds can be. I grew up in riches, but I lived in poverty when I fled from Franco, and now I live with somewhat comfortable means. Not great, but not terrible either. It’s given me a different perspective on life compared to my sisters, who have only ever lived in wealth.

After we place our orders—a sirloin for Killian, a filet mignon for me, and the duck for Petrov—we get back to business.

“So, I was thinking,” I say, “that after the wedding, we strike against my uncle. Franco can’t rule much longer. It’s not right. We go after him when he least expects it and take him down. That way, neither of us has to wait long for me to be in a position of power. That benefits your daughter, it benefits me, and it also helps you,” I tell Killian. “Once I’m in power, I can help you take down Patrick O’Connell.”

“Sounds good to me,” Killian says.

Petrov shifts in his seat. “I like it. We need to hit Franco when he’s not expecting it, yes. But what exactly is the plan?”

“We need to start at his operation of power. He’s expanded into guns. If we take them from him, we’ll have more power, and it will weaken him. We can’t kill Franco in one shot. We need to weaken him, show his men he’s not a good leader, so that when I take over, they’ll be more accepting of me.”

“Good.” Petrov has a dark glint in his eye. “I like the way you think, Antonio. Let’s work on the plan. But for now, let’s eat.” As if on cue, the waitress brings out our food.

I settle into my seat with my delicious steak and feel the roots of my power stirring within me.

PETROV ARRANGED the meet with Nina and me to take place in Central Park at the Bethesda Fountain. When I arrive, I see Nina sitting on the fountain, a guard by her side. She somehow looks even prettier under the sunshine. Her light blonde hair makes her shimmer.

“Nina,” I greet her. She glances over, a small smile on her lips. Her beauty makes me catch my breath. Honestly, if I get the chance to look at Nina every day of my life, it won’t be a bad one. Even if she ends up being a horrible person, she’ll still radiate beauty. But I just can’t imagine someone as

gorgeous as her having a mean streak. The woman I met at the restaurant a week ago seemed so timid and nice.

“Antonio,” she responds, standing up and stepping around a couple walking toward the fountain, holding hands. “It’s nice ___”

“I’m glad—” I say at the same time. We both pause, then laugh. “You go,” I tell her.

The flush on her cheeks makes her porcelain skin look even more lovely. “It’s nice we finally get the chance to talk away from my father. I want to know the man I’m marrying.”

“I agree. I want to know the woman I’m marrying. You’re not alone in that.”

“I’m glad. This ... engagement has me worried. It’s happening so fast.” She smooths her hands down her summer dress, which gives me an excuse to rake my eyes over her and take in her body. I can’t wait to see her naked.

“You don’t need to worry,” I tell her in my most calming voice. When you’ve grown up with five sisters, you learn how to talk to women. “I don’t want to hurt you, Nina. Truly. The reason I agreed to this marriage is because I want to protect my family. I have good intentions. Trust me.”

She looks at me for a moment before smiling. “I do. You have a trustworthy presence.”

“I’m just looking to get back what’s rightfully mine. I want to save my family from my uncle. That’s all.”

“Ok, then. If I’m going to be anyone’s wife to anyone, I want it to be to someone who is kind. And you seem kind, Antonio.”

I step closer to her, barely avoiding a kid running past, holding onto a balloon. “I am kind. You seem kind as well.”

She ducks her head, and I place my finger under her chin, bringing her beautiful face back up to mine. “You don’t need to hide from me,” I tell her.

“Well, if you find me kind and I find you kind, then maybe this is a good match.”

“A match made in heaven,” I tease.

She chuckles, not pulling away from me. The natural chemistry between us is intense. It’s easy. It’s effortless. Who knew an arranged marriage could be like this? “I’d like to get to know you better.”

“Then let’s take a walk.” I hold out my arm to her, and she takes it without hesitation, her touch warm on my skin. Together, we walk through Central Park, her guard keeping a few paces behind us.

“So, you said you want to protect your family from your uncle,” she says in her delicate voice. “How so?”

“When my father died, my uncle took over, and he hasn’t let go of that power since. But it’s rightfully mine. And I need to protect my family from him because he’s hurt us too many times to count.”

“I’m so sorry.” The way she says it tells me she means it. Most people sound insincere when they offer sympathy, but Nina has a genuine presence to her that makes me instantly like her. “I know what it’s like to want to protect your family. I have a younger sister, Anna. Our father can be ... strict at times. I’m hoping our marriage can offer me more influence, too, so I can always help take care of Anna.”

“I get that. Petrov can be a bit of a hardass, huh?”

A strained smile passes her lips. “You can say that.” We walk through a grassy area of the park where families are having picnics and kids are running around with Frisbees in their hands. “But I don’t really want to talk about my father. I just wanted to meet you without him there so I could get a better read on you.”

“Same.”

“And what do you think?”

I answer honestly. “I think marrying you might be one of the best things to ever happen to me. And you?”

“I think marrying you will give me freedom. And for that, I’d do anything.”

Nina and I are a lot more alike than I thought. We both want something from this marriage, which makes us equally matched. That's not a bad thing. We understand each other.

Marrying Nina will help me retake my rightful role, but it's already brought someone into my life who gets me.

And for that, I feel slightly less alone than I did the day before.

THE WEDDING HAPPENS in less than a month. Petrov is antsy to get Nina and I married, and I don't stop it. I want this marriage as much as he does. I don't partake in any of the wedding planning as Nina's mother, Elizabeth, handles all that.

Killian, Petrov, and I also plan on which of Franco's gun shipments to hit after the wedding. All is going according to plan.

Except for the fact that my family won't attend my wedding. My older sisters, Emilia, Gemma, and Francesca, can't come because that would mean choosing sides. And since their husbands have all made deals with Franco, they can't choose mine. My younger siblings and mom can't come, seeing as they still live with Franco, and he'd never allow it. Besides, he's not even supposed to know this marriage alliance is happening. Everything has to be kept under lock and key. Which is why the wedding planning doesn't take long; the only people in attendance will be Nina, her family, and me. The wedding will take place in a church, and then we'll have dinner together as a new family, and that's that. Not exactly the most romantic, but it will do in a pinch.

I'm getting dressed in my tux when the memory of my father's funeral hits me. Since it's my wedding day, a funeral seems appropriate, given everything.

I remember staring at my dead father as he laid in his casket on the church dais, his men surrounding my family and I as we mourned. Cecilia was bawling next to me, holding onto her cross and trying her best to murmur a prayer. I

grabbed her hand and kept my head up, keeping my tears at bay.

I was twelve, and already, I was trying to show how much of a man I was. On the other side of me was Francesca, who was silently crying. Even when mourning, she was quiet. Gemma couldn't hold back her tears, and Emilia was trying to hold it together for everyone. Mia, my youngest sister at the time before the twins were born, was only eight. She looked so fragile as she stood beside Cecilia and cried. That's the one thing I always envied about the twins, Lucia and Luca. They were born nine months after our father died. They never knew what it was like to miss the man who raised them. My father was my role model, and he was gone.

Even in death, he still looked like my dad. His dark hair and wrinkled skin, despite being middle-aged. Riccardo Moretti. He looked so much smaller in death.

After the ceremony was done and we'd arrived at the rec center where the reception was hosted, I wandered off alone. I'd just seen a spider I'd wanted to kill, but Gemma tried and stopped me. She ended up falling backward after we fought. and our mom scolded her. I used that to my advantage and walked outside, where I sat on the stoop. I looked at my father's pendant, which hung around my neck. My mom had slipped it to me an hour earlier. I was still getting used to it.

A presence at my back made me turn around. Franco, looking so much like my dad it hurt. For a moment, I thought he was my dad until he stepped into the sunlight, and I saw the differences between him and my dad. Where my dad was tall and broad-shouldered, Franco was slightly skinner and shorter. Though they both shared the same dark hair and intense eyes.

"Antonio," he said, nodding down at me. My father wouldn't have hesitated to sit beside me on the ground, but Franco kept his distance. "You have your father's pendant, I see."

I clutched it in my hand. "Yeah."

"You know, because I'll be taking over in his stead, it's only fitting you give it to me."

I tucked the pendant under my shirt and stood up, keeping far out of Franco's reach. "No. My mom gave it to me, and she knew my dad better than anyone. He wanted me to have it."

Franco chuckled in a dark way that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. "You really think your mother knew your father best? He was my brother. I think I knew him best."

"No. You're wrong."

"Just give me the pendant, Antonio." He held out his hand. "This doesn't need to be hard."

I looked around to notice I was alone with Franco outside. Everyone else was inside for the reception. I edged my way toward the door. "No. This belonged to my father, and now it belongs to me."

"Just give it to me." Franco lunged in my direction, and I darted back. For a moment, I thought he was going to hit me, and maybe he would have, if not for my mother stepping outside at that moment.

"What's going on here?" she asked, looking between Franco and me. My uncle immediately stepped away from me, smoothing back his hair.

"Nothing, Giulia," he said to her. "Just Antonio and I having a chat. I wanted to see my brother's pendant. That's all."

Mom didn't move from her spot. "Well, Antonio, maybe you should come back inside. Cecilia was asking where you were. Come on." I hurried inside with my mom, feeling my uncle's eyes on my back the entire time.

I settled in at one of the tables next to Cecilia, who had her head bowed over her cross as she said a prayer for our father.

"Are you ok?" she asked without looking at me.

"Not really," I admitted, and that was when the tears came. I'd been holding them back for so long, but I could no longer pretend to be a man. I was just a twelve-year-old boy.

All Cecilia did was take my hand and silently tell me she would be there for me, even though she was just ten years old

herself. I clung back, and together, we stayed like that for the rest of the reception until we could finally go home.

But home wasn't any better because my father wasn't there and, in his place, was Franco. Nothing was ever the same again.

Now, as I finish fixing my tie, I look myself over in the mirror, taking in my suit and slicked back hair, ready for my wedding.

A wedding and a funeral.

What could do wrong?

CHAPTER 4

Mina

It's my wedding day.

I can barely believe how fast it's come. My mom spent the past month planning it in a frenzy. She even stopped taking her normal pills so she'd have the energy to plan it. Even though Antonio and I met up, which helped me feel more comfortable around him, he's still unknown to me. I guess we have the rest of our lives to figure each other out. That's a surreal thought.

"There," Mom says, brushing down the skirt of my wedding dress. It's a simple satin gown with off the shoulder sleeves and a subtle neckline that shows off just a hint of cleavage. We got it on short notice because my father insisted I marry Antonio as soon as possible. "You look lovely." She fluffs my hair, which is down in a simple hairstyle.

"Thank you." I take in a deep breath as I look at myself in the full-length mirror. My bedroom is reflected in it, and it dawns on me that this is probably the last time I'll see my bedroom for a while because I'll be moving in with Antonio after we're married.

"Are you ready?"

I meet her gaze in the mirror. "Am I a bad a person if I say no?"

"Of course not. This is an arranged marriage, after all. It's ok to feel a little scared."

More like a lot scared. "Mom, do you think this is the best thing for me? Marrying Antonio?"

She sighs as she sits on my bed. “It’s what your father wants.”

But what about what I want? I just want to get Anna out of this house and away from our father. My marriage to Antonio provides me that opportunity, and yet, Antonio will be working with my dad, which means I’ll still be tied to him in a way. Which is exactly what I don’t want.

“Tell me you’ll make sure Anna is safe.”

Mom frowns. “Why wouldn’t she be safe?”

The memory of my father’s hand tightening on his belt flashes through my mind.

I want to tell my mom, but she’s already so fragile as is. “When’s the last time you’ve taken your pills?”

She fiddles with a piece of string poking up from my bedding. “I’ve been trying to cut back, you know that. I’ve made an effort to plan your wedding. I thought you’d be proud.”

“I am proud,” I tell her, sitting down next to her on the bed. “I just want to make sure you’ll be ok, too.”

“I always am. Now, let’s get to the church. You need to get married.” She hurries out of my room. I know she’s keeping something from me just like I’m keeping something from her.

I GOT HOME, and all was quiet. Normally, Anna would be running around the house, having gotten home from preschool before me. I was in middle school, and it always ended around three, so it was strange that no one was home. My Mom was out shopping or something.

I set my backpack gently on the ground by the door. Father didn’t like me tossing it just anywhere. He said it caused clutter and that clutter got you one step closer to the devil. I saw my father’s shoes in the foyer, so I knew he was home.

And next to his shoes ... were a pair of high heels.

They weren't my mother's. She barely wore high heels because she broke her ankle a few years ago. After it mended, she swore off high heels, even though my father tried insisting she still wear them. She told him no, and it was probably the only time I'd ever seen her stand up to him.

I walked into the living room and looked around. A lacy top was on the couch. I touched its thin straps before backing away. Why was a woman's slinky shirt on our couch? My mother never wore anything like that, and seeing as I was only eleven, my father would kill me if I ever tried to wear something like that. Anna was only four.

Then I heard a giggle come from my parent's bedroom. My father's voice followed. "Yeah, you're a sexy thing, aren't you?" His voice was primal and dark. It made me feel afraid because I'd never heard him sound like that before. There was that giggle again. High pitched and feminine.

It dawned on me that my father was in his bedroom with a woman who wasn't my mother. But why?

I knew I should have scurried off to my room. That was what would have been expected of me. But I needed to know what was going on. Something was urging me to.

So, with a gulp, I walked toward my parent's bedroom. When I looked through the slit in the door, I saw my father's bare backside. Underneath him was a woman much younger than my mother. She looked like the teen girls I watched on my favorite TV shows—the ones my father always criticized me for watching.

And they were ... moving together. I didn't quite understand it. My parents kept me in the dark when it came to that stuff, so I didn't have the comprehension to fully understand what was happening.

I did know one thing.

I knew it wasn't right.

I couldn't bear the sight anymore, so I turned away. Unfortunately, I stepped on a creaky floorboard. I gasped, then heard my father shush the woman. Then there was silence.

I waited for a beat before running toward my room. My father's thunderous footsteps sounded out behind me.

"Nina?" he asked in a calm voice, but I could sense the anger underneath. I could always sense the anger.

I didn't look at him. "I have homework to do."

"Don't tell your mother." His words made me freeze. "Just ... go to your room and don't come back out until dinner time."

I didn't waste a second as I ran to my room. Even after hours passed and Mom came home and made dinner, even after sitting down at the table as a family, I couldn't look at my father, not once.

I FOLLOW my mom out of the room, my wedding dress flowing around me. I never told her what I saw, even now, years later. I desperately want to, but ever since she started struggling with her pills, I haven't had the heart to tell her. She moves slowly as she crosses the living room. Planning this wedding took a lot out of her. I tried my best to help, but Father told me planning my wedding wasn't my job.

"Mom?" I call out, making her stop. When she turns to me, I try to not wince. She looks so fragile and tired. I could tell her everything. About Father, about me, about what I saw. But the words don't come. They never come.

"Nina," she says, coming back toward me. "We really need to go. Your father is meeting us at the church. He'll be upset if we're late. Anna?" she calls out. "We have to go!"

Anna comes slinking from her room, looking uncomfortable in the bright blue dress Father insisted she wear. "Weddings are stupid. I don't want to go."

"You have to. This is Nina's big day. Now, come on." She grabs Anna's hand before Anna can bolt back to her room, and together, we leave the condo. The moment the door shuts behind me, I know my life is about to change. I'll be marrying

a man who's still a stranger in so many ways. The only consolation is that Antonio seems genuinely kind.

And yet, he's working with my father. How kind of a man can he really be if he's getting into bed with the devil?

Anna sulks the entire way to the church. We're seated in the backseat of the town car. My father insists we have a driver take us everywhere because it's not proper for women to drive. Or so he believes.

"Nina?" Mom says in a quiet voice. She glances over at Anna, who sighs and rests her head against the window, trying to ignore us. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Yes?"

"You do know what's going to happen tonight, don't you?"

I frown. "The wedding?"

Her cheeks flush as she ducks her head. "No. I mean ... *tonight.*"

"Oh." It dawns on me then what she's really trying to get at. I give her hand a squeeze. "It's ok, Mom. They taught us all about that in school." When my father found out, though, he was livid. He doesn't believe in sex education at an all-girl's school. "I know the basics."

She relaxes a little bit. "Good, good. I just want you to be prepared. On my wedding night with your father ..." She shakes her head, turning her head away from me. "It wasn't what I expected. So, if your husband is ... rough with you ... that's just how men show their affection."

"Rough?" Sex education at my school didn't cover that. I was never allowed to look up porn or read erotica. My father would have killed me. I know enough about sex but not everything. "It's supposed to be rough?"

"It will hurt," she says bluntly. "You probably won't enjoy it. Be prepared for that. But it's your duty, and you need to perform your duty."

"What duty?" Anna asks. "What will hurt?"

“Anna, shush,” Mom says. “This conversation isn’t for you. Go back to looking out the window.” Anna sighs but does what she’s told. Mom turns back to me. “Do you understand, Nina?”

“I understand,” I whisper. “I’ll do my duty even if ...” Even if it hurts.

We arrive at the church, now with me even more nervous than I was before. Mom gets out behind me and reaches into her purse. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her pop something into her mouth. More of her pills.

I don’t say anything. If I did, it would just be the same thing I’ve said to her a million times before.

Father is waiting on the top step outside the church, towering over us.

He looks me over and nods as if I’ve passed his unspoken test. “You look like a bride. Antonio is waiting inside. Shall we?” He holds out his arm to me, and I take it.

Anna is walking up the steps when she trips, landing hard on her knee. I start to move toward her when Father stops me.

“Anna!” he scolds, walking over to her and yanking her up. She lets out a small cry. “Learn how to walk like a lady.” He lets her go with a scoff before turning back to me. “Come on.”

Anna’s knee is now bleeding. Mom doesn’t seem to notice; her eyes are already glazing over. Her medicine works fast.

I try again to walk toward Anna, but Father grabs my hand and whisks me inside the church. “But Anna—”

“Will be fine,” he finishes. “It’s time for you to get married.”

The church is practically empty. There’s no one in the pews. The only people in the church are the priest and Antonio standing on the dais. My mom and sister are behind me, and my father is next to me. I wonder why Antonio’s family couldn’t be here. I know a little—that he wants to regain control of his family business. That his uncle is the one with

all the power. But that doesn't explain why his family couldn't be here. Does his uncle have that much power over them that they couldn't come? Or do they just not care about Antonio?

My sympathy for Antonio grows. If he's alone—and I know what it feels like to be alone—then maybe he really will treat me right. I hope we're compatible. It would make this marriage easier.

Antonio smiles as I walk down the aisle. My father's hand is tight on my arm, and I have to resist the urge to grimace. I can't help but smile back as Antonio looks at me the way he does—like I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever laid eyes on.

Once I reach the end, my father hands me over to Antonio and takes his seat in the pew with my mom and sister. My footsteps echo on the wood as I take my place before Antonio.

“We are gathered here today ...” the priest begins.

Antonio takes up my entire field of vision. He's handsome personified in his suit, his sandy hair slicked back, showing off his strong jaw and cheekbones. His eyes are warm, and his touch on my hand is a comfort. When I look into his eyes, all I can feel is safety. How can a man who seems so sweet work with my father? I don't understand it, but it's not my job, as a woman or a wife, to understand it. My father instilled that in me.

When the priest turns to Antonio and asks him if he'll take me in marriage, Antonio stands up straighter and says in a clear voice, “I do.”

His words send a shiver through me. So, this is it. My turn.

“And do you,” the priest asks, “Nina Petrov, take Antonio Moretti to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

For a moment, I glance at my father, who gives me a subtle nod. I can't disobey him now.

I turn back to Antonio. “I do.” The smile Antonio gives me lets me know everything will be all right.

“Then I pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Antonio gently cups my face and leans down. With the barest of touches, he brushes his lips against mine before pulling back. Instantly, I want more. Just that simple touch set my body on fire.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says so only I can hear. I can’t help but agree.

Because the wedding happened so fast, there’s no reception. Instead, my parents give us their congratulations.

Father shakes Antonio’s hand as we stand outside of the church. “Treat my daughter well.”

“You know I will, sir,” Antonio replies. “I look forward to working with you.”

“And I you.” Father turns to me, his eyes turning colder. “Make me proud, Nina.” There’s an undercurrent in his words that make me frown. Before I can wonder much what it is, Mom pulls me into a hug.

“I’m happy for you,” she says into my ear.

Once she steps back, I hug Anna, even as she tries squirming away. “Be safe, ok?”

“You’re weird sometimes, Nina,” she says back, stepping away from me. I want to tell my sister everything, but I can’t. Not with my father right beside her. Anna has to be ok. I have to believe it.

Antonio takes my hand. “I guess ... it’s time to go home.” I nod and follow him to his car. He drives himself, I note. I wave goodbye, mostly to my sister and mother, as Antonio drives us away from the church and from my father.

ANTONIO’S APARTMENT is a lot smaller than the high-rise condo I grew up in, but it instantly feels warmer inside. Messy blankets lie over the top of the couch. A record player sits in

the corner. A rack of his shoes is in the entryway. It feels ... lived in. My home felt like a glass museum, but Antonio's home feels like a real home.

"I plan on moving into a real house once I take over," he tells me as if apologizing for the small space.

"No. It's perfect," I tell him.

"Yeah?" He shrugs his jacket off, showcasing the muscular build beneath his white shirt. He's so handsome; it's almost hard to concentrate on anything else. "Well, thanks. When my uncle took over and I left, I didn't have anything, I had to make my way in the world, and I worked to be able to afford something like this. It isn't as nice as the place I grew up in, but it's still nice. It's all ... mine."

"I've only ever lived in the condo I grew up in, and that place is staunchly my father's, so ..."

"So, I guess we can make this place ours. For the time being."

My breath gets caught in my throat at Antonio's words. Ours. The thought doesn't make me nervous. In fact, it makes me sort of ... happy. "I'd like that."

"Great." His easy-going smile warms my heart. "I know this has happened fast, us getting married. I never expected this."

"Why did you agree to marry me?" I blurt out.

He pauses before nodding, a resolute expression on his face. "Because you offer me the chance to save my family and take back my family's power from my uncle. Why did you agree to marry me?"

"Because my father wanted me to."

"Huh." He takes a step closer to me, and I don't move away. "Do you always do what your father tells you?" With a tentative touch of his fingers, he sets his hands on my waist. The sudden touch makes me yearn for more, but then I remember what my mother told me.

It's my duty to have sex with Antonio, but it will hurt.

“I do,” I whisper. “It’s just ... easier that way.”

“Well, your father isn’t here, so you can do what you want to.”

“I have to perform my duty.”

He leans his head close to mine. “And what duty is that?”

“To have sex. But I’m ... scared.”

“You don’t need to be scared.” He intertwines our fingers together. “We can do what you want to. If you don’t want to have sex, we don’t have to.”

I let out an explosive breath. “But ... my mom told me ...”

“Don’t listen to what your mom or dad wants. What do you want?” His fingertips touching my fingertips is really distracting me.

“I don’t want it to hurt,” I admit.

“Sex shouldn’t hurt,” he tells me. “In fact, it should only fun.” He gently squeezes my waist, which makes me stumble closer to him.

“How do you know?”

His lips twitch. “Trust me. I know. Now, what do you want?”

What do I want?

Looking into Antonio’s eyes, I know.

I felt it when he brushed his lips against mine at the church.

Without any more hesitation, I kiss him.

CHAPTER 5

Mina

Antonio eagerly kisses me back. Before I know it, our lips are meshed together in a passionate kiss that takes my breath away. This is so much better than the little kiss we shared at the church. This new kiss lights my body on fire and makes me desperate for more.

My mother made it sound like sex would hurt, but Antonio just assured me that's not the case. I'm not sure who to believe but kissing Antonio feels too good; I can't imagine the rest will be horrible.

Antonio clutches my waste tightly as he walks me over to the couch. The back of my knees hit the cushion, and I stumble down onto it. Antonio doesn't miss a beat as he continues to kiss me. I place my hands on his shoulders, trying to steady myself. His broad shoulders are muscular under my hands, making me feel lightheaded. Antonio kisses me harder as he leans over me onto the couch, pressing me back against it.

He trails kisses down my neck and jaw. I gasp. "This doesn't hurt, does it?" he asks into my ear, his breath hot, making me shiver.

All I can do is shake my head no. It doesn't hurt at all.

Antonio lifts his head to meet my gaze, his eyes intense and all-consuming. "We don't have to take things further if you're not ready. We barely know each other."

"No. It's my duty to do this."

“But I don’t want it to just be your duty.” He cups my face. “I want you to choose to do this. Not because you’re doing it out of duty. If you want to continue, tell me now. If you want to stop, I think we should stop before we take it too far.”

“You’re really kind, you know that?” I’m starting to see how true that is. Antonio’s nothing like my father. There’s such a sweetness to him that makes my heart ache.

His crooked smile gives me butterflies. “I try to be when it comes to women. I was raised with five sisters. I learned how to treat a woman right. My sisters and mom made sure of it.”

“Then give them my thanks.”

His smile fades slightly, and it dawns on me what I just said.

“Antonio, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean ...”

“No, it’s ok. I haven’t spoken to my family in five years. But once I take my uncle down, I’ll be able to see them again. Now that we’re married and I have your father’s support, my dream will become a reality.”

“I want to help you make it a reality.” The moment the words leave of me, I realize just how much I mean them. “I want you to see your family again.”

“Thank you.” He leans off me. “Now, enough about family. I don’t really want to think about them when I have my beautiful wife under me.” I flush. “Do you want to stop, Nina, or do you want to keep going?”

I bite my lip, and his eyes dart straight to it, darkening. “You promise it won’t hurt?”

“I promise. I only want to make you feel good.”

With a deep breath, I answer. “I want to keep going.”

“Then we keep going,” he says, his voice dropping an octave and making me shiver as goosebumps settle over me.

Antonio gets off me and helps me stand up before he picks me up into his arms, bridal style. I hold onto him as he carries

me into his bedroom. *Our bedroom*, I remind myself. This is my home now, too.

Antonio's bedroom is clean and simple. The only thing that really stands out are the photos on one wall. Pictures of him with other women. Some are blonde, some are brunettes. But they all look alike. It's in their eyes and noses and chins.

"Your sisters?" I ask, nodding at the photos.

"Yeah. Those were the ones I had on my phone before I had to leave. I was just a teenager in all of them." He sounds wistful for a moment before clearing his throat. "But I'm here to focus on you. So, let's do that." He sets me down on the bed so gently my heart warms. "Let me show you how good this can be."

He grips my right foot and slowly takes off my shoe. His fingers brush my ankle, and I gasp at the sensation. I never knew I was so sensitive there. Antonio smiles as he takes off my other shoe, then rakes his hands up my legs to my knees, slowly pushing my dress up. My breath comes out shaky.

"You don't need to be afraid," he says, placing his steady hands on my knees. "If you want to stop at any time, just let me know, ok?"

I nod, settling into the bed, feeling calmer after his reassurance. Antonio won't hurt me. I refuse to believe it. He has too much kindness in him.

Antonio leans down and presses a kiss to each of my knees. Who knew knees could be so erotic? I swallow hard at the sensation. He smiles at me as he steps back and motions at my dress. "Let's get this off you."

I sit up on shaky arms. Antonio sweeps his hand over my neck, providing me with comfort. Every touch of his makes me feel even more alive than before, and we haven't even done much beyond kiss. I wonder what it'll be like it when we have sex. I'll probably spontaneously combust.

Antonio unzips the back of my dress before helping me slip it off. I push the rest of it down my legs. Antonio rakes his eyes over me, and I resist the urge to cover myself. I'm in

nothing but my bra and underwear. They're both lacy and nothing I would normally wear, but my mom insisted, telling me it was my wedding, and my husband would expect it.

"Is this ... ok?" I motion at my bra.

He lets out a rough breath. "Is it ok? You're beautiful, Nina. God, you're beautiful." The way he says it, I can only believe he truly means it. "But I'd like to see all of you, if you're ok with that."

I think on it for a moment and then nod. "Ok," I whisper. "But first ... I want to see more of you." I nod at his white shirt. "Please."

Antonio saunters closer to me, undoing his buttons one-by-one. "You want to see more of me? I'd be glad to show you." When he slips his shirt off, I almost can't breathe at the sight. He's gorgeous. His chest is toned and muscular but not too much. He's just right.

"You can touch me, you know." His words break me out of my reverie. With a tentative hand, I reach out to touch his chest. Antonio blows out a rough breath the moment my fingers touch his skin. I pull back.

"Is ... is this ok?"

He grabs my hand and places it firmly on his chest. "It's more than ok." I take the next few minutes to explore his chest, running my hand down his stomach and up to his upper chest. Antonio watches me intently the entire time. I can feel a wetness forming between my legs. It's arousal. I've felt it plenty of times before but nothing like this. I feel like I'm melting inside.

Antonio gently grabs my hand and kisses each of my fingertips. "It's my turn." He leans over me, making me lay down on the bed as he kisses his way over my upper chest. I breathe slowly, watching him. When he reaches my bra, he unhooks it before I can do anything. With his intense gaze meeting mine, Antonio slides my bra down my arms. He looks me over, his eyes darkening.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs before kissing my breasts. I have to clamp my legs together from the powerful sensation that races through me. He gives special attention to each breast with his lips and hands.

“Antonio,” I gasp, my body writhing on the bed. I’ve never felt this frantic before.

“I know what you need.” He sits up and grabs the hem of my underwear before ripping them off me. All I can do is gasp and arch my hips. Antonio tosses my underwear away like it’s no big deal before he grabs my thighs and slowly parts my legs. “You still ok?”

Am I ok? I feel like I’m burning inside, but it also feels so good. I nod. “I’m ok.”

“Trust me.”

“I do.” I know I barely know Antonio, but I already trust him. He makes it so easy.

Antonio pushes my legs apart, then slides his hand between them. The moment his fingers brush against my most sensitive area, I cry out. This feeling is electric. Its fire come to life.

“Feel how good this is,” he says, running his fingers over my folds. When his thumb brushes my nub, my hips buck up of their own accord, and a small moan escapes me. My father would judge me for being so wanton, but at this moment, I don’t care. Antonio is my husband. There’s nothing wrong with this.

He presses his hand harder against me, rubbing me faster and faster. I can’t breathe. It’s like Antonio has taken everything from me in the best way possible.

The way he’s looking at me makes me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. Like I’m the only woman in the world.

“Antonio?” I ask when I feel something growing inside me. He presses down onto my nub, sending shockwaves of pleasure over me. “Antonio?”

He nods like he understands exactly what I'm feeling. "Come for me, Nina. It's ok. Just let go."

I trust Antonio enough to do just that. I let go.

And it's glorious.

My entire body feels like it's a live wire to touch. I gasp as my body shudders in pleasure. I've heard of this before, of course. An orgasm. I've just never experienced it before. It's surreal and amazing and consuming and everything else in between.

Antonio watches me with a smile. "Good?"

When I can finally speak, I nod. "Good."

"Are you ready for more?"

Am I? I can barely breathe after that, but I don't want this to end. So, I nod for us to continue.

I watch in confusion as Antonio gets off the bed, but once he slides his pants down, I understand. We're going to have sex. This is the moment. I really hope my mom is wrong about everything. If she is, then I'll feel incredibly sad for her.

Once Antonio is undressed, I get to see him in all his glory. His erection is intimidating to be honest, but the look of it also heightens my arousal. I don't move as he settles on top of me, his erection against my inner thigh.

"I got you, Nina." He wraps his arms around me, bringing us chest to chest. My breasts feel so sensitive against his skin. "Ready?"

"Ready."

With a shift of his hips, he enters me. Slowly at first. Right away, I feel a pressure inside my inner channel. It doesn't hurt, but it's not exactly comfortable. Then Antonio presses in deeper, and that ache goes away, leaving behind only pleasure. I've never felt this full before. It's overwhelming.

I clutch Antonio's back for support as he settles all the way inside me. Then he stops. "Are you ok?" he grits out.

"Are you ok?" I ask. "You sound ... upset."

He chuckles darkly. “I’m not upset. You feel amazing around me. I’m just trying to concentrate and not move.”

“Oh.” I understand. He doesn’t want to hurt me, but it’s causing him discomfort to not move. I shift my hips experimentally, and Antonio hisses.

“Not helping, Nina.”

“Sorry,” I squeak out.

“You’re good. Just tell me when you’re ready, ok?” He kisses me before I can respond, and we spend the next few moments just kissing. My body adjusts to him inside me, and it doesn’t take long for me to pull back and tell him I’m ready.

Antonio looks so relieved as he presses his head to mine. And then, together, we start to move. He shifts his hips against mine, driving his erection deeper into me. I cry out, wrapping my legs around his hips, seeking more friction. Now that the ache has passed, all I feel is a goodness that makes me breathless.

Antonio is gentle with his thrusts as he moves inside me. His length is touching parts of me I didn’t even know could be touched. My hands clutch his back, my fingers lightly digging into his skin. Antonio grabs my thighs and rolls his hips, thrusting into me again and again. It’s magical. I never knew I could feel this good. My mom was wrong. Sex doesn’t hurt—it’s the opposite. It feels like I’m breathing for the very first time.

I start to move my hips up to meet his, matching his pace. Antonio smiles, and I smile back, our foreheads still pressed together. He really is such a kind man. I don’t know how I got so lucky, but I guess years of putting up with my father was my act of penance, and now I’m getting my reward through my marriage to Antonio.

He grabs my thighs tighter, bringing my legs up higher around his waist. His pace is becoming more frantic. “Nina,” he groans, grinding against me. I gasp, holding onto him tighter.

“Come on, baby,” he says, making me moan softly. “Come for me again. I know you can do it. I want to see it.” His words are making it hard for me to even think clearly.

One thing I do know is that same pressure is building up inside me again, waiting to explode. And it doesn’t take long for it to reach its climax again.

When Antonio thrusts into me once more, I let go. I shudder and cry as I come again. Antonio increases his pace as he thrusts harder into me. I don’t mind. It helps spur on my orgasm even more.

Antonio soon comes next, releasing inside me. He groans, pressing his head harder against mine, and I hold him back just as tightly. Together, our bodies shudder and seek their release.

It’s only after we’ve stopped that Antonio sits up slightly, though he still doesn’t let me go. His eyes rake over my face, making me blush. “I think I’m going to be happy being married to you.”

When his words sink in, all I can do is laugh. Antonio joins in and kisses me, smothering our laughter, and soon, we spend the rest of the evening kissing in each other’s arms.

“I WANT to see where you grew up,” I tell Antonio the next day. He hasn’t left my side once since the wedding. Even though we’re sitting at the breakfast table, Antonio still finds a way to touch me. A graze to the knee, a tap to the thigh, a press to my arm. Who knew anyone could be this happy in an arranged marriage.

Antonio’s smile falters slightly when he hears my request. “Nina ...”

“I know. But I still want to get to know more about you. There’s still so much for me to learn, and I think seeing where you grew up might help me understand you better.”

“If we do this, then we can’t be seen. My uncle can’t see me.”

“I understand. I just want to see your house.”

It doesn't take much to convince Antonio to bring me to his childhood home. I get the feeling Antonio wants to see me happy, which I'm not used to. My father never cared if I was happy or not growing up. But Antonio cares, and that means the world to me.

It takes an hour by car to get to his childhood home. He parks a little down the street, so we won't be seen. “There.” He points at a white brownstone with big windows.

“You really did come from wealth.”

“I wasn't lying.” He puts his arm around me, pulling me in close. “It's always weird seeing it, yet being so far away. It would be so easy for me to just walk inside and see my family again, but my uncle would try to kill me, so that's out of the question.”

“What are you going to do about your uncle?”

“Take him down,” Antonio says bluntly. “There's no other way. That's what your father is helping me with.”

“Well, I'm glad. He's doing one good thing at least.”

Antonio frowns, turning to me. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh ... nothing.” I look away from him. I don't want to ruin his alliance with my father by revealing how cruel my father can be. My father tried to hurt me growing up, but he won't do that to Antonio. He's always valued men over the women in his family.

“Nina.” Antonio gently tugs on my chin to make me face him again. “Is there something about your father I need to know?”

I could tell him. About how my father cheated on my mom. How he threatened to whip me with his belt if I ever told her the truth. But none of that matters in Antonio's alliance with him. “No,” I say instead. “My father can be cold sometimes, but ... that's it. I'm glad he's helping you. He must see a lot of potential in you to make a deal with you and

entrust me to you. You have nothing to worry about. I can't wait for you to take down your uncle and get the power you deserve. I'd love to meet your family one day."

He stares at me a moment before nodding and settling back in his seat. "I'd love for that, too. You'd get along great with my sisters. I know they'd all love you. But we should head back. I don't want to risk my family coming home and seeing me. Or worse, my uncle."

With one last look at Antonio's family home, I turn away as he drives out of the neighborhood. I can't unsee the pained expression on his face. Antonio misses his family dearly. I can't wait for him to see them again.

MY FATHER CALLS ME, demanding I return home to see him. I'm surprised because I thought he couldn't get rid of my fast enough. The only reason I agree is because I want to check on Anna. And I want to make sure I don't hurt Antonio's alliance by refusing my father.

"Ok," I tell my father over the phone. "Antonio and I will come by to see you."

"No," he says. "Just you."

I glance at Antonio, who's in his homemade gym, which is in spare bedroom, pounding away at his punching bag. I know to not disobey my father, so I tell him ok. I'm sure he has his reasons for wanting to see only me. He always has his reasons.

I let Antonio know I'll be going to see my father, and he gives me a kiss goodbye. He's so affection. Gosh, I'm happy.

When I arrive at my old home, my first instinct is to find my sister, but when my father opens the door and guides me into the living room, I stop. There's that man again. The one who was outside our house a month ago asking about ... something. I can't remember now. Frank, I think his name was.

“Nina, this is Franco,” Father says, motioning to the man. Franco. That was it.

“Hello,” I say politely.

Franco gives me a cursory glance before turning to my father. “You really think she’ll be able to handle this? She looks like she’ll blow over in the wind.”

Handle what?

“Where’s Anna?” I ask, scanning the room.

“Your mother and sister are out for the day,” Father explains, sitting in his favorite chair. He nods at the couch, his silent cue for me to take my seat. I do. Father turns to Franco, who’s pacing the room. “My daughter is *my* daughter. She’ll do anything I tell her to do. I raised her right, Franco. She can do this.”

“Do ... what?” I ask.

“Nina, Franco here is Antonio’s uncle.”

All the breath leaves my body. The man before me is the man who tried to kill my husband? The reason Antonio can’t see his family anymore?

“I don’t understand ...”

“We work together,” Franco says, nodding at my father.

“But ...”

Father leans toward me. “Nina, the reason I had you marry Antonio wasn’t so I could make an alliance with him; it was so I could get someone close to him he would trust. Someone he wouldn’t suspect.”

“Suspect ... what?” My heart is pounding, and blood is rushing in my ears, making it hard for me to comprehend what my father is saying.

“Nina.” Father steepled his fingers together, which means he means business. “Franco and I need you to kill Antonio.”

CHAPTER 6

Mina

It takes me a moment to comprehend my father's words. *Kill Antonio*. They need me to kill Antonio. Antonio, my new husband. Antonio, the man I just made love to. Antonio, the one person who has been nothing but kind to me. I trust him, even though I haven't known him long.

"What?" That's all I can say. No other words make sense.

Franco snorts, turning away from me. "See? She's already confused. We can find someone else to do this."

"No one is better," Father snaps at Franco. "She's the only one who can get close enough to him."

"But what about that Killian guy? The one Antonio had you make a deal with."

Father waves a dismissive hand as he settles back in his seat. "No. A man like that is hard to sway. We need someone malleable." He looks at me, and I shrink back against the couch. "Someone who'll do as I tell her," he says pointedly. "Someone Antonio would never suspect."

Franco rubs his chin, looking thoughtful. "It would be a nice bit of irony that his own wife kills him. That would take that little bastard down a peg. He's been nothing but an annoyance to me who refuses to die."

I can't believe what I'm hearing right now. Antonio has told me about his uncle, but I never knew his name. I never knew this was him, standing right before me, talking about wanting Antonio dead. Antonio was right—his uncle is a bad man. No wonder he wants to protect his family from Franco.

Father leans toward me. “Nina, did you hear me? We need you to kill Antonio.”

“Why?” I whisper.

Father and Franco share a glance, which only serves to make me more uncomfortable, before Father turns back to me. “Because he’s a threat to Franco’s power. He needs to be dealt with. He’s a hard man to kill, but he would never suspect you. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He already trusts you, Nina. It won’t be hard. All you have to do is kill him.”

“You make it sound easy,” I gasp out, clutching at my chest.

Father doesn’t even blink as he responds, “That’s because it is.”

“Just grab a knife from the kitchen,” Franco says, “and stab him when he’s asleep. Simple. He won’t be expecting it.”

I double forward, my head against my knees. “I can’t. I can’t kill him.” I look up at my father. “I’m not a murderer. And Antonio doesn’t deserve to die.”

Franco rushes up to me, and I jerk back as he leans in close to me.

“Franco, careful,” Father warns.

Franco ignores him. “You think Antonio doesn’t deserve to die?” he seethes, spittle flying from his mouth and hitting my cheek. “Antonio is a little shit. He thinks he has a right to my power. Mine.” He jabs his finger against his chest. “I’ve earned it. I’ve worked for it. I’ve had it for eleven years. I had to stand behind my brother for years before he died. When I took over, I vowed I would never stand behind anyone ever again. This is my power. My business. I’m not about to let some *boy* steal it from me. So, if you think Antonio doesn’t deserve to die, you’re more delusional than you look.” He steps back, letting me breath. “Just listen to what your daddy tells you and be a good little girl.”

Father eyes Franco. “Are you done?”

Franco straightens his tie and clears his throat. “She needed to know.”

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Father turns to me. “Nina, we need you to do this. I need you to tell me right now you can do this.”

“And if I can’t do it?” I whisper, my entire body shaking.

Father’s cold eyes turn pitying. “Then you’re no daughter of mine.” I flinch back. “If you don’t do this, Nina, I’ll just find someone who can. And seeing as your Antonio’s wife ...” He shrugs. “Something may happen to you, too.”

I stare at my father in shock. He’ll have me *murdered* if I don’t murder Antonio? I knew my father was a cold man, but this takes the cake. “Nothing is stopping me from going to Antonio and telling him about your plan. Antonio and I can run away together, and we’d be ok.”

Franco snorts. “It’s cute how you think that. But you’re just a woman. And Antonio’s time is ticking.”

“Do you really want to die with him, daughter?” Father asks.

No. I have an entire life I want to live. But I want Antonio at my side while I do it. I can’t let my father win this game. I just can’t. I’ve been letting him win my entire life. When he cheated on my mom and told me to not tell her, I listened. When he threatened to beat me with his belt if I said anything, I remained quiet. He’s always won. I’m tired of it.

So, I say the only thing that gives me a chance of winning. “I’m not afraid to die.”

“Mmm.” Father looks at me carefully before nodding. “All right. If you’re not afraid to die, then what about your sister?”

It’s like ice cold water has been poured over me. “What?”

“Anna is only thirteen. She has many years before she’s old enough to live on her own. I could make her life hell if you don’t do what I want.”

My breath gets caught in my throat as blood rushes in my ears.

I can't let Anna get hurt because of me. She's never experienced the cold side to our father because I always took the brunt force of it. But now I'm not living here anymore. I can't protect her. Anna's life will take a turn for the worse if I don't do what my father tells me.

"What would you do to her?" I ask.

"Hedging your bets, are you?" Father shifts in his seat, taking his sweet time giving me answer. He's making me sweat this out. His own form of torture. "What would I do to Anna? Well, first things first, I'd make sure no man would want to marry her when she's older. I'd make sure she couldn't escape and live her own life. I'd make sure she was miserable every day all because her older sister refused to play by my rules. Maybe I'd even pull the belt out every now and then."

I gasp. "You can't."

"I'm not bluffing, Nina. Franco and I need this done, and you really are the best one to do it. So, for your sister's sake, I'd work on a plan to kill Antonio. And soon. You don't have to do it today, but don't make us wait forever."

Franco looks like he's really enjoying himself as he watches this showdown between my father and me. "You have less than a month to get it done. I don't want that bastard walking around any longer than he already has."

"Why not just get someone else?" I ask, knowing I'm running out of options. I can feel my father's fist closing in around me.

"Because this is more interesting," Father responds coldly. "He won't be expecting you. Just do what Franco suggested. Kill him when he's asleep. And then, that's it. Anna and you will be safe under Franco's and my protection. Just do it, Nina." He grabs my hand and squeezes it tightly, making me wince. "Make me proud."

He turns away from me, letting me know he's done with me. Franco smirks as I stand and waver on my feet. "Have fun killing my nephew," he says.

I force myself to walk away when all I want to do is stand there and object to everything my father and Franco want from me. I do not want to kill Antonio, but ... if I don't, Anna will get hurt. My sister or the man I just married. I have no choice because the choice is clear. I have to save my sister.

The one problem, I'm not a killer. I don't know how I'm going to do it. Just thinking about it makes me want to pass out.

I'm ready to bolt from the house when the front door opens and Mom and Anna return. They have shopping bags in their arms. Mom is looking only a little glassy eyed, which is progress. Maybe she really isn't taking her pills as often.

I stop short when I see them. The urge to cry hits me like a boulder when I see how happy Anna looks.

"Hey, Nina," she says, approaching me. "Check out this cute top I got." She pulls out a green t-shirt that looks to tiny, I'm amazed anyone can even fit in it. And then I remember—Anna's only thirteen. She's so skinny. There's no way she can take the force of my father on her shoulders. She'll buckle and break before I even get the chance to save her.

"Isn't it great?" she asks, flinging it at me.

"Yeah, it's cute," I murmur. My voice sounds like it's behind a wall of glass, slightly muffled and pained.

She cocks her head, looking at me quizzically. "You ok? You seem weird."

I glance over to the living room to see it empty. Father and Franco left. They must have moved to Father's office. Even so, I can feel each of their presences, reminding me of the danger Anna is in if I don't do what they want.

"I'm ok," I say, turning back to her. "But listen, Anna." I grip her arms. "If Father tries anything with you, you leave and come to me. You can stay with Antonio and me, ok?"

She wiggles out of my grip, looking at me like I'm crazy. "Nina, you're being weird. What would Father do to me?"

I look behind her to see Mom is leaning against the wall, practically falling asleep. Maybe she took more pills than I realized. I desperately need her help, but my mom is no help, not when she's doped up on pills. She can barely remember her name when she's like this. "I think Mom needs to lie down." I hurry over to her side and let her lean on me. "Come on, Mom."

I take her to her room, with Anna following. Mom lands on her mattress with a thump. Staring at the bed, all I can think about is the time I saw my father's bare backside as he thrust into a woman not much older than I am now. They were on this bed. The thought makes me skin crawl.

"Is she going to be ok?" Anna asks, gripping the bags tighter in her hands.

I swipe Mom's hair back and check to make sure she's breathing. I relax when I feel her steady pulse under my fingers. "She just needs to sleep. But, Anna, remember what I said. If Father starts treating you any differently, you come stay with Antonio and me." That is if Father even lets her go. He'll probably hold her under lock and key until I kill Antonio. But I have to try at least.

"Fine. But I still think you're being weird. I'm off to my room. These clothes"—she waggles the bags at me— "are dying to be worn again." She walks off without a care in the world. It breaks my heart that her safe, little world will change if I don't kill a man. If I don't murder my husband.

I grip Mom's arms and give her a little shake. She groans, her eyes fluttering open. "Why do you have to be like this?" I whisper at her. "Anna needs your help. You can't be on drugs all the time. Father will hurt her. Mom, please. I need your help."

She stares at me for a moment before her head lops to the side. "I just need to sleep," she says, her words slurring.

A sob escapes me. I'm truly on my own. I can tell Antonio the truth, about what my father and his uncle want me to do. But unless Antonio can kill his uncle, which he hasn't been

able to for the past five years, Franco will keep coming after him. Which means Anna could be hurt at any time.

I can't risk it. My sister can't be punished because of me. I won't allow it.

Which means I need to think about how I'm going to kill Antonio. Even if it breaks my heart.

I TAKE a moment to stand outside Antonio's apartment door. My apartment door, I remind myself. We're married after all. What's mine is his.

I keep pushing back the tears threatening to escape. I can't do this. How am I going to do this?

With a deep breath, I open the door and walk inside. Antonio is at the kitchen table, bent over a sandwich. "Hey, baby," he says, standing up and pulling me into a hug. We've only been married a day, and he's already given me a pet name. Gosh, why does Antonio have to be so sweet? This would be so much easier if I hated him. But I like him so much. Really, really like him.

He kisses my cheek before pulling back. "How's your dad? I've been meaning to set up another meeting with him to discuss what we're going to do about my uncle."

His words make the tears come. Antonio looks surprised as I cry, but he does his best to comfort me. "Hey, Nina. Baby. Are you ok? Did something happen? Are you hurt?" He's worried *I'm* hurt when I'm the one who'll have to kill him.

I can't stop the tears, but I can't tell him the truth, so I bury my head into his chest and let out all my fear, frustration, and anger. Antonio just wraps his arms around me, being the good man he is.

"Talk to me, Nina." He sounds so worried, and it just makes me cry harder. "Did something happen to you?"

"No, nothing happened to me," I manage to say.

He relaxes. “Good. That’s good. So, why are you crying?”

“I just ...” I could tell him. Looking up into his kind face, it’s on the tip of my tongue to blurt out the truth. My father is betraying you. He’s working for your uncle. And they want me to kill you.

But the words don’t come because all I can think about is Anna.

My father has me in an impossible situation. I’m suffocating, and there’s no one to help me.

I wipe my tears away and force myself to speak. “I’m just homesick,” I tell Antonio. The lie comes to me before I can stop it.

Antonio nods like he understands, and it dawns on me. He does understand. He’s been homesick for years. All Antonio wants is to be reunited with his family and to take his uncle down. He’s a good man who doesn’t deserve to die. Not one bit.

And yet, I’ll have to find a way to kill him. The time is ticking. I only have a few weeks before Franco and my father send someone else to do their dirty work. And then I’ll be killed right along with Antonio, and Anna really won’t have me to protect her. She’ll be on her own.

“I get it,” Antonio says, rubbing his hands up and down my back. “I miss my family every day. But hey, if you want to visit your family more often, we can go over there. I wouldn’t keep you from them.” He pushes a piece of my hair behind my ear, giving me such a sweet smile that I almost cry all over again. Antonio is really not making this easy. “I want you to be happy with me, Nina. I want this marriage to work. Not just because of the alliance I made with your dad.” I keep my face composed and try not to flinch. “But also because I like you. I just do. I don’t want you to feel trapped with me.”

“Thank you,” I force myself to say. I hate how strained my voice comes out. “I’m just tired. I think I’m going to lie down.”

“Care if I join you?”

I want to tell Antonio to leave me alone because that'll make it easier to kill him. If I'm not as attached ...

The problem is, I'm already attached to him. I was the moment we had sex. He's had all of me. Nothing anyone else has ever touched. That means something.

I can't push Antonio away because I'm worried he'll become suspicious. My father wants me to this exactly because Antonio and I are close.

And I really just want to feel his arms around me, comforting me. I need something to make me feel better about this horrible situation.

So, I let Antonio take my hand, and together, we go into the bedroom, where we lie down. Antonio strokes my back while I let out a few more tears. "Thank you," I say, "for being such a kind man."

"That's what husbands are for," he says into my neck, pulling me closer against him. Thank goodness I'm facing away from him because, otherwise, I'm sure he'd see the guilt flash across my face.

Antonio holds me the rest of the night while I face down my future—the future where I have to kill Antonio and live with his death on my hands.

CHAPTER 7

Antonio

Over the next few days, Nina acts withdrawn. Every time I try to ask her about it, she just shrugs and says she's homesick. I get that. I do. I miss my family pretty much every damn day. But what I don't get is that Nina can see her family whenever she wants. I don't quite understand why she's feeling that homesick given the circumstances. I don't push her, though. Our marriage is new, and I want to be a good husband. My mom and sisters instilled in me the importance of being respectful to women, and I don't want to hurt Nina.

Even though we've only been married a short time, I care for her. So, if Nina is struggling, then I'll stand by her side and let her struggle while she works through her feelings.

I just wish she'd talk to me more.

"Are you all right?" I ask over breakfast one morning. It's been a couple of days since she visited her family home. She hasn't recovered since then.

"Fine." She stares into her oatmeal, stirring it slowly.

"You can talk to me, Nina."

She gives me a quick smile before looking away again. "I know. I'm just ... adjusting to everything. Is that ok?"

I take her hand in mine and squeeze. "Of course, it's ok. Just know I'm here."

A pained expression crosses her face before she shakes her head. I want to ask her about it, but I know she won't tell me.

Whatever Nina is struggling with, she needs to get through it on her own time. “I know,” she finally says. “I really appreciate you, Antonio.”

“I really appreciate you, too. I never imagined what married life would be like.”

“I’m disappointing you, aren’t I?”

“No. I’m getting used to it, too. I don’t really know how to act.” I rub my hand over the back of my neck, feeling embarrassed. I was always taught to be a strong man and not show weakness. If Franco heard me talking like this to my wife, he’d smack me upside the head. If my father heard me talking like this, he’d give me sage advice, then pull me into a bear hug. My dad was great at giving bear hugs, which was something my uncle sorely lacked after he moved in.

“You’re doing just fine,” she tells me in her soft, pretty voice. Staring at her lips desperately makes me want to kiss her again, but we haven’t been intimate since our wedding night. Nina hasn’t initiated anything, and I don’t want to push her into having sex too soon again. Maybe her body is still healing after our first time. Things are so new and strange between us, and I don’t want to do anything to mess anything up. So, I push down my desires and focus on Nina and her wants. And it seems she wants to be alone.

“Did I do anything wrong?” I ask.

She frowns. “Why do you ask that?”

“Just ... you’ve been ... withdrawn. I just want to make sure it wasn’t something I did.”

She pauses, biting her lip, which makes me want to kiss her again, before she responds. “It’s not your fault at all, Antonio. I really am just getting used to married life. That’s all. Give me time.”

“All right.” I pat the table and stand up, my chair screaming as it gets pushed back. “I’ll give you all the time you need. But I have to head out. Killian and I have a meeting with your dad.”

She jerks. “My father?” Her voice comes out strained.

“Yeah. Typical stuff. Ways to take down my uncle.”

“You know ... you never told me your uncle’s name. I’m just curious.”

“Franco Moretti. My dad’s brother. He isn’t a great man like my dad was. Now, I need to head.” I kiss her on the head before leaving. Nina doesn’t object to me going, even though a small part of me wants her to drag me to our bed and tell me she’s ok.

I meet Killian and Petrov at an upscale restaurant that Petrov clearly picked. Killian looks out of place in his jeans and leather jacket. Petrov just looks annoyed to be seen with Killian. Even though these two men clearly don’t like each other, I appreciate that they’re working together for me.

“All right, let’s talk business,” I say, sitting down. Petrov gives me a gruff smile while Killian pats my back. “So, Franco has a drug shipment coming in later this week. I think it’s the perfect one to attack. Blow it up. Hurt him.”

“I agree,” Killian says. He motions for the waiter and orders a beer. Petrov looks appalled that Killian is ordering a beer in such a nice place.

“Surely a glass of wine,” Petrov says.

Killian shrugs. “I’m more of a beer guy.”

“I’ll have one, too,” I tell the waiter.

After the waiter is gone, Petrov shakes his head. “Young men these days.”

“We’ll get wine next time,” I tell Petrov, trying to reassure him. I can’t upset the man who’s helping to fund my operation to take back my family business. “Now, let’s talk details.”

Petrov nods. “Let’s.”

After discussing exactly how we’re going to target Franco’s next shipment, I turn the conversation to another matter. Nina. She hasn’t been the same since she visited her family a few days ago, so I might as well get info from the other source. “Petrov, is everything with Nina all right?”

Petrov tenses as he takes a sip of wine. “Why wouldn’t things be all right?”

“I just wanted to make sure things are going well with you and your family.”

“All well, dear boy. No need to worry.”

“Nina’s just been ... withdrawn lately.”

Petrov holds up a hand. “Let me stop you right there, Antonio. Things between you and your wife are between you and your wife. I’m not getting involved. Understood?”

“Understood,” I say, even though I’m desperate to ask more. I think Petrov might know more than he’s letting on, but I’m not sure. Call it a gut feeling. Whatever it is, though, he’s right. Whatever Nina is going through is between her and I. Not her father.

Killian and I walk out together, leaving Petrov behind in his upscale restaurant. “That man is a prick,” Killian mutters.

“Hey. He’s a prick with money, show some respect.”

Killian laughs at this. “True. If he helps you get your spot back, then I’m all for it. Because once you have your influence back, you can help me take down Patrick O’Connell, and I’ll have control of my own. Until then, I’ll keep quiet when that old stodgy guy makes comments about my choice of drink.”

“He’s a wine guy. He doesn’t understand us beer guys.”

Killian pats me on the back before getting into his car. “I’ll see you Friday.” That’s the day we’re blowing up Franco’s incoming drug shipment.

I’m wired up after the meeting, so I decide to head to the fighting ring to see if I can’t get a last-minute spot for a fight. I need to punch someone when I’m in a mood like this.

The club is packed tonight, even though it’s Tuesday. A big fight is happening between Big John and Stinky Sam. The giant and the skinny fighter.

I find Johnny at the bar, trying to unsuccessfully flirt with a woman. I interrupt his big move of trying to put his arm

around the clearly uninterested woman. “Hey, Johnny.”

He jumps and turns away from her. “Hey! Tony! Haven’t seen you around in a week. What’s up? Where you been?” The woman looks relieved and walks away.

“Getting married.”

Johnny spits out a sip of beer he just took. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope. Things are on the up-and-up for me, Johnny. Soon, I won’t have to make my living doing fights.”

“Then why are you here tonight?”

“Well ...” I scratch the back of my head. “I kind of wanted to fight tonight.”

“Just couldn’t stay away forever, huh? Didn’t you just say you didn’t want to fight forever?”

I push his head to the side, saying, “Yeah, yeah. Tonight is more about blowing off some steam than anything else. Have anyone can I fight last minute?” I look around the club, taking in the crowd, the messy fight between Big John and Stinky Sam, the smell of sweat and alcohol, and the palpable energy in the room that makes me even more ready to hit someone.

“Yeah. There’s a new guy, Crazy Pickle. I’m sure he’d fight you.”

“Crazy Pickle? What kind of name is that?”

Johnny shrugs. “Someone who’s crazy and likes pickles, I guess? I don’t know. But he’s always down for a fight. I’ll set it up. I get about half of your winnings because this is so last minute.”

“Not a fucking chance, Johnny. Your one percent as usual. Take it or leave it.”

Johnny grumbles but eventually agrees as he heads off to find Crazy Pickle.

Just an hour later, I’m in the fight ring with Crazy Pickle himself. He’s pretty scrawny but has a lot of lean muscle. I’m taller and bigger than him by a lot, which isn’t always the case

with the fighters that come through here. Crazy Pickle relies a lot on frenetic, fast movements. Almost like he's, well, crazy.

I have to move in a new way myself because I can't use speed against this guy. He's too fast. I'll have to use my strength.

Crazy Pickle has stringy hair and is missing about half his front teeth. He almost looks like a crackhead. Shit. Maybe he is. This isn't the nicest part of town, let me tell you.

"Come at me," he growls as we circle each other. "Come at me!"

Fuck it. I do. I lunge forward and land a square hit to Pickle's face, knocking him back a few steps. The crowd cheers me on as usual. I look out at them, smiling slightly. At least these people respect me. They love me.

Then I see my sister, Cecilia. The blonde hair, the similar nose and eyes to mine. It's my sister. I rush over to the side of the ring, trying to get a closer look. When I do, disappointment kicks in. It's not my sister. It's just a woman who looks eerily similar to her. The crushing blow hits me right in the gut. Of course, my sister would never be in a place like this. None of my sisters would be. They don't belong here, in the sweat and the grime and the blood. It's where I belong. I wonder if Cecilia even misses me.

Pickle recovers and comes for me, sweeping out his leg and landing a kick to my shin. I stumble. Pickle uses it to his advantage and barrels into me, knocking me onto my back. He brings his fist down, but I jerk out of the way and manage to roll him off me. The crowd is going wild, screaming for blood.

They want blood? I'll let them have it.

While Pickle tries to get up, I land a punch to his gut, making him flop to the ring. Then I get on top of him and start pummeling his body.

My anger surprises me. It's a combination of missing my family, my new marriage to Nina, and Franco for fucking me over. I punch Pickle over and over and over again. The referee

has to run in and grab me away from Pickle; otherwise, I might have killed him.

Pickle groans, his face covered in blood and swollen.

The ref raises my arm up as the winner, and the crowd cheers, but I pull out of his grip and stumble off the stage, my hands bloodied and sore.

“Tony,” Johnny says, approaching me warily, concern in his eyes. “Tony?”

I brush past him into the locker room and slump onto one of the benches. Before I know it, the tears come.

I WAS SEVENTEEN, and Franco had worked me hard during a training session. It would only be later after he tried to kill me that I wondered why he kept up my training sessions after my dad died. Why did he make me stronger only to try and break me?

I came home, covered in sweat and bruises. Mom was busy with the twins, Lucia and Luca, but she still made time to rush over to me, making sure I was all right.

“He’s fine,” Franco said, coming in behind me. Mom glared at him over my shoulder but didn’t say a word.

“I’m tired, Ma,” I said to her. “But I’m getting better at hand-to-hand combat.” Thanks to Franco. Most of my siblings didn’t like Franco, me included, but I couldn’t deny he was a good fighter.

Mom tried to object to me going upstairs, but I brushed past her. Cecilia found me later, lying on the floor of my room, staring up at the ceiling. Without a word, she laid down beside me.

In my family, each of my siblings had a different relationship with each other. My two oldest sisters, Emilia and Gemma, were always close. Then it was Francesca, who most kept to herself. Then it was me and Cecilia. Thick as thieves.

Mia was the baby of the family for so long, so she was doted on by pretty much everyone until the twins came. Lucia and Luca have each other and probably always will.

“Are you ok?” Cecilia asked, her hand going to the cross at her throat. She always wore it, no matter where she went. It was similar to Dad’s pendant around my neck.

“Why wouldn’t I be ok?”

“Because you’re lying on the floor, not looking ok. Is it Franco?”

I sighed deeply. “I miss our dad, you know. Franco just isn’t the same.”

“I know. I can’t believe it’s been six years since he died. I can still remember what he smelled like. Woodsy. It was nice.”

“Franco just smells like whiskey most of the time. I’m surprised he can even lead with how much he drinks. When I turn eighteen, I’ll show how much of a better leader than Franco I am. Dad’s men will flock to my side. I know it.”

“I believe in you. But ... Antonio ... they’ve been Franco’s men for years now. Are you ready to take on such a huge undertaking?”

I shrugged. “Someone has to rule. When I turn eighteen, Franco will step aside, and I’ll be the leader. He’ll help me, I’m sure.”

“How can you be sure?”

I turned to Cecilia. “Because I’m the rightful heir of the business. It was our dad who was the leader. Franco will respect that.”

“Ok.” She didn’t look convinced, but Cecilia knew better than to object. She always supported me, even when she didn’t agree with everything I did.

“Remember when we went on that camping trip and Gemma had found this huge cliff that led into the lake.”

“Of course, I do. You dared me jump in, and I didn’t want to. But then you took my hand, and we jumped in together.”

“I could tell you were scared.”

She nudged me. “I thought you were the scared one.”

“Ok ... maybe I was. We were both scared, then. But we did together. After I take over, I’ll need the support of my family. I don’t think I can do it on my own.”

“You’ll always have us, Antonio.”

I squeezed her hand, taking comfort in it like I did when I was a kid. “So, tell me about your day. Still thirsting after Theo?” Theo was Cecilia’s bodyguard whom she had the biggest crush on, even though he was an adult and she was only sixteen.

“Antonio,” she warned, slapping my arm. “Drop it.”

“He doesn’t even like you, Cecilia. You’re his job. Your crush is completely impossible.”

She sat up, pulling away from me. “I don’t need you to tell me what to do, ok? I know Theo doesn’t like me like that. Just drop it.”

“I’m just looking out for you.”

“I know.” She flashed me a quick smile and patted my hand before standing up. “I’m always here for you, too.”

That was the thing with Cecilia and me—we could bicker and then become best friends again. From when we were kids to when we were teens, it never changed between us.

I haven’t seen my sister in five years ... I wonder if things have finally changed between us.

THE PLAN IS IN MOTION.

Killian and I head out to the docks where Franco will be receiving the drug shipment at one of his warehouses. I’ve spent the past five years studying Franco’s every move; I know exactly where his warehouses are.

Petrov will stay behind because he's more of a man behind the scenes than a front-line guy. Which leaves things up to Killian and me.

Armed with Molotov cocktails, we're going to blow up Franco's warehouse and all the drugs within it. This won't stop him, but it'll hurt him, and that's what I want. I need to chink away at his armor and create an opening to kill him.

We scope out the warehouse, staying behind a shipping container close to Franco's warehouse. He has two guards stationed out front. Who knows how many inside. I don't want to kill too many of my dad's men, but this is war, and in war, there are casualties. Besides, they chose to follow Franco, not me. They're enemies in my eyes.

I nod at Killian, who has the better aim between the two of us. He throws the cocktail at the window. It explodes on impact, causing fire to expand over the side of the warehouse. The guards run over to it, which gives Killian and me a chance. We run around the other side of the warehouse and sneak inside through an open window.

The plan is to throw the remaining cocktails inside and blow up all the drugs and any men who get in the way.

Except ... when we get inside, I notice right away it's empty.

No drugs, no men, no nothing.

Killian and I exchange a confused look. "Where're the drugs?" Killian asks.

"I have no clue. I knew it was coming in tonight. It's supposed to be here. The place is supposed to be teeming with men."

"So, then, why is it empty?"

"Shit!" I throw one of the cocktails, and it explodes on the ground, lighting up right away. "Shit! This wasn't the plan. Franco must have changed things at the last minute."

"But why? Did he know we were coming?"

“How could he?” I shake my head. The fire is growing more now. We need to get out. “He must have changed plans just to be safe. He knows I’m coming after him. He’s known it since I was eighteen. Franco is a smart man, despite how much it pains me to say. He ... outsmarted me.”

Killian pats my back. “There’ll be other chances to wound him. But we need get out now, unless we want to end up as fried chicken.” He nods at the fire slowly approaching us.

Killian and I scramble back out of the window and hurry to our car, avoiding the guards along the way. Killian drives while I fume.

I can’t fucking believe this. This plan was supposed to be the first of good things to come. Hurting Franco bit by bit. Now, I’ll have to go back to the drawing board and think of something else I can do to hurt him.

Killian is smart enough to not say anything as he drops me off at my apartment. He’s already showing how much of a good number two he is. Someday, when I take back my family business, I’ll make sure to reward Killian handsomely.

Nina is on the couch when I come home, looking forlorn as she has for the past few days. But when she glances up at me, she must see how devastated I look because she comes running over.

“Antonio? Are you ok?”

“The plan didn’t work,” I mutter. “The plan didn’t work.”

For just a second, I think I see what looks like guilt in her eyes before she pulls me into a hug. “Oh, Antonio. I’m sorry.”

I hold her tightly as I bury my head into the crook of her neck. “I’m going to get him one day, Nina. It’s going to happen.”

Nina doesn’t say anything as she rubs my back. She doesn’t have to. Just having her with me is enough.

CHAPTER 8

Mina

Every day is slowly killing me.

It's been a week since my father asked me to kill Antonio, and I've been paralyzed with fear over it. Antonio clearly knows I'm in a mood, but he's a kind enough man to not push me, which only makes it harder on me. If Antonio were horrible, maybe then ...

No. I'm not a killer. I don't know how I'm going to do this.

Antonio has been distracted with his plan not working out, which has made him less observant when it comes to me and helps slightly. I just can't help but feel guilty when he tells me he tried to blow up Franco's drug shipment, but no one was there.

I know the reason; my father and Franco are working together. My father must have warned Franco about Antonio's plan and interfered, making it impossible for Antonio to complete his work.

Of course, I can't tell Antonio any of this. Every time I open my mouth, I think about Anna and how much my father could hurt her if I don't play by his rules.

I can't stand not knowing if she's all right, so I take a visit to my childhood home. Father isn't home, which I knew. Antonio told me he was meeting with my father today. Perfect time for me to talk to Anna.

I still have my key, so I use that to let myself in. The condo feels instantly lighter without my father's presence darkening

it.

Anna is in the living room, scrolling on her phone. She barely glances at me when I sit down beside her. “Oh, hey, Nina. What are you doing here?”

“Just wanted to come visit; that’s all. Can’t I see my sister?”

Anna shrugs, still keeping her eyes on her phone. “Yeah, you can. Nothing exciting is really happening, though. I have homework to do, but I really don’t want to do it, you know?”

“So, you’re procrastinating by ...” I grab her phone from her. “Watching people do weird dances?” The screen of her phone is filled with young, hot people doing strange dance moves.

“Hey!” She grabs her phone back. “It’s a dance trend, ok? And it’s fun. I wanted to try it someday.”

“I doubt Father would let you. I’m amazed he even gave you a phone.”

“What Father doesn’t know, won’t hurt him.”

As a memory of his belt flashes through my mind, pain grips my heart. “Anna, you know he’ll find out. Especially if you go plastering that all about the internet. He won’t be happy.”

She snorts. “What’s Father going to do? Ground me? I can handle that.”

I grab her arms and shake her. “He’ll do more than that, ok?”

She looks so startled that I immediately let her go. “Jeez. What the hell?”

“Anna, I’m sorry. Just ... just listen to me, ok? Father is not a good man. He will hurt you if you don’t fall in line, do you understand?”

“Hurt me how?” For once, she actually puts her phone down.

“I’m ... not sure,” I admit lamely. Judging by Anna’s expression, she doesn’t believe me. She huffs and settles back onto the couch, acting like she doesn’t have a care in the world. It’s good Father hasn’t hurt her yet, but if I don’t kill Antonio soon, it won’t be long before he sets his sights on Anna. “I just know he has a mean side. I’ve seen it.”

“When? What did you do?” She returns to scrolling through videos.

“I ...” *I caught him cheating on Mom.* I don’t have the heart to say it, though. I can never forget the time he took me aside to tell me to keep things a secret between us.

“Nina,” he’d said, calling me into his office. As a twelve-year-old, I was terrified to step foot in there, even though I wasn’t quite sure why. The memory of him having sex with another woman on my mom’s bed was burned in my mind. “Shut the door behind you.”

I did, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do.

“Listen, Nina, I need you to understand you can’t tell your mom about what you saw. Do you understand me?”

I gulped. “Why?” Normally, I’d just nod, but I needed answers. I was too confused.

“Why?” The darkness that settled in his eyes made goosebumps form on my skin. “Why? Because I told you so. You listen to me, young lady. What you saw was none of your business, and neither is it your mother’s business. So, you will not tell her or anyone else, understood? I’d hate to have to do this.” He stood up and undid his belt.

I was rooted to the spot, unable to move. Father approached me with his belt in hand. “Do you want me to use this on you?” he asked in a chillingly calm voice.

I shook my head frantically.

“I need to hear you say it,” he demanded.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I whispered.

He stared at me for so long, I felt sweat dripping down the back of my neck. When he finally nodded and said, “Good,” I

felt like I could breathe again. He looped his belt back around his pants and sat down. “You’re dismissed.”

I ran from that room and never looked back.

Now, sitting next to Anna, I want to tell her everything, but she’s only a year older than I was at the time Father threatened me. I don’t want her innocence taken away from her. The less she knows, the better. If I tell her the truth, she might act strange around Father, and that might set him off. The more she acts normally, I’m hoping the more he’ll leave her alone.

“I didn’t do anything,” I tell her, answering her question. “Just ... be careful. Keep your head down. Do your homework. And do not post pictures of yourself dancing on the internet, ok? Please. For my sake.”

She pouts. “You’re just like Father sometimes. No fun.” I flinch. “But whatever. I won’t do it.” Anna glances over at me. “Did you need something?”

“I guess not.” I stand up, and Anna immediately acts like I’m not there as she returns her attention to her phone. “I’m going to see my mom.” She nods.

I find Mom asleep in her room, a pill bottle beside her bed. This is what my father has done to her. Made her so miserable and lonely that she feels like her only respite from life is being drugged.

“Mom?” I gently shake her awake. There’s always a moment where I have to breathe deeply as I wait for her to stir, wondering if this time, she’s finally gone for good.

But when she wakes up, I can breathe normally again. “Nina?”

“Hey. Maybe you should get up,” I suggest. “Not ... you know.” I nod at the pill bottle.

She looks sheepish as she pushes herself up. She struggles to do it, so I have to help her. “I’m just a little tired.”

“I can see that. But, Mom, Anna needs you. You can’t be doing this.”

“I don’t have a problem, Nina. I only took a few to help me nap. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

That’s the thing about my mom—she doesn’t want to admit she has a pill problem. There’s no use arguing with her over it. “Just ... pay more attention to Anna, ok? Keep Father away from her.”

“Oh, honey. You know I can’t do that.” She lays back down. “What your father wants, your father gets.” It’s only a few seconds before she’s snoring slightly, dead to the world again.

I resist the urge to cry as I leave her room. My mother is an addict, and my father is a scary man. Anna is only thirteen. There’s no one I can turn to for help.

I stop short in the hallway when I see my father has returned from his meeting with Antonio. He doesn’t even look surprised to see me.

“Nina.” He stays where he is, expecting me to approach him. “You’re here.”

“I am.”

“Why?” He glances toward the living room—where Anna is. “Wanted to see your sister?”

“Yes, actually. I did.”

“Are you making any progress on what we talked about?”

“What you ordered me to do, you mean.”

He raises one bushy eyebrow. “Where is this sass coming from? I must say, Nina, I don’t like it.” I know what that means; it means *shut up and do what I say or there will be consequences*. Antonio will die whether I kill him or not. If I want to protect Anna, I have to kill Antonio.

I just can’t seem to make myself do it.

“If you’re having trouble,” he says, “then I have something that will make it easier on you.” He walks to the kitchen, expecting me to follow. I hate myself for it, but I do.

Grabbing a glass vial from the back of one of the shelves, he hands it to me. “Just slip this in Antonio’s drink, and that will be that. So simple.”

I don’t grab it. “Won’t he detect it?”

“It’s odorless and tasteless. It’s like water. As I said, simple.” He thrusts it at me, but I still don’t take the vial.

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

His eyes darken, and a subtle sneer crosses his face before he smooths his expression out. “All right.” He pockets the vial before walking out of the kitchen. I follow him into the living room, where Anna still sits. But instead of watching videos, she has her phone positioned on the coffee table and is trying to recreate one of the dances she was watching.

“Anna,” he barks, making her jump. She stops, looking guilty.

“Yes?”

“What are you doing? Acting inappropriately?” He sneers at her phone. “Give me that.” He takes it from her and smashes it to the ground, making Anna jerk back. “Don’t act like that again. Do you understand?” She nods quickly. For the first time, she looks frightened. Maybe now she’ll start to understand what I’ve been trying to tell her.

“Now, clean this up,” he says, nodding at the broken phone on the ground. He turns to me and motions for me to follow him into the foyer. “That’s just the tip of the iceberg, daughter.” He keeps his voice low so only I can hear him. “I can hurt Anna in so many different ways. In much worse ways than breaking her phone. Do you want me to use my belt on her?”

I flinch back. “No,” I whisper.

“No? I couldn’t hear you.”

“No,” I repeat louder. “Please don’t.”

“Then use this.” He hands me the vial again. This time, I take it, even though my hands shake the entire time. “Just pour

it in Antonio's drink and things will be done. You'll make me proud, Nina. I know you will."

I nod and start to turn toward the door when he stops me.

"I need to hear you say it," he says.

I know what he wants, and it's the last thing I want to say. But I say it anyway. "I'll make you proud, Father."

"Good girl. Now you may go."

I hurry out of the condo as fast as I can and practically run downstairs and outside, gulping in deep breaths of the fresh air. I put the vial in my purse, unable to look at it for a moment longer. I have to go home and use it on Antonio.

Someone ... something ... give me the strength to make it through this.

WHEN I GET HOME, Antonio isn't there. For a moment, I'm disappointed. I want him to see the vial in my purse and grab it, demanding answers. I'd tell him everything, I know. He's the one who could help me.

But could he help save Anna from my father? He hasn't saved his family from Franco. And if he can't even save his own family ... How would he save mine?

I rush over to the cupboard, take out a glass, and fill it with water. Then, with shaky fingers, I pull the vial from my purse. Staring at it, I know my father is right. It would be so simple. I can pour it in this glass and give it to Antonio to drink.

And yet, when I open it up and start to angle it toward the cup, I pause. Can I really kill Antonio? This is eating me up inside.

The tiniest drop lands in the water when the front door opens. I jerk and close the vial, turning toward the door as Antonio walks through. He gives me such a warm smile; it breaks my heart.

“Hey,” he says, coming over to me. “How was your day?” He kisses my cheek, making me feel even guiltier.

“Um ...”

His eyes slide over to the vial in my hand. “What’s that?”

Oh no. No. No. No.

I quickly enclose it in my hand. “Oh. Nothing. Just a water flavoring ... thing.” God, I sound so stupid.

Antonio looks at me curiously. “Is it any good?”

I want the earth to swallow me whole just so I can get out of this situation. “Uh, I haven’t tried it yet. I’m not really in the mood for water.”

“... ok?”

I smile, trying to act at ease with a bottle of poison in my hand. “I’m just going to use the bathroom, ok?” I pour the water in the cup down the drain and take the vial with me. Antonio watches me go with a confused smile on his face.

I lean back against the bathroom door, trying to catch my breath. Oh, my goodness. That was a close call. I could go out there and tell Antonio everything. I could pour this poison down the drain, and he’d be none the wiser.

I just ... can’t make myself do it. Every time I imagine myself going to Antonio with the truth, I see my father beating my sister with his belt. I can’t do that to her. Not in a million years.

I quietly walk back into the kitchen. Thankfully, Antonio is in the living room, so he doesn’t see as I open the cupboard closest to the sink and put the vial at the way back because I know Antonio doesn’t cook much. Since we’ve been married, I’ve been the one doing the cooking.

I hide the vial behind a bag of cornmeal, knowing the chances of Antonio looking behind a bag of cornmeal are slim to none. I’m not sure why I’m saving the vial. Do I hope to use it someday? Not really. Am I just putting it out of sight until I know what to do? Most likely.

I don't bother talking to Antonio anymore. Instead, I go to our bedroom and get ready for the night. After changing into a silk nightgown, I lay down in bed and hope Antonio doesn't ask any more questions when he comes to bed.

Antonio joins me in a little bit, sliding in beside me and pulling me into his arms. "Are you sure you're ok?" he asks against my neck. I shiver at the sensation. We haven't had sex since our first time, and I've been craving for more. But every time I even think about getting close to Antonio, the guilt inside me tears away at me.

"I'm fine. Just tired. Night." I close my eyes and hope Antonio falls asleep quickly. I stay awake until I can hear him breathing deeply in sleep.

I turn to him and watch for a moment. He looks so peaceful; it hurts my heart even more. An idea occurs. I could take the pillow from under me and press it to his face, killing him in his sleep. He'd be none the wiser.

I grab my pillow and hover it over his face. *Just bring it down and end it*, my father's voice whispers in my head. For a moment, I truly consider it. I bring it just an inch above his face ...

... and then I pull back, stuffing the pillow behind me. I'm still sitting up when Antonio opens his eyes. I gasp.

"Hey," he says, sounding groggy. "What are you doing?"

"Um ... just fluffing my pillow." I do it, feeling like the world's worst person. All I want is to be happy with Antonio and save my sister from my father. So far, neither of those things is happening for me.

"Trouble sleeping?" He reaches up and pushes a piece of my hair behind my ear. I shiver at his touch. It dawns on me how close we are. My lips are just a few inches over his.

"Yeah," I admit. That's one truth I can say.

"I'm here for you, Nina."

I part my lips to tell him ... what? The truth about my father? The truth about how much I want to be with him?

His eyes dart to mine, his gaze darkening with lust before he looks back at me. I can't take it a moment longer. I'm tired of feeling guilty for something that isn't my own doing. I'm tired of pushing Antonio away when he's trying so hard to be there for me. I'm just tired of it all.

So, I guess that's why I take the plunge.

Without hesitating, I lean down and kiss Antonio.

CHAPTER 9

Antonio

I don't hesitate to kiss Nina back. I've been aching for this for the past week, and since she's the one initiating it, I'm all in for more.

I grab her waist and roll her onto her back, kissing her with all my might. Nina's lips and tongue are more frantic than before, like she's just as desperate for this as I am. Our lips press together in a passionate storm. My hands begin to roam up and down her body, and Nina arches into me.

Nina pulls back from me, grasping the sides of my face. "I need more, Antonio."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." She kisses me hard again, almost smothering me with her mouth. I'm not complaining. All I want is to be with Nina, and she's offering herself up to me.

I rip my lips from hers to kiss down her neck. She's panting hard, her body writhing beneath mine. When my lips brush her upper chest, she lets out a soft gasp that hardens me further. I cup her breasts in each of my hands. "I've wanted this all week." I plant a kiss on each of her nipples through her nightgown. The silky fabric is like water under my hands.

"So did I," she admits.

I don't bother to ask her what held her back. Something tells me Nina wouldn't be fully honest with me about that. I'm not sure what prompted this change in her, but I don't want it to go anywhere so I keep my mouth shut and kiss her body

instead. Nina arches and twists as I plant kisses on her stomach before moving to her upper thighs.

She doesn't stop me as I push the end of her nightgown up and slowly take off her panties, exposing her glorious pussy to me bit by bit. I part her legs and settle my face between them.

“Antonio!” she cries out as I press my lips to her nub. She sounds so shocked; I smile. I begin to kiss and lick her all over her pussy. Nina writhes, moving her hips like she's seeking more, desperate for more. I'm more than ready to give it to her.

“Antonio, what ...?”

I glance up at her but don't remove my mouth from her skin. She looks like a fucking angel, practically glowing as I go down on her. Our eyes meet, and she blushes. I lick up her slit, making her gasp and clamp her legs together. But my shoulders prevent her from closing her legs all the way.

“Oh,” she sighs, settling back onto the bed. She finally stops resisting the sensations and leans into it.

It doesn't take her long until she's breathing heavily. I roll her nub around on my tongue. Nina's hips begin to jerk up, and I have to press a hand over her stomach to keep her in place. I pay special attention to her nub, licking it and licking it and licking it.

Finally ...

She let's go.

“Antonio!” she calls out as her orgasm hits her. Her body shudders, and I get to watch in amazement as pleasure washes over her face. For the first time in a week, she looks relaxed.

When I sit up, she grabs my shirt and pulls me down on top of her. She pushes my pants down, pulling my cock out. She's so much bolder than she was our first time together. I fucking love it.

“I need you,” she pants, gripping my cock tentatively in her hand. She still has a shyness about her that's cute.

“I need you, too.” I line my cock up to her entrance, not bothering to take off the rest of our clothes. I need this now, and I’m tired of waiting.

Staring deeply into Nina’s eyes, I enter her. Her lips part, and her head rolls back, exposing her beautiful neck to me. I plant sloppy kisses over her neck as I thrust into her. This time, I’m not being so gentle. It’s time to start exploring this side of our relationship.

I grip her thighs, pulling them up around my body, as I enter her again and again and again. With every thrust of my hips against hers, Nina lets out a small gasp, spurring me on even more. She grabs my arms, digging her fingers into my skin. I pick up my pace and fuck her with everything I’ve got.

From my frustration with Franco to missing my family to my confusion with Nina, I let it out. I thrust into her with wild abandon. Nina responds, lifting her hips up to meet mine.

“Oh, oh, oh!” She repeatedly gasps as I fuck her. “Antonio.” The look she gives me is full of lust but also something else. Contentment perhaps?

“Nina,” I growl, pressing my head to hers and grinding my hips down. Her inner walls are clenching my cock like a vice. I can barely breathe because of it. I roll my hips around, letting her feel my cock reach all parts of her pussy.

Sweat beads between her breasts, and I lean down to lick it. She wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper within her. We moan together.

And then we both come as if on cue.

I can feel Nina’s inner walls tighten around me as her body begins to shudder. I release into her, letting go myself. We cling to each other like we might die if we don’t hold on.

Slowly, we come down. I slump on top of her, keeping my hands beside her so I don’t crush her with my weight. I kiss over her neck. “That was amazing.”

She sighs, nodding. “It was.”

I roll off her and pull her into my arms. “Remind me again why we haven’t been doing that every day?”

For a moment, she tenses before relaxing into my arms. “I was just dealing with some stuff, but ...” She looks up at me, a sense of peace in her eyes. “I’m all better now. I just want to be with you, Antonio. No more being sad or homesick. I just want us to be happy.”

“I want that, too,” I say. She laughs as I pull her on top of me. “Let’s have some fun together, Nina. What do you say?”

“I think that sounds amazing.” She settles into the crook of my body, hiding her face from me. But right before she moved away, I caught a glimpse of ... something in her expression. Something tense. Maybe Nina is still adjusting to married life. It was a lot of big changes for her in one go. I just hold her closer to me and focus on the positive; things between Nina and me are looking up.

I TAKE Nina to my favorite restaurant to celebrate our relationship strengthening. It’s a smaller, more intimate place near where I live. It’s a little shabby, but it has great food.

“The best pizza in all of New York,” I tell her as we walk inside the small space decorated in red with checkered tablecloths on the tables. It’s a little kitschy, but it’s like home for me at this point.

“Don’t most restaurants make that claim?” she says, taking her seat.

“Yes, but this one is true. The best pizza, trust me.”

She opens her menu. “Which one are you going to get?”

“Typical. Meat eaters galore.”

“I’ll just get the veggie one.” She sets her menu aside and smiles at me. “I haven’t had meat in years.”

“How come?” I take a sip of my water. The waitress approaches us; she’s a young woman with a kind smile.

Nina finishes talking after the waitress leaves with our orders. “It was always in some defiance to my father,” she admits.

“Wanted to stick it to the man, huh?”

“I guess you could say that.” She looks withdrawn for a moment before cheering up. “But I don’t really want to talk about him. I’d rather talk about you. Did you ever come here with your family?”

I laugh. “God no. My mom would never be seen in a place like this. Only the best five start restaurants for my parents. But mostly, we ate at home, and Mom would cook for us. She’s a great cook.” I smile sadly at the memory of her.

Nina grabs my hand, squeezing it. “You miss her a lot?”

I clear my throat, pushing the memories of my mom away. “I do. She was always great. Don’t tell my other siblings, but she always favored me.”

Nina laughs as she pulls her hand away and takes a sip of her wine. “Maybe that’s why she was always great.”

“Probably. If you asked some of my other siblings, I’m sure they’d tell you the issues they had with her, but when it came to my mom and me ... I was her baby boy. She tended to let me get away with things when she probably shouldn’t have.”

“What about your sisters?”

“Oh god,” I say, dropping my head back. “They never let me get away with anything. They made sure I got what I deserved. Which was good. They helped me learn to respect women. Especially my two oldest sisters, Emilia and Gemma. Emilia was like a second mom to us for most of our lives, so she made sure to teach me kindness. As for Gemma, well ... she’d smack me upside the head if I ever said anything stupid about girls. I learned real quick how to be nice to girls after that.”

Nina smiles, looking into her wine glass. “It’s sweet how you had those relationships with your sisters. With Anna ...

she just treats me like an inconvenience. She's thirteen and thinks only of herself."

"Pretty typical at that age. But you said I *had* those relationships. I still have them. I'll see my family again one day."

"Oh, Antonio," she says, her eyes widening. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know. I'm just saying. I'll return to my family one day. You'll get to meet my all my siblings."

"How many do you have exactly?"

"Seven, now."

Nina's eyes almost bug out of her head. "Seven?"

"Yep. I already mentioned Emilia and Gemma. The third oldest is Francesca. She's the shyest of all of us, but she helped me out a lot when I was eighteen. That was when Franco tried to kill me, and Francesca found me and took me to the hospital after I'd been shot. It made us closer, but then I had to go into hiding, so we never really got to develop that. Then it's me. And then Cecilia." I smile at the memory of my favorite sister. "We've always been the closest. She just gets me in a way the others don't."

"How so?" She takes a sip of wine.

"Cecilia never treated me differently because I was the only boy in the family for so long. We just meshed."

"Who else is next?"

"Mia was the baby of the family before the twins came along. Lucia and Luca." Nina makes a face. "I know, I know. As if my mom couldn't name them something else that didn't make them sound like a freaking nursery rhyme. They're the youngest by far. They're ... god. Ten now." I shake my head. "Mom got pregnant with them around the time our dad died. It was unexpected, to say the least."

"At least she has that last memory of her husband before he died. I'm assuming it was a happy marriage, given how many kids they had."

“They loved each other. At least, that’s what Emilia has told me. I was only twelve when my dad died. I never really paid attention to my parents’ relationship back then. Now ... I’d give anything to go back in time and be with them again.”

“You will. One day,” she says with so much conviction that I believe she believes it.

The waitress returns with our pizzas. The steam wafting from them makes my nose water. “Ready to try the best pizza in all of New York?”

“I’m ready.” Nina takes a bite of hers and chews thoughtfully. Soon, her eyes widen, and I know I won her over.

“Good?”

“The best,” she says.

“Cheers to that.” I take a bit of my own pizza, happy to enjoy our simple date at this simple restaurant, just eating pizza and enjoying life.

MY FATHER, the great Riccardo Moretti, was the one who taught me how to fight. I was only seven when he started training me. My mom claimed I was too young, but he told her it was good for a boy my age to start preparing how to be a man.

Our first fight session was with a pair of boxing gloves. Dad put them on and had me punch of his hands.

At first, I was tentative. I barely brushed the glove with my fist.

Dad gave me a stern but patient look. “Antonio, you have to give it your all. Someday, when you’re older, you won’t have the option of being nice. Not in the business I’m in. The business you’ll inherit one day. You might have to actually hit someone for real.”

“But I don’t want to hurt anyone,” I said.

“I know, son. But you might have to.”

“But why?”

He set his hands down, sighing. “Because that’s the world we live in. The world you live in. Not everyone lives in the same world, but it’s something special—the world we occupy. It’s dangerous. It’s not easy. But you need to learn how to do this. And it starts by not being afraid to really punch me.” He holds his hands back up, the boxing gloves looking silly to seven-year-old me. “Now, hit, Antonio. Hit.”

I sucked in a deep breath and, using all my might, landed a solid punch against my dad’s boxing glove. It wasn’t much, but it was something. It was the start of something.

My dad looked down at me with so much pride; I beamed that day.

I never knew that one day, I’d lose him, and my uncle would take over my fight training. Suffice to say, Franco Riccardo could never hold a candle to my father.

I HAVE another plan to hurt Franco. It’s one I only share with Killian. Not because I don’t trust Petrov, but because it’s spur of the moment.

Killian and I are at the fighting rings when a man walks into the club. Alfonso Gentile. Franco’s second-in-command. I’d recognize him anywhere. I’ve been keeping an eye on Franco for the past five years, and wherever Franco goes, Alfonso is usually right beside him. But tonight, Franco isn’t here.

Alfonso just walked into the lion’s den, and he doesn’t even know it.

I nudge Killian. “That’s Alfonso Gentile. He works for Franco. I just spotted an opportunity.” I’m still a little bitter over the drug shipment plan not working out, so I’m ready for a little bit of action. “I think Franco will be upset if his second-in-command goes missing, don’t you?”

Killian gives me a dark smile. He's normally such an easy-going guy; it's strange to see him act differently. "I think that sounds like one hell of a plan. What are you going to do with him?"

"I haven't fully decided yet, but let's go. I'll think of something." Together, we head toward Alfonso.

He's distracted by a scantily clad woman, so he doesn't see me as I land a blow to the back of his head. People around us step out of the way. The people here know me, and they know to not mess with me. They've all seen me fight.

Alfonso stumbles forward, gripping the back of his head. "What the fuck?"

Killian grabs him before he can turn around and marches him out the door. I grab Alfonso's other arm as he struggles.

"What's going on?" he demands. "You boys are going to regret this."

We take him around the back side of the club, where I know there are no cameras. It's an illegal fighting club. The owners don't want evidence as much as the next person.

I push Alfonso to the ground.

"I work for Franco Moretti," he says, on his hands and knees. "When he hears of this, you boys will be scared."

I flip Alfonso around so he faces us. When he sees me, his eyes widen. I smile. "That's right. You know who I am. Do I look a lot different from when I was a boy?" Alfonso used to work for my father before he died, and he didn't hesitate to switch loyalties to my uncle, leaving me in the dust.

Alfonso scrambles back on his hands and ass. "Antonio Moretti."

"That's right." I kneel beside him while Killian stand threateningly over Alfonso. "And I need you to deliver a message to Franco for me."

Alfonso scrambles at his jacket pocket, probably going for his gun. Thankfully, I carry a gun on me at all times, except for when I'm sleeping, fucking, and fighting in the rings. I pull

it out of my back waistband and point it at Alfonso's head. He stops.

I nod at Killian to come closer and hand him my gun. "Keep this on him." Killian nods, trusting me to do what I need to do.

I take out the pocketknife from my boot, grab Alfonso's hand, and press the knife to his index finger.

"What the fuck?" Alfonso screams as I begin to cut off his finger. It's quite easy once you get past the bone. Like cutting a fucking carrot. Alfonso doesn't stop screaming, even after his finger is gone. I toss his finger at him, and he scrambles for it. While he's busy with that, I take my gun back from Killian and, without wasting another moment, kill Alfonso by shooting him in the head.

Then I take his finger.

Killian looks impressed as he turns to me. "I've never seen you in action like that before. It's scary. Good thing I have you on my side."

I pat Killian on the back. "I've been storing a lot of anger inside me for years. It's time to finally let some of it out." I toss the finger into the air before catching it. "Now, I need to get an envelope and some stamps. I have a message to deliver to Franco."

CHAPTER 10

Nina

My phone rings with an incoming call from my father. He's the last person I want to talk to, but I know if I ignore him, he'll just find another way to reach me.

I answer, and before I can even say hello, he starts shouting. "Why haven't you done it yet!"

I flinch, pulling the phone from my ear. Antonio is at the gym, and I have the apartment to myself, so at least I don't have to be worried about Antonio overhearing my father on the phone. "Father—"

He cuts me off. "No. I gave you the poison to kill him. It was supposed to be easy. Why haven't you done it yet?"

It's been a few days since Father gave me the poison. It's burning a hole in the kitchen cupboard at the moment.

"I ..." I don't want to. But that's not an acceptable answer for him.

"Do you know what your husband has done?" He says the word "husband" like it's something dirty. I can't even ask before my father tells me. "He's killed Franco's second-in-command. This is unacceptable, Nina. You need to end Antonio soon, or I'm going to have to find someone else to kill him. And you, too. Do you want that?"

"No," I whisper, my heart beating so fast it hurts.

"If you don't want to use the poison, fine. Then find another way to kill him. But if Antonio is left alive for much

longer and continues to cause chaos, then things will not end well for you. Or Anna.”

“I understand. But ... I’m confused. How did Antonio get away with that?” I know Antonio and my father have been meeting up. I know that’s what allowed Franco to remove his incoming drug shipment before Antonio could blow it up. My father told him.

“Because he never told me,” Father seethes. I raise my eyebrows but don’t say anything. “He went off book. Killing Franco’s man was never part of the plan. At least, nothing he ever told me. I need to make sure Antonio is telling me everything.” He pauses, and in that pause, I can feel sweat beading on the back of my neck. “He didn’t happen to tell you about his plan, did you? And you just conveniently forgot to mention it to me?”

“No! I knew nothing. Antonio never told me.” I noticed he had been happier lately, but he never told me he killed someone, especially Franco’s man. Maybe he thought I couldn’t handle that side of him. I knew when I married Antonio he’s a Mafia man, and they sometimes have to do bad things. I’m not surprised he killed someone in his war against Franco.

“You’re telling the truth?”

“Yes. I am.”

Father doesn’t reply right away. He’s making me sweat this out—see if I’ll crack. When he finally responds, it’s full of iciness. “Well, you need to make sure if he ever says something to you about Franco or me, you report it back to me immediately. Understood?”

“Yes, Father. Understood.”

“Good.” He hangs up without a goodbye.

My phone drops from my hand and lands on the floor with a clatter. I’m shaking all over. Things are coming together; Antonio going after Franco, my father and Franco wanting him dead—and me, caught in the middle. My father is clearly running out of patience.

I need to kill Antonio soon and fast.

I go to the cupboard and push the cornmeal out of the way. The vial of poison is just sitting there, waiting to be used. But I can't get my hand to reach for it.

Instead, I push the cornmeal back into position and close the cabinet, unable to contemplate the reality that I have to kill Antonio.

I jump when Antonio enters the apartment. He's sometimes so silent that I don't even hear him. Years of fight training, I guess. That gives me an idea ...

I approach Antonio as he's taking off his jacket and shoes. "I want you to teach me how to fight."

He blinks, stunned silent for a moment, before he smiles. "Really? You want to learn how to fight? Why?"

Because I need to kill you. "Because I think it would be a good skill to have."

Antonio shrugs. "Can't argue with that." He kisses me on the lips. "All right. When do you want to start?"

"Can we start now?"

ANTONIO TAKES me to a boxing gym, where huge, muscular men are pounding into punching bags. Grunts and growls are the only sound in the huge room. I feel so out of place in my yoga pants and tank top. My arms look like twigs compared to all the men's arms.

"The first thing I learned when I starting training was how to punch someone. It's a good skill to have in case you find yourself in a tough spot," Antonio explains as he takes me to a punching bag.

A man at the closest bag looks at us, smirking like he thinks it's funny a woman like me would be in a boxing gym. Honestly, I kind of want to punch him myself. I guess Antonio is onto something.

Antonio hands me boxing gloves. The smallest ones the gym has, I notice. “All right.” He slips on his own boxing gloves and stands before me. “Try punching my hands.” He holds them up, standing in a bent-leg position.

“Ok.” I take in a deep breath and swing. My gloved hand connects with his glove in a simple punch.

Antonio nods. “Good. But try using more force behind your throw. Stand like this.” He bends his knees. “You want bounce in your legs. You don’t want to be locked out.”

I do as he instructs, and this time, my punch has more power to it. I smile wide. “Wow. I feel ... powerful.”

“As you should. Being able to defend yourself in a fight is something my dad taught me.” Antonio’s smile dims slightly. “It’s really the only good memories I have of him. We bonded a lot when he was teaching me how to fight.”

“You must miss him.”

“Every damn day. But enough about my dad. Let’s practice some more punches before we move on to defensive moves.”

After spending around fifteen minutes of pure punching into Antonio’s gloves, we finally move on. I’m sweating like crazy. “Do we really have to repeat so many moves?”

“It’s the best way to make sure you learn muscle memory when fighting. Now, I’m going to teach you how to get out of a hold if someone grabs you from behind.” He stands behind me and wraps his arms around my shoulders and neck. My skin tingles at his touch. Even though Antonio and I are sweaty, the urge to be with him again is so strong, it’s almost scary. I never knew someone could encompass me the way Antonio has.

He teaches me how to get out of this hold by brining my elbow back and landing a solid hit to my attacker’s stomach. I do as he says but I hold back.

“You have to really hit me, Nina. If someone were attacking you, you couldn’t hold back.”

I take in a deep breath. “Ok.” But when I bring my elbow back, I still hesitate. “This isn’t working.”

“It’s because you’re not angry or scared. But if you were being attacked, you’d feel all of that. So, try to imagine something you hate or something that scares you and use that to hit me.”

I close my eyes, and the first image that comes to my mind is my father. My father threatening me. My father threatening my sister. My father cheating on my mom. My father wanting me to commit a heinous act against my husband.

When I bring my elbow back this time, I use everything within me. Antonio grunts at the impact and lets me go.

“Good.” He comes around to face me, rubbing his side. “You really hit me. That’s what you need to do in the future in case you’re ever in a situation like that.”

The man who smirked at me when I came in saunters over to us. He’s on the shorter side but just as muscular as the rest of the men in the gym. “Your woman got the better of you, Tony?” he asks in a gruff voice.

His question instantly makes more anger flare through me.

“Chris, I’m teaching her how to fight,” Antonio says in a weary voice.

Chris eyes me over, making me cross my arms to cover my chest. “She’s a tiny little thing. You can teach her how to fight all you want, but she’d never stand a chance against any man.”

“She’s my wife,” Antonio growls. “You don’t get to talk to her like that.”

Chris has the decency to look a little intimidated by Antonio, but he continues to press on. “Oh, yeah? Maybe she needs a real man teaching her how to fight. One who isn’t afraid to be rough with her.”

The anger that flashes through Antonio’s eyes makes me shiver. There it is. That anger he probably channeled when he killed Franco’s man. I’ve never seen that anger in my husband

before. Is that what he'd look like if he found out I was supposed to kill him?

Antonio lunges at Chris and shoves him back, making Chris fall to the ground. I watch in horror as Antonio gets on top of Chris and starts pounding into his face. Punch after punch after punch.

Chris' face slowly turns to a pulp the more Antonio goes at him. All I can do is watch in horror and fascination.

Two men run over and pull Antonio off Chris. Antonio doesn't bother fighting them. He goes willingly. "That's what you get for talking about my wife." Chris groans in pain.

Antonio comes over to me. "Are you all right?"

"I'm not the one who was just beaten to a pulp," I say, still partly in shock. "Is that how you fight in the ring?" Antonio has mentioned in the past he would fight in fighting rings to earn money.

"Pretty much. It's brutal. But I earn good money doing it. Until I can take over my family business, that's how I make money."

One of the guys hovering over Chris tells Antonio he should probably leave. Antonio doesn't object.

"I've never seen that side of you," I tell him.

"Do you want to?"

I turn to him. "What do you mean?"

"I have a fight scheduled for tonight. You could come watch me. If you wanted to."

Did I want to? There's still a lot I don't know about Antonio, and I'm starting to learn I want to see all of it.

"Ok," I tell him.

THAT'S how I end up at the fight club later that evening. The place is crowded and slightly smelly, like beer and sweat. The women are wearing practically nothing, making me feel overdressed in my simple summer dress. I feel like a child compared to the people here.

Antonio walks through the crowd like he owns the place. People part for him like it's the red sea.

"You're famous here," I say.

He squeezes my hand. "I am. I've been fighting here for the past five years. I've made a good name for myself. Here." He leads me to a booth near the back of the club. "Settle in here. I have to get ready for the fight. No one will bother you. Trust me." He kisses me, letting it linger, before pulling away and heading off toward a door near the bar area.

I sit in the booth, feeling nervous as I look at the people around me. They all notice me, too. I came in with the famous Antonio Moretti. Of course, I'm getting looked at.

A man slides into the booth across from me. He's handsome in an easy-going way. "I'm Killian. I work with Antonio. He told me you were coming tonight and to make sure you're treated like a queen." He winks. "I've got you."

I instantly feel comfortable around Killian. "Thanks. I've never been to something like this."

"You don't say?" he teases, and I smile. Killian sits back in his seat, watching me carefully. "How's your dad doing?"

I tense at his question. "Why?"

He shrugs. "Antonio's gotten himself into a deal with your dad. And so have I. I just want to make sure we can trust him."

"Why do you ask?"

"I know you're his daughter, so I don't expect you to badmouth your dad. I just get a weird vibe from him, that's all. He doesn't like me, which is fine. But ... I don't know. There's just something else there. I was just curious if you have any insight into him at all."

Killian is skirting so close to the truth. “No,” I say tightly. “My father is ... He can be cold, yes.”

“But he can be trusted?”

My heart is pounding against my rib cage. I can barely breathe. I don't know what to say, and so I scramble for some excuse when the crowd starts cheering. It turns my attention toward the large fighting ring in the middle of the room. Antonio steps into it, and the crowd goes wild for him. Out of the corner of my eye, I can feel Killian still looking at me, waiting for an answer. But I keep my gaze focused on Antonio, and soon, Killian turns to watch the fight. I can breathe again.

Antonio is facing off with an incredibly large man who the announcer says is Big John. “He's going to crush Antonio,” I say.

Killian chuckles. “You haven't seen Antonio fight. He'll be fine. He always is.”

The fight begins with Big John lumbering after Antonio and Antonio keeping just out of his reach. Antonio lands a few quick punches to Big John's side, making the large man roar in anger. He grabs Antonio and throws him to the side. Antonio just laughs and lunges back, landing a kick to Big John's shin. Big John stumbles forward. Antonio uses that momentum to hit him in the back, knocking Big John to the ground.

Antonio takes a moment to stand before the crowd, soaking in the cheers and applause. Even I clap my hands for him. Antonio meets my gaze across the room and smiles. I smile back. This man is my husband. This powerful, beautiful, amazing man.

Big John slams into Antonio's side, knocking Antonio to the ground. Before Antonio can react, Big John starts punching Antonio everywhere. His face. His stomach. His legs. I gasp, holding still as I watch Antonio get hurt.

“It's ok,” Killian says. “He's got this. He's always got this.”

Antonio manages to hit Big John in the stomach, making him grunt. Antonio pushes Big John off him and kicks the large man in the head. Big John slumps to the ground. He doesn't get back up.

The referee holds up Antonio's hand as the winner.

I relax into my seat, knowing Antonio will be ok.

"You care for him?" Killian asks.

"I do," I say, keeping my eyes on my husband. It's at this moment I know. I can't kill Antonio. I can't see him get hurt like he got hurt tonight. I can't be responsible for that. Even if my father sends someone else after Antonio and me, we'll fight together. I'll find a way to get Anna out, even if it kills me.

But I will *not* kill my husband. The man I care for. The man I can see myself falling in love with.

I might already be falling in love with him.

"Tell Antonio I need to go," I tell Killian. "I need to talk to my father." I hurry out of the booth before Killian can stop me. I need to confront my father. No more waiting. This is it.

On my way toward the door, a blonde woman approaches me. "Who are you?" she asks.

"I'm sorry. I'm in a hurry." I try walking past her, but she gets in my way.

"I noticed you come in with Antonio." She eyes me over. "You know, I'm the blonde one he tends to fuck. So, who are you?"

I stop short at her words. Eyeing her over, I can tell she's pretty in a trashy kind of way. "I'm his wife. Who are you?"

Her eyes widen as she backs up. "Uh, Joanna. Antonio and I—"

"I know. You just told me. But you're not the blonde one he has sex with anymore. I am." This sudden possessiveness scares me. I don't know where it comes from.

I brush past Joanna before she can say anything else and hurry out the door. I flag down a taxi and head off in the direction of my father's house.

When I get there, I let myself in and head straight for his office, where I know he'll most likely be. I don't bother knocking. I just open the door and walk straight in.

My father is behind his desk. He doesn't even look surprised as I barge in. It's his annoying little trick. Never show any weakness.

"Nina? What are you doing here? This is my office. You don't get to just waltz in here like you own the place."

I slap my hands down on his desk. "I'm not killing Antonio. You can send someone after him. After me. But leave Anna alone. I'm done. I'm not going to kill Antonio. I refuse to."

He's silent for a moment, sitting back in his seat, with his fingers steepled under his chin. The image of calm. It makes me want to punch him. "Interesting you say that. I never agreed to leave Anna out of it. I can send someone after Antonio, yes. But you'll still need to be punished for disobeying me. Shall I call Anna in here?"

My heart lurches. "Leave Anna out of it."

"You don't get to tell me what to do. Anna!" He calls out for her.

"Don't do this," I whisper, my bravado slowly disappearing.

"Anna, get in here!"

I hear her scamper on the wooden floors as she comes into the office. "Yes?" The sight of my baby sister makes me want to cry. My father can't hurt her. He can't.

Father turns to me. "Nina, did you have something to say?"

I remain quiet.

He stands up and grabs a ruler from his desk. “Anna. Place your hand on my desk.”

Anna looks between Father and me but does as she’s told. “What’s going on?”

He whips the ruler down, straight onto her hand, in one quick motion. Anna screams and clutches her hand to her chest.

“No!” I shout, pushing her behind me.

Father slicks back his hair—the one tick that shows he’s not fully in control. “Did you have something to say, Nina? Or do I have to hurt Anna again?”

Anna whimpers behind me.

“Do it to me instead,” I say, putting my hand on his desk.

Father *tsks*. “No. That’s not how that works. Do you still want to disobey me, or will you do what I want you to do?”

“Yes, yes,” I blurt out, my voice ragged. “I’ll do what you want.”

He points the ruler at me. “Good. Don’t try to disobey again.” After he sits back down and puts the ruler away, he tells Anna she’s dismissed. Anna shoots me a wild look before scampering out of the room.

“Nina.” My father’s voice makes me flinch. “You don’t get to come in here and demand anything of me. You are going to kill Antonio. And that is final.”

I’m dying inside. That’s the only way to explain who I feel.

I walk numbly out of his office. I tried to be assertive, and it got Anna hurt. Sure, it was a small pain but that was my father lying down the line. He could do so much worse to Anna. He and I both know it.

I keep walking until I’m out of the condo and in the hallway of the building.

“Nina?” Antonio’s voice makes me look up.

Antonio is here.

CHAPTER 11

Antonio

Nina's eyes widen when they see me. "Antonio? What are you doing here?" She glances at her family's condo door.

"Killian told me you left in a hurry after my fight. He said you needed to talk to your father. I wanted to make sure everything was all right." I place my hands on her hips. She tenses for a moment before relaxing.

"I'm ... I'm fine." She's blinking rapidly like she's holding back tears.

"Are you really fine, or are you just saying that?"

"I'm fine, Antonio," she snaps, brushing past me. I follow her.

"If you're fine, then why are you acting like this?" We reach the front door of the building, and Nina pushes it open in a gust of anger.

She doesn't look at me as she answers. "Am I not allowed to act like this? Am I supposed to be the perfect wife all the time?"

Her attitude shocks me. "Nina, where is this coming from? Nina? Stop." I grab her arm, stopping her.

She whirls around, shoving me back. The little bit of fight training I've given her is already kicking in. If I wasn't so confused, I'd be proud. "Why do I have to listen to what men tell me all the time? Why do I have to be the perfect daughter? The perfect wife? Why?"

I approach her again, this time with my hands raised. Nina steps back like she's the prey and I'm the predator. There's a fear in her eyes I don't understand. "Nina, talk to me. I never said you had to be perfect."

People walk around us on the busy New York street. Even at night, there's still crowds of people out and about.

"What's going on?" I ask her.

"Why do you care?" she practically sobs. "It would all be so much easier if you just didn't care."

"What would be easier? Nina."

She opens and closes her mouth before shaking her head. "No. I can't do this. I can't do this, Antonio." She starts walking away.

I don't let her get far. My wife is in distress, and I need answers. "Nina, just tell me what's bothering you. I care for you." I step in front of her, making her stop. She gives me an annoyed look but doesn't fight me this time. "You know I care for you."

"Why can't you just let me walk away?"

"Because you're my wife. I'm worried. I can't let you walk away because I don't want you to get hurt. You're clearly upset over something. Did ... did your father say something to you? Is it your family?"

She sucks in a deep breath. "Do you even know what's going on with my family?" She shakes her head sadly. "No. Why would you? I haven't told you. My mother is an addict. She's constantly out of it. She's not there when I need her." Tears begin to slip down Nina's face. "She prefers pills to her own daughters. And Anna ... Well, she's too caught up in being a teenager to see I'm trying to help her. And my father —" She shuts her mouth instantly.

"What about your father?" I have to step to the side as a woman pushing a baby stroller lumbers down the sidewalk.

"Nothing," she says tiredly. "It's nothing. I just want to go home."

“Then let me take you home.” I hold out my hand to her, praying she’ll take it. After a beat, she does.

I take her to my car, making sure she gets in safely. Nina is silent on the drive back to my apartment. The only sound coming from her is her crying. Soft, little sobs.

“Nina, I’m here for you, ok? Was it my fight? Was that too much for you?” I know Big John got the better of me tonight and almost won. I got distracted by how beautiful Nina looked in the audience.

She shakes her head but doesn’t talk to me.

When I pull into the parking garage for our apartment, I stop the car and turn to her. “If there’s something wrong, you can talk to me about it. I want you to know that, Nina. I’m here for you. I care about you.” More than care, I’m starting to realize. Nina has me fucking smitten.

She faces me, tears streaming down her cheeks. For a moment, I think she’ll tell me everything bothering her, but instead, she leans in and kisses me.

I pull back. “Nina, maybe we shouldn’t be doing this while you’re upset.” Another thing my sisters taught me. Always respect a woman, especially when she’s in a vulnerable state.

“I want to.” She grabs my face and kisses me again. It’s like she’s dying of thirst and I’m her only water source. “I need to, Antonio. Make me feel happy again.” She peppers kisses all over my face and down my neck.

“Are you sure?” I ask, gripping her arms.

“I’m sure,” she whispers into my ear before pressing her lips to mine. This time, I kiss her back. The passion within Nina tonight startles me. She really does want to forget about whatever is bothering her.

Nina crosses the console and settles into my lap, her legs on either side of me. She tugs at my shirt, running her fingers along my bare stomach. I shiver at her touch. Kissing her harder, my tongue mingles with hers. Sighing, she melts into my touch.

I grip her hips. My fingers dig into her skin, but Nina doesn't seem to mind. Our kiss is the most passionate we've ever had together. Nina's tears slide onto my lips, and the saltiness makes me pull back.

"Are you sure?" I ask again.

"Stop asking me. I'm sure." She kisses me with a fierceness I've never felt from her.

Nina tugs on my belt. I help her undo it and slide my pants down enough to let my cock free. Nina grips it, making me groan. I press kisses down her throat, nipping and biting. Nina drops her head back. A gasp escapes her.

I shove her dress up and rip her panties down. Nina kicks them away before settling back on top of me. For just a moment, she looks uncertain.

"We haven't done this position before," she says.

"I'll show you." I grab her hips and help her line up my cock to her entrance. I can feel her wetness when I swipe a finger along her pussy. She moans. "Like this," I tell her. I help Nina lower onto my cock.

The moment she slides down, we moan together. The windows of the car are getting steamy, protecting us from any unsuspecting people who might pass by. Nina begins to rock her hips forward and back. Fuck, she feels amazing on my cock.

We press our heads together as our bodies move as one. Our gazes are locked in a lustful battle of wills, neither one wanting to look away but daring each other to.

Nina's lips part as she increases her motion. She rolls her hips around, grinding down, allowing my cock to sink deeper into her. I hold onto her tightly. She's mine. I'm never letting her go.

"Antonio," she gasps, bringing her hands to clutch the headrest behind me. She thrusts her hips downward. I moan as I grip her hips and kiss all along her jaw and neck.

The only sound in the car is our heavy breathing. The car is rocking slightly from our movements.

I angle my hips upward to enter her deeper, which makes her gasp loudly. Her body leans back against the steering wheel. She accidentally presses on the horn, making us both jump. Nina looks down at me and laughs slightly. I smile back.

“We need to be more careful,” I say, wrapping my arms around her waist and bringing her back toward me.

“More careful,” she agrees.

We kiss again as our bodies start a frantic rhythm. Neither of us is holding back now.

“Antonio,” she whimpers, pulling back. “I need ... I need ...”

“I know what you need.” I bring my hand between us and press down on her nub. That does it.

Nina drops her head back and moans my name as she comes. It’s the most glorious sound I’ve ever heard. That spurs me on, and I come quickly right after.

Our bodies shudder as we hold onto each other, each of us coming down from our highs. She slumps against me, burying her head in the crook of my neck. Nina is breathing heavily, and I start to worry for her all over again.

“Nina, are you ok?” I whisper, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I need you to be ok. I can’t stand the idea you’re hurting for any reason. It’s not because of me, is it?”

She kisses my neck. “It’s not because of you.” She pulls back and slides into the passenger seat, pushing her dress down. I hand her the panties that are on the floor, and she blushes as she puts them back on.

“Then what’s it about?” I put my cock away and right my pants.

She won’t look at me as she answers. “Just ... my father. He can be so cold sometimes.”

“You’ve mentioned that before.”

“He’s cheating on my mom. Did you know that?”

I go still. “No. I didn’t know that.”

“Why would you? He made me swear to secrecy when I was a kid. It’s just ... been bothering me, I guess.”

“I get it.” I swipe my fingers down her arm. “If you want to talk about it more ...”

She shrugs, opening the door. “What’s there to talk about? He’s hurt my feelings. He’s betrayed my mom. There’s nothing else to say.” She leaves the car before I can say anything else. The only evidence she was even in the car at all is the faint smell of sex in the air.

This time, I watch Nina walk toward the elevators that will take her to our apartment. I don’t follow her.

Instead, I send her a text that I’m going to talk to her father. I start the car and leave.

PETROV ANSWERS the door of his condo for me. Nina only responded with an “Ok.” She’s clearly dealing with things between her and her father, and that’s not my place. Except, I need to know more about the man I’m working with. If he’s betrayed his own wife, who’s to say he won’t betray me, too?

So far, Petrov hasn’t given me any reason to doubt him. He’s provided me with money, which he promised. He married his daughter to me. But the only way I’ve managed to hurt Franco since starting to work with Petrov was by sure chance when Killian and I stumbled upon Alfonso, Franco’s second-in-command.

I need to hit Franco in an even bigger way, and I need Petrov’s help with that.

“Antonio,” Petrov says, welcoming me into his home. “I wasn’t expecting you tonight.”

“I realized I haven’t been entirely truthful with you,” I tell him, taking a seat on the couch. He settles in across from me.

Knowing what Nina told me about her father cheating on his wife, I look at the man with new eyes. Yes, a lot of Mafia men are scoundrels who cheat on their wives, but my father was never one of them. And I never intend to be one of them either.

“Oh?” Petrov has this uncanny ability to quirk his eyebrow in a way that makes me feel both at ease and uncomfortable.

“I didn’t tell you about killing Franco’s second-in-command. Alfonso is dead. But knowing how powerful you are, I’m sure you already know that.”

“I do. I found out through an acquaintance. I have eyes and ears everywhere, you know.”

That almost sounds like a threat. I brush it off. “It was a spur of the moment thing. I saw an opportunity, and I took it.”

“With the Irishman?” Petrov’s lips curl on the word.

“Yes, with Killian. Remember, we’re all on the same team here.”

Petrov shifts in his seat. “Oh, I know. But next time, don’t leave me out of any plans. That’s all I ask. I am helping to pay for this operation, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are. Which is why I wanted to tell you what my next game plan is. Even Killian doesn’t know yet.” Petrov perks up at that. I continue speaking. “Franco is a powerful man. I wanted to weaken him until there was nothing left of him, but I can’t wait anymore. I think the next plan of attack is to draw Franco out and just be done with him. Kill him in one fell swoop. I’ll take over after that. His men will have no choice but to come to my side. And with you at my side, it’ll make things even easier. What do you say?”

Petrov purses his lips, eyeing me over carefully. “Are you sure you don’t want to try going after another one of his shipments? That would be the smarter move.”

“It would be. But I can’t keep waiting for Franco to go down. He has too much power. If I want Franco gone, I need to kill him myself. And I need to do it soon. So, I was thinking you could go talk to him.”

“Me?” Petrov chuckles. “Why ever would it be me?”

“Because you’re Pavel Petrov. You’re famous in this city. Franco won’t be able to resist a meeting with you. You tell him to meet you at a spot I’ll designate. You get him into position, and I’ll strike. He’ll be dead for good.”

Petrov is quiet for a moment before he speaks. “Very well. It could work. When do you want this to happen?”

“As soon as possible. You just let me know when you have the meeting set with Franco.”

“I will.” Petrov and I stand up at the same time. He shakes my hand. “I’m glad to business with you, Antonio. Soon, we’ll take over this city together.”

I smile darkly. “That’s what I like to hear.”

I LEAVE Petrov’s place on a high. Even though I don’t approve of his personal life when it comes to his wife or his issues with Nina, I do love how much of a Petrov good businessman he is. He’ll help me regain the power owed to me.

And I’ll be able to put down Franco for good.

I think back to the very first training session I had with Franco. It was just a week after my dad died, and Franco had moved into our house without anyone granting him permission to do so. I was only twelve.

Franco took me to his private gym, where he instructed me that he’d resume my fight training. “Pick up where you dad left off,” he said.

I didn’t have my issues with Franco at the time. He was still so unknown to me. I never saw him much when my dad was still alive.

I’d expected hand-to-hand combat lessons like my dad gave me. But when a group of men came out of the shadows, I realized this training session wouldn’t be what I was used to.

And it wasn't.

Not when Franco instructed the men to start attacking me. I tried blocking and kicking and punching, but I was just a kid. I hadn't even hit puberty yet. These were grown men. These were my dad's men, who were now Franco's men.

They took glee in watching me fumble and trip and sweat and pant. I was losing fast. They all kept coming after me, again and again and again. I was powerless to stop it.

And Franco just looked on, a smirk on his lips.

It was only when Franco walked forward and landed a square punch to my face that I knew things would never be the same.

I landed on my back with a grunt, and all the men laughed at me.

Franco kneeled beside me. "You need to toughen up, Antonio. Your father taught you to be weak. But I'll make strong." He patted my bruised cheek, making me wince.

When we arrived back home, my face was just starting to show the bruise. Mom saw and rushed over to my side. "Antonio?" She slicked back my hair and looked at my face. I wiggled out of her grip. "What happened?" She shot a look toward Franco. "What did you do to him?"

Franco shrugged. "I taught him to be a man."

Cecilia ran into the foyer, carrying one of her many dolls. She was only ten at the time, and her little eyes widened when she saw my face. "Antonio?"

I brushed past her and headed upstairs. She followed. "Antonio?"

I tried shutting my bedroom door on her face, but she wouldn't allow it. She barged into my room and demanded answers.

Instead of giving them to her, I just burst into tears. It was the first real time I'd cried since my dad died.

Cecilia's eyes softened. "Oh, Antonio." She set her doll down and threw her arms around me. "Why are you sad?"

"Dad," I managed to say. But it wasn't just that I missed him. It was that I had a new father figure in my life, and I wanted nothing to do with him. I began to realize just how much Franco was changing things.

"I'm sad, too," she sniffled.

We clung to each other and cried, neither one of us letting go.

CHAPTER 12

Antonio

“Nina?” I ask into the dark bedroom. My wife is lying in the bed, her back to me. She pulled away from me again after that night we had sex in the car. I know she’s struggling with her father, but I wish she’d just talk to me. “I’m heading out. Tonight’s the night I’m finally going to take down my uncle.”

She glances over her shoulder at me. “I’m glad, Antonio. I really hope you do that.” There’s something ragged in her voice.

I want to go to her and make sure she’s all right, but I hold back. Petrov called me a few minutes ago, telling me he’s meeting up with Franco tonight. I need to be there on time so I can kill my uncle.

“I ...” I what? I love you? Nina has stolen my heart in such a short amount of time. But now isn’t the right time to tell her. If there ever will be.

“Have a good night,” I tell her instead.

She sits up and gives me a look I can’t decipher. It’s one of pain and longing. “You, too, Antonio.”

I smile, but she just lies back down, so all I can do is leave. Nina is important to me, but I have something much more important tonight to deal with: Franco’s death.

Killian is waiting for me at the appointed meeting spot. An old junkyard. When Petrov told me he arranged the meeting with Franco here, I thought it strange but didn’t question it. As

long as Petrov gets Franco where I need him to be, I'm fine with anything.

Killian gives me a nod and a pat on the back. We stay on the outskirts of the junkyard where we can keep an eye on the entrance while we wait for Petrov and Franco to show.

"Do you really think this will work?" Killian asks, keeping his voice down.

"It has to." I pull out my gun and check it for bullets. Fully loaded. With Franco, I'm not taking any chances. I kiss the pendant around my neck. "Dad, this is for you."

We wait in the darkness until we hear voices. Petrov and Franco. They round a corner, with Petrov taking the lead. Faintly, I can hear him telling Franco he likes to meet people here because it's secluded. Franco looks suspicious, but that's just who he is. Nothing new there.

Petrov takes Franco to the middle of the junkyard. The two of them are talking about potentially working together.

"I'd love your help with expanding," Franco tells Petrov. I don't hear Petrov's reply as I stare at Franco. I haven't been this close to him since the night he tried to kill me. I make a move forward, but Killian grabs my shoulder, keeping me back. He silently shakes his head. It's not the right time yet.

Petrov needs to get Franco into position so I can fire off a shot. Right now, Petrov is in the way.

What's he waiting for? I want to shout at him to move. I've waited five years for this. I need Petrov to move out of the way so I can have a clear shot at Franco.

A rumble of footsteps echo in the night, and a large group of Franco's men arrive at the junkyard. That was not part of the plan. Petrov was supposed to find a way to get Franco alone, but Franco's paranoia probably got the best of him.

"Dammit," I growl softly to Killian.

"We can still kill him," he tells me. "We just need Petrov to move."

“What’s the meaning of this?” Petrov asks Franco, still standing in the way of him.

“You really think I’d go anywhere alone? Not when my nephew is out there looking for me. I’d love to make a deal with you, Petrov. You just can never be too careful. What do you say?” Franco holds out his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Petrov hesitates for a moment before shaking Franco’s hand. “We have a deal.”

“Good. Now, let’s go men,” he orders the group surrounding him. His men. My father’s men. These men were supposed to be my men.

Anger clouds my judgment. This is not how it was supposed to go. I’m tired of waiting to kill Franco.

I’m taking my shot tonight.

I stand up and walk into the junkyard clearing, my gun pointed at Franco. I don’t bother announcing myself. I just want him dead and gone.

But Petrov turns toward me, his eyes widening, cueing Franco in on what’s happening. Franco whirls around to stare at me and grabs Petrov as a shield just as I fire.

The bullet misses Franco and, instead, lands in Petrov’s shoulder. Petrov shouts as he stumbles back. Franco pushes Petrov out of the way and lifts his gun at me.

I’d be dead if it weren’t for Killian pulling me out of the way. Franco’s bullet hits a dirty old car instead of me.

“What the hell are you thinking?” Killian hisses as we hunker down behind the car. “You didn’t have a clear shot. We need to get out of here.”

He’s right. Franco is armed and has a group of men at his side. Judging by their footsteps, they’re getting closer.

I could stay and fight, but I can’t stand a chance against all those men. So, with gritted teeth and lost hope, I follow Killian out of the junkyard before Franco and his men can catch us. The only problem? They’re hot on our heels.

“Run!” Killian shouts, hustling toward his car. I glance back and see Franco at the head of the group, coming right for me. A dark smile is on his lips. He thinks he has me.

Not a fucking chance.

I dive into Killian’s car, and Killian takes off in a screech of tires. Franco’s men scramble toward their cars to follow us. “Dammit!” I kick the glove compartment.

“Hey, easy on my car,” Killian says, making a sharp right turn.

“How did this happen? Petrov was supposed to get Franco alone. Petrov was supposed to move out of the way. Why didn’t he?”

“I’m not sure, but you did shoot him in the shoulder. Nice aim.”

“I was aiming at Franco.”

Killian only shrugs.

I level a glare at my friend. “I know you don’t like Petrov, but he was on our side. What the hell happened?”

“I’m not sure, but right now,” Killian says, flicking his gaze to the rearview mirror, “we have about five cars right behind us. We need to ditch them.”

“I have a spot we can go. Take a left turn up here and then a quick right turn. Hopefully, we can get there before Franco and his men see us.”

Killian does as I instruct, and we end up in an old parking garage. It’s sort of hidden from the street and not easily seen unless you know it’s there.

“Pull in there,” I tell him. Once Killian does, I tell him we need to get out and switch cars just in case Franco or his men spotted us. We get out and pick a random car, some basic white Honda, and jumpstart it before taking off in it.

As we ease back out on the street, it’s clear we’ve lost Franco. I don’t see his car or any of his men’s cars either. Killian lets out a rough breath as he drives. I fume in my seat.

“I can’t believe that happened,” I mutter. “How did that happen?”

Killian is quiet next to me.

I turn on him. “What? Spit it out. I know you something to say.”

“I didn’t want to say it before, but you know I don’t exactly like Petrov.”

“I know.”

Killian sighs as he turns a corner. “I don’t trust him, man.”

“You don’t trust Petrov? Why? What has he done that’s made you distrust him?”

“Nothing. I just get a weird feeling from him. You sent him to make a deal with Franco to get Franco alone, but that didn’t happen. Instead, Petrov stood right in front of Franco, making it impossible for you to get a shot in. Isn’t that suspicious?”

“I did think that was weird ...” I shake my head. “But I trust Petrov. He married his daughter to me for fuck’s sake. If that isn’t a sign of trust, I don’t know what is.”

“True. I don’t really know how to explain that one. But ...”

I groan, dropping my head back so it thuds against the headrest. “What now?”

“When I met Nina at your fight the other night ...”

I shake my head impatiently. “What?”

“She just seemed like she was keeping a secret or something. It was weird. But I felt it.”

“Oh, so now my wife is in cahoots with my uncle, is that what you’re saying?”

“No, of course not. But I am suggesting maybe Petrov is. Maybe he’s a spy for Franco.”

I stare at Killian for a long hard moment before laughing. “Killian, you’re fucking insane. I made an alliance with him. I

married his daughter. No father would marry his daughter to the enemy. That doesn't make any sense."

"No, you're right. That doesn't." Killian pulls up outside my apartment. "I'm just putting it out there. Maybe you need to look at Petrov a little more closely. And Nina, too."

I turn to him slowly, anger radiating off me. "Nina is not some spy. She's not working for her father. She doesn't even get along with her father. It doesn't make sense for Petrov to betray me." *He cheated on his wife.* Nina's words come back to me. Maybe betrayal isn't so foreign to Pavel Petrov. But it still doesn't make since why he'd marry Nina to me.

"Ok." Killian raises his hands in surrender. "I hear you. I'm just asking you to be on the lookout. I think your wife is keeping a secret."

"No, she's not. She told me what was bothering her. She's not keeping anything from me. And, if I were you, Killian, I'd keep Nina's name out of your mouth. Otherwise, you might make me think *you're* the spy."

"I'm no spy," he spits out.

"No? I met you and Petrov around the same time. You both approached me wanting to make a deal. How are either of you so different?"

"I was with you the night we killed Alfonso. If I were a spy, do you really think I'd let you kill Franco's second-in-command?"

I shrug. "Maybe you realized there were no other options without getting caught."

Killian shakes his head, chuckling darkly. "This is messed up, man. Antonio, I'm here for you. I'm honest. If you want to be so caught up in your revenge against your uncle that you can't see the truth in front of you, that's on you. But Petrov messed up tonight, and that's something to look into at least. And you know it. Now, get out of my car."

"It's not your car," I growl, getting out anyway. "We literally stole it tonight." I slam the door and head inside to my apartment.

I find Nina still in bed, now asleep. I take a moment to look at her peaceful form. There's no way someone as sweet as her could be a spy. I just need to talk to Petrov and get to the bottom of what happened tonight.

I slide in beside Nina, wrapping her into my arms. She stirs and looks over her shoulder at me, relaxing. "You're all right. How did it go?"

"My uncle is still alive," I mutter. "Otherwise, I don't want to talk about it. I just want to hold you."

She nods and turns away from me, snuggling into me. I breathe in her vanilla scent and shut my eyes, telling myself everything will be all right.

I SHOW up at Petrov's house the next day. He called me and told me they got the bullet out of his shoulder and to come meet him.

I can't get Killian's words out of my head. None of this makes sense.

Petrov welcomes me inside, this time with his arm in a sling.

"Does it hurt?" I ask, nodding at his arm.

"Only a little."

"I didn't mean to shoot you," I tell him, settling down on his couch. "I was aiming for Franco."

"I understand. What happened last night didn't go according to plan. Antonio, you need to know I tried to get him there alone. I didn't know his men would show up, but we should have planned better for it."

"I agree." So that answers one question. "But there's something else I need to ask you about."

"Go ahead." Petrov settles into his seat.

“We went over this before. You were supposed to make sure Franco was in the right position so I could take a shot at him. But you were in the way. What gives?”

Petrov shifts in his seat, looking uncomfortable. “I was trying to get him into position, but I didn’t want to make Franco suspicious. You should have waited a few more minutes before trying to kill him. I maybe could have gotten him where he needed to be. I’m sorry, Antonio. I let you down. But we can always try again.”

“How? Now Franco will be even more suspicious of you. How will I ever get him alone to kill him?”

“You’re a bright young man. You’ll think of something.”

“I hate to say this, Petrov, but ... Killian thinks you were in on it. That maybe you’re working for Franco. That’s a crazy idea, though, right?”

Petrov chuckles. “That is crazy. I have no desire to work with a man like that. But why would Killian think that about me?”

I tell him Killian’s accusations against him.

“Ah.” Petrov clears his throat. “Well, I think the real answer is right in front of you. Why is Killian making accusations except to keep them off him? Maybe he told Franco you were coming that night. Maybe he was even the one who told Franco about your plan to blow up one of his drug shipments. I seem to remember Franco not being there when he should have been. Perhaps it’s young Killian spying on you for Franco.”

“But I trust Killian ...” Or do I? He *was* trying real hard to place blame on Petrov and Nina. Petrov, I understand. But Nina? She’s my wife. And any man who tries to hurt my wife is an enemy in my eyes.

“I can see it in your eyes that you don’t know.” Petrov sits back in his seat, the power radiating off him like a man who’s never had to work hard a day in his life. “I’d question Killian if I were you. Something is going on, and I can assure you, Antonio, it’s not me. You’re married to my daughter. I’d never

entrust a man to her I didn't trust myself. You understand that, right?"

I do. Petrov and Nina might have some issues between them, but that's just family stuff. It has nothing to do with business.

I thank Petrov for his time and head off to find Killian.

KILLIAN IS at the fight club in his normal booth, drinking a beer and watching a fight. I storm up to him. "How do I know you're not the spy?"

Killian doesn't look at me. "I'm not going to justify that with a response. I've been with you every step of the way."

"Were you the one who warned Franco about the drug shipment raid? Is that why he wasn't there and all the drugs were gone?"

With a sigh, Killian finally faces me, setting his beer down slowly. "I. Am. Not. The. Spy. Why don't you ask your good friend Petrov if he is."

"I did, and he made it very clear he wasn't. He would never marry his daughter to the enemy. He just wouldn't, and you know it. So, there are only so many people who could have given Franco a tip."

"It wasn't me," Killian stands up and says right to my face. "Maybe the reason Petrov married his daughter to you is because she's the spy. You tell her all your plans, same as me, same as Petrov. She's the only other person it could be. Maybe that sweet, little, innocent act she has going on isn't real."

I see red.

With a snarl, I grab Killian and knock him back against the table. "I told you to keep my wife's name out of your mouth."

"What if I'm right?"

“No.” I lunge at Killian and land a punch to his jaw. Killian grunts and stumbles back. “Nina is innocent.” I land another punch to his cheekbone. It tears the skin on my knuckles, but I don’t care.

“How do you know?” Killian grabs me and wrestles me to the ground. People in the crowd start to turn and look at us. He punches me in the nose. I can hear the crack before I feel it break. I growl and push Killian off me, managing to get on top of him. I start raining down punches on his face.

I only stop when Killian stops putting up a fight. “You want to know the secret she told me? Her dad cheated on her mom, and it’s tearing her up inside. So, if Nina seemed like she was keeping any secrets, that was it. Don’t ever talk about my wife like that again.” I stand up, leaving him there to bleed on the ground.

But Killian isn’t over yet. “Someone’s the spy, Antonio. You might want to figure it out before it gets you killed.”

With a snarl, I whirl around and punch him so hard upside the head that Killian flops back to the ground and passes out. I leave the shocked crowd to help him as I depart the club, my knuckles bruised and paranoia swirling in my head.

THE DAY I realized how evil my uncle could be was the day he cornered me in the gym after our fight session. He no longer sent a group of men to attack me for our sessions. Instead, he fought me one-on-one.

I was only thirteen at the time. Puberty had finally hit me, but I still had a long way to grow. Franco dominated me with his height and muscle.

“You’re getting better,” he said, still hovering over me.

“I know.”

He chuckled darkly. “I like your confidence, kid. You know, we’re spending a lot of time together. Just me and you. I’ve been doing you a favor by teaching you how to fight.”

I wanted to correct him and tell him it was my dad who first taught me how to fight, but there was something in Franco's eyes that stopped me.

"I think it's time you returned that favor," he said.

"How?"

"By taking off your pants."

His words sent a chill over me. I almost thought I'd misheard him. "What?"

"You see, Antonio. Your mom and I ... we've gotten close over the past year." I didn't understand what he meant by that, but I could only assume. "Now, I think it's time you and I also get close."

He reached for me, and I jumped back. The way his expression darkened made me feel real fear for the first time in my life. "Come on, Antonio. Don't be like that."

"No," I snapped. "I don't want you to touch me, you sicko!"

He lunged for me, and I ran before he could grab me. I kept running and running and running. Franco didn't follow.

When I finally made my way back home, it was hours later. Mom rushed to my side the moment I walked through the door, worried out of her mind. Franco was there as well.

Cecilia showed up and hugged me, too, as well as Emilia, who scolded me for not calling them and letting them know where I was.

The entire time, Franco just gave me a look that said things between us weren't over.

I knew at that moment I'd have to grow so strong he could never even get the *chance* to touch me.

CHAPTER 13

Nina

Antonio bursts into our apartment, covered in sweat and blood.

I stand up from the couch, startled by the sight. “Antonio?”

He doesn’t answer as he walks up to me and grabs my face, pulling me in for a kiss. At first, I’m surprised. I try to pull back, but Antonio kisses me harder, and I’m powerless to stop him. I don’t want to. Being with Antonio is the only time I ever feel truly happy. I can forget about my father and sister and the horrible thing my father wants me to do.

I gasp as Antonio presses me against the side of the couch before spinning me around so my stomach is pressed into the couch. “Antonio?”

He rips down my loungewear pants and underwear and shoves his hand between my legs. “Antonio?” I ask in a gasp. He swipes his fingers along my nub, and I cry out at the contact. My body responds to him like a moth to flame. It’s instant. It’s instinctual.

Antonio kisses along my neck as he uses his other hand to grab my breast, kneading it. I moan and let myself sink into the sensations. I’m not sure why he’s acting like this. He’s been out all day, so I don’t know what he’s gotten up to. But judging by his bloody knuckles, I’m assuming nothing good.

“I need you,” he growls against my skin. He rubs my clit until I can barely breathe. “I need you now, Nina.” My arousal grows by the second.

“Ok,” I whisper, gripping the edge of the couch.

I hear him undo his belt buckle and unzip his pants before I feel his erection at my entrance. My body remembers what this feels like, and my core throbs in anticipation.

Antonio grabs my hips tightly as he enters me in one thrust. I cry out as he groans, burying his head against my neck. I hold onto the couch as Antonio shows no mercy to my body. It’s a lot rougher than any of the other times we’ve had sex. It’s a little scary, knowing Antonio has this side to him. But it’s also thrilling.

I let myself get lost in it. I move my hips backward, angling so he can get deeper. We find our rhythm, becoming passionate and rough and frantic.

Antonio growls as he presses on my low back, bending me over the couch. I drop my head, letting go. Every thrust of Antonio’s hips sends his erection deeper. The roughness of it hurts slightly, but it’s also the most turned on I think I’ve ever felt.

“Oh,” I gasp out as he thrusts particularly hard into me. We’ve never had sex like this before. In this new position, he’s able to reach depths of me I didn’t know were possible. “Oh, oh!”

Antonio doesn’t say a word as he grips my hips tighter, thrusting into me with wild abandon. It’s like he’s not fully in control of his body. I’m desperate to know what happened tonight. What prompted him to act like this.

My hands press down onto the couch cushion as Antonio increases his speed. His erection touches that sweet spot within me, and I cry out every time. I can feel my orgasm getting closer and closer.

Antonio jerks out of me so unexpectedly, I almost fall over. But then he whirls me around and sets me on the armrest of the couch. He opens my legs and enters me all over again. Instantly, I come.

I hold onto his neck as my orgasm washes over me. Antonio’s eyes are filled with lust, which only spurs on my

release. He growls as he thrusts into me, grabbing my legs higher around his waist. I drop my head back, unable to keep myself upright.

With another growl, Antonio comes next, filling me up. My legs clamp around his waist. He brings our lips together in a sloppy, tired kiss. We're both covered in sweat.

After holding me for a moment, Antonio lets me go. I lay down on the couch, too spent to move. He rights his pants, then comes over and lies down beside me, scooping me into his arms. I pull my pants back up and snuggle into him.

"Wow," I say after a moment of silence. "Where did that come from?"

"I just needed you," he says, sounding a lot more like himself. "I got into a fight with Killian tonight. It wasn't fun."

I look at him over my shoulder. "Why did you two get into a fight?"

Antonio watches me closely before answering. "He said someone might be a spy for my uncle."

I try to not tense. "Oh?"

"Yeah. Things with Franco didn't go according to plan. Killian pointed out that maybe someone is a spy. Your father specifically." I keep my face neutral as Antonio talks. "But when I pointed out your father gave me you and it wouldn't make sense for him to be a spy, Killian made a comment."

"What kind of comment?" My heart is pounding, and I can only hope Antonio doesn't feel it.

"That maybe *you* were working for my uncle."

"What?" I pull away from him. Antonio still watches me closely. "I don't ... No! I'm not working for you uncle." And that's the truth. I don't want to do what Franco and my father want from me.

Antonio pulls me back into him and gives me a kiss. "I know. I told Killian that was absurd. And it ... pissed me off. So, I hit him. Multiple times. Not my finest moment."

After taking a deep breath, I settle back against him. “So, that explains your knuckles.” I give each of his knuckles a kiss.

“I accused Killian of being the spy.”

A flash of guilt passes through me. I know exactly who the spy is, and I could tell Antonio right now, but ... I don't. The fear for my sister keeps my silent.

“Do you really think he is?” I ask.

Antonio lets out a rough breath. “I'm not sure. Killian hasn't given me any reason to doubt him, but neither has your father. There was something though that you told me ...” He traces his fingertips down my arm, sending goosebumps over me. “You told me he cheated on your mom. Now, I wouldn't normally care what another man does in his spare time, but if that's any indication of him as a person ... Do you think he could betray me?”

I swallow hard. “Antonio ...” I have no clue what to say. I want to tell him the truth. That's there a bottle of poison in the kitchen just waiting to be poured into his glass. That if I don't kill him soon, my father will beat my sister.

The thing is ... I've seen Antonio quick to temper. At the gym with that guy Chris and now with Killian. Who's to say Antonio wouldn't try to hurt me if he found out the truth? My father has put me in an impossible spot, caught between two very scary men.

“No,” I finally say, lying to Antonio even though it breaks my heart. “My father wouldn't betray you.” It's like speaking through concrete. Almost impossible, but I do it anyway.

Antonio relaxes against the couch, smiling softly. “That's good to hear coming from you. I trust you, Nina. I want you to know that.”

Another flash of guilt.

When will it end? I know the answer.

When either Antonio or me is dead.

“KILLIAN IS IN THE HOSPITAL,” Antonio tells me the following day. “Shit. I didn’t realize I hurt him that bad.”

“Do you want to go talk to him?”

He gets up from the kitchen table, turning away from me. “I’m not even sure what to say. I’m sorry for hitting you so hard you’re in the hospital? I’m still pissed about the accusations he made against you. I don’t know if I can see him.”

“I get it. But you can use all the allies you can get.” And I know for a fact Killian is actually on Antonio’s side. The guilt of knowing Killian got hurt because of what he said, when he wasn’t technically wrong, ate at me all night.

“You’re right.” Antonio stands up straighter. “I should see him.”

“Can I ... come?” I ask.

He looks surprised but not suspicious, which I take as a good sign. “Sure. But why? You don’t know Killian all that well.”

“I just want to be there for you.” And find a way to apologize to Killian for the truth without telling him the truth.

“You have such a kind heart.” He kisses me, and it sends the guilt pit straight to the bottom of my stomach.

Killian is in his own room at the hospital, his face covered in bruises and so swollen that it’s almost hard to look at. But he’s alive and awake, so that’s the important thing.

He glares at Antonio as we enter his room. “What are you doing here?”

Antonio sighs. “Killian, listen, man ... I’m sorry for hitting you like I did. You’ve been a solid ally, and I shouldn’t have done it.”

“So, do you believe me?” His eyes flick to me and back to Antonio. “About everything I said?”

“No. But I don’t think you’re the spy. I don’t know what’s going on. If there even is a spy. I just know I need you at my side to take down Franco. What do you say?” Antonio holds out his hand to him.

Killian eyes it over before sighing deeply and shaking it. “Fine. We made a deal, and I intend to stick to it. But you need to know I don’t trust Petrov.”

“Understood. We’ll figure it out together.” Antonio’s phone rings. “I need to get this. I’ll be right back.” He walks out of the room, leaving Killian and me behind.

Killian watches me as I hover in the room, feeling incredibly awkward. “Are you the spy?” he asks me.

I jump. “What?”

“I just need to know.”

“No.”

“Is your father?”

I hesitate too long before answering. “No.” But by then, Killian is already nodding like he knows the truth.

“Just don’t get Antonio killed,” he says. “I need him to help me later after he’s killed Franco.”

“I—I ... I don’t want Antonio to die.”

He frowns. “Why are you here, Nina? It’s not like you care about me. We’re strangers.”

Guilt. “Because you mean a lot to Antonio, and I just wanted to make sure you were ok.”

Killian smiles like he’s in on some sort of joke. “You really are kind if you’re being truthful. I guess we’ll see in time, won’t we?”

I smile tightly in return as Antonio enters the room again. “That was my sister Emilia. She wants me to meet up with her, Gemma, and Francesca. My sisters want to see me.” The awe

on his face is part amazement and part disbelief. “They’re not supposed to be in contact with me, not if it means putting them in danger with Franco. I’m not sure why they reached out.”

I do.

Yesterday, while Antonio was out, I called Emilia. I remember Antonio telling me she was like a second mom to him, so I figured she’d be the best one to call. I got her number from Antonio’s phone.

I looked into it as I’d been thinking about calling for a while. Antonio misses his family dearly, but he can’t reach out to the family members still under Franco’s thumb. Emilia isn’t, though—not since she married the head of the Italian mob in LA. His three older sisters aren’t bound to Franco, but their husbands are because they have a deal with him.

I called her and introduced myself and told her Antonio could really use seeing his some of his family, even if it’s dangerous. She understood and told me she’d arrange a meeting without Franco finding out.

Now, here we are.

“I haven’t spoken to Emilia in ... years. I made sure my sisters didn’t call because I didn’t want to put them in danger. Why call me now?”

“Maybe it’s just fate,” I tell him.

That’s one thing I’ve learned over these past few weeks, dealing with my father. I know what it’s like to not have any familial support. I don’t want Antonio to go through life alone anymore. It’s not right.

I can only hope that one day, I’ll have a family of my own I can depend on.

THE MEETING TAKES place at the end of the week in a secluded part of Central Park where it’s mostly trees and barely any

people. Antonio jiggles his leg as he sits on a bench, waiting for his three older sisters to arrive.

“I can’t believe they’re doing this,” he says. “I told them to not reach out. I don’t want them to piss off Franco. It wouldn’t be good for their husbands.”

“You’re their brother. I’m sure they’ve been missing you just as much as you’ve been missing them.”

Sets of footsteps can be heard coming up the path. When I turn, I see three women approaching us. Two with blonde hair, one with brown. It’s obvious to me which one is Emilia because she’s front and center.

“Antonio?” she says, pausing as she reaches us. The other two remain back a little, watching eagerly.

Antonio stands up, and before I know it, he’s holding onto his big sister. The other two join in on the hug, and all three hold each other. I can even hear crying mixed in.

I stay back and watch. This isn’t my place.

Antonio finally lets his sisters go but doesn’t look like he wants to. “You’re all really here.”

“We are,” Emilia says.

“You should have reached out more,” the other blonde one says. “We would have come.”

“Gemma, I didn’t want you guys to get hurt because of me. If Franco knew we were meeting ...”

The second blonde one, Gemma, swats Antonio’s arm. “You’re an idiot. I don’t give a rat’s ass what Franco thinks, and neither does Viktor.” I know that’s her husband from what Antonio has told me. “We’re both willing to go to war for you. You were the one who said no.”

“Because I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

The brunette steps forward. Clearly Francesca by process of elimination. “That’s not for you to decide, Antonio. You’ve been on your own for five years. It’s time to stop pushing us away because you’re afraid of what Franco might do.”

“Yeah,” Emilia says. “Each of us have powerful husbands. We’re not afraid of Franco.”

“Powerful husbands who are all aligned with Franco. If your husbands were to break their deal with him, it would only hurt Mom and the rest of our siblings.”

“I know,” Emilia says. “That’s why we waited until you reached out to meet.”

Antonio frowns. “But I didn’t reach out.”

A secretive smile passes Emilia’s lips. “No. But your wife did.”

Antonio turns to me with a happy surprise on his face. “Nina? This was you?”

“You deserve to be with your family again,” I tell him.

All three sisters face me.

“I think it’s time you introduce us to your wife,” Emilia says.

“Yeah,” Gemma cuts in. “You have a lot of explaining to do ...”

AFTER INTRODUCTIONS HAVE BEEN MADE and everybody has been caught up (Emilia’s daughter, who is five, is doing well. Gemma and Viktor have no plans to have kids, and Francesca and her husband are just enjoying life together), the siblings turn their conversation to something else.

Their mom.

“She misses you so much,” Emilia tells Antonio. “She calls me almost every day, crying over you. Even five years later.”

Gemma frowns. “She doesn’t call me.”

“That’s because she doesn’t like you,” Francesca says. “She doesn’t call me, either.”

Gemma smiles, nudging Francesca. “Then we’re the two black sheep of the family, huh? Nina, are you the black sheep of your family?”

“Oh, uh ... it’s complicated.”

“When is it not?” Gemma says.

Emilia gives me a smile before turning back to Antonio. “Mom would love to see you again.”

Antonio’s easy smile vanishes. “No. You know she’s most at risk when it comes to Franco. If he found out she was meeting me ... I don’t even want to think what could happen to her.”

“We understand,” Emilia says, “but she really wants to see you again. Let us plan a meeting in secret like we did today. Franco never has to know. It can just be a one-time thing. But I think it would do her good.” She pauses, taking Antonio’s hand. “And I think it would do you good as well.”

Antonio grabs the pendant around his neck and bows his head. “I’d give anything to see our mom again. And Cecilia.”

“Then we’ll make it happen.”

Antonio nods, looking resolved. “Ok. Make it happen.”

Watching Antonio with his sisters and seeing the easiness and effortlessness between them makes the guilt within my heart grow ten-fold. Antonio looks happier than I’ve ever seen him.

I just hope he lives long enough to get reunited with his entire family. My father’s grip is closing in, and I’m running out of time.

CHAPTER 14

Antonio

Today will be the day I see my mom for the first time in five years.

And I'm completely fucking nervous.

Nina is at my side as we wait near the back of the Italian restaurant where the meeting is supposed to take place. She places her hand on my jiggling knee. "I thought you'd be happy to see your mom?"

"I am. But it's been five years. I don't even know what she'll think of me."

"You told me you two were always close."

"We were. But she wasn't exactly happy when I told her I couldn't see her again until I took Franco down. That was years ago, and we haven't spoken since. Does she resent me?"

Nina grabs my cheek and presses a kiss to it. "Your sisters told you she misses you. This will be a good thing. It's time you see your mom again. Franco is proving to be hard to take down, and you need all the support you can get."

I rub a hand along the back of my neck. "Franco cannot find out about this meeting. If he does, my mom is in serious danger. I'm not sure this is a good idea." I stand up, ready to leave, when my mom walks through the door.

I stop. She's alone. Cecilia isn't with her. The pang in my heart over not seeing my favorite sister is strong, but the happiness at seeing my mom overpowers that.

She notices me right away. The large smile that breaks across her face instantly puts me at ease.

Giulia Moretti, my mother.

She rushes over to me, pulling me into a hug before either of us can say anything. “Antonio,” she whispers into my ear. “Antonio.” Her grip tightens on me as she begins to cry. “I’ve missed you so much. Oh my god.”

I hold her back just as tightly, and rest my chin on her head. I never thought this day would come, where I’d be surrounded by my mother’s love. It makes me feel like I’m back home again.

I’m the one who pulls away because I have a feeling my mom would hold onto me forever if she got the chance. “Mom, how are you?”

“I’ve been miserable ever since you left. But I’ve been getting by.”

“What about Franco?”

Her soft eyes darken. “I don’t want to talk about him.” She notices Nina at my side, and her smile widens. “You must be Nina. Emilia told me about you.”

Nina looks surprised as my mom pulls her into a hug. “Any wife of Antonio’s is a daughter to me. I’m so happy you’re a part of our family and you’ve been there for my Antonio.”

Nina doesn’t say anything as she tentatively hugs my mom back. I nod at her encouragingly, letting her know it’s ok. “Thank you,” she finally says once my mom lets her go. “I’m glad to have Antonio as my husband. I don’t think anyone could be better, given it was an arranged marriage.” Even though Nina’s words are kind, there’s a hesitancy to them that doesn’t make me quite believe what she’s saying. I’ll have to ask her about it later.

After we sit down and order our food, Mom begins to gush over seeing me. “I just can’t believe how much you’ve grown. You’re a man now.” She blinks back tears.

I have to hold my own back as well. “Five years can change a person.”

“It sure can. What have you been doing in that time?”

“Do you really want to know?”

She makes a face. “Of course, I want to know. I’m your mother.”

With a deep breath, I tell her. “I’ve had to fight to earn money.” The way she gasps, it’s clear she’s not ok with this revelation. “It was the only thing I was good at. The only thing I could do that would earn me a reputation that I could use against Franco and to take back our family business.”

Mom shakes her head sadly. “I understand. I just don’t like hearing you’ve had to literally fight to get by. That just breaks my heart, Antonio. I tried so hard to protect you, and I ... failed.”

“You didn’t fail,” I tell her, squeezing her hand. “You were always good to me. It wasn’t your fault Franco took control after Dad died. You were in a vulnerable position. We all were. Hell, I was just a kid.”

“Don’t swear,” she says instinctively.

“I’m not a kid any longer,” I say pointedly.

Nina’s quiet as she watches the exchange between my mom and me. She was the same when it came to my sisters. I want Nina to know she belongs in this family.

I turn to Nina, wrapping my arm around her. “So, what do you think of my wife? Nina has been nothing but supportive of me.” Nina blushes and ducks her head, not saying anything.

Mom smiles warmly. “I’m just so happy. Now, you can extend the Moretti line.”

Nina’s eyes bulge, and I hold up my hands, laughing. “Mom, it’s still a little early for that. We’ve only been together a month. Give it time.”

“I know. But children can help secure your power once you get rid of Franco.”

“It didn’t help us, though,” I point out. “Franco took over because none of us were adults.”

“Emilia was eighteen.” Mom crosses her arms like she’s won this argument.

“Yeah, but she wasn’t the one expected to take over after Dad died. That was me, and I was just a kid. I’m not sure how kids help your family line unless they’re adults. I don’t want to bring a kid into this world until I’m sure I can take Franco down. Until he’s dead.”

She raises her hands in surrender. “Fair enough. Right now, that’s what you need to focus on. Taking down Franco. I don’t want him in your father’s house any longer.” The venom in her voice surprises me. I knew she didn’t like Franco, but the hate she exudes is powerful. “I hated what he did to you. Trying to kill you. He put the rest of us in a tough spot with that. All I wanted was to be there for you, and I couldn’t be because Franco wouldn’t let me. He barely lets me out of his sight anymore. I managed to come here because he allows me time to go shopping every week.” She rolls her eyes. “As if that’s all a woman is good for.

“But,” she continues, “that’s why we couldn’t get Cecilia to come with. It would have looked too suspicious to Franco if she and I left together. We have to be so careful about where we go now. Franco’s grip is suffocating.”

“I know the feeling,” Nina says quietly. It’s the first time she’s truly offered to talk since my mom arrived.

Mom nods at her. “Being under the thumb of a powerful man is no fun.”

“That’s like my dad,” Nina explains. “He likes to be controlling, too.” I remember what Nina told me about her dad cheating on her mom and making her keep quiet about it.

“Before my husband died,” Mom says, taking a sip of her wine, “Franco was never on my radar. Yes, I’d see him around, but we never interacted. It wasn’t until Riccardo died and Franco moved into our house that things changed. For all of us. He’s hurt me in ways you can’t imagine.”

I sit up straighter, my heart constricting. “What do you mean?”

Mom opens and closes her mouth before sighing. “I think it’s time you knew. Your older sisters already know. He’s ... *hurt* me.”

“Like abused you?” I thought I was the only one, but I guess I was wrong. “I knew he was a bastard, but he’s hit you? That’s what you’re telling me?” My anger is rising. Nina has to place a hand on my arm to settle me down.

“He ... has,” Mom says shakily. “Among other things.”

“Other things? What ...” I trail off, realizing what she means. “Mom,” I start slowly, treading carefully. “Are you telling me he ...”

“Raped me? Yes.” She lets out a rough blow of breath. Nina gasps at Mom’s admission. I can only stare at my mom. “God, I haven’t been able to say that before. Your older sisters know. They found out without me telling them directly. But I know boys can be a bit more obtuse.”

I’m shaking so hard it’s difficult to stay in my seat. “How did I not know this? When did this happen?”

Mom looks me straight in the eye. “It’s been happening since your father died and Franco moved in. It’s taken me this long to speak the truth. He frightens me. When you get the chance to kill him, Antonio, you take it.” She grips my arm. “You take it, you hear me? I want that man out of our lives for good.”

A tear slips down my face. “Mom, I never knew ...”

“How could you? You were busy dealing with the death of your father just like the rest of your siblings. No one paid attention to me. I never expected you to. And then, you were gone for five years. As a teenage boy, I didn’t expect you to see it. But now, as a man, I know you can handle the truth. Your older sisters have been encouraging me to speak about it more, even though it’s so hard. It’s taken me eleven years to get to this point. To be able to speak about it to you ... I was so worried what you’d think of me.”

It takes me a second to realize what she means. “You though I’d blame you?”

She looks away. “I wasn’t sure. Men can be so unforgiving when it comes to women getting raped. I didn’t know what kind of man you became while you were gone.”

I stand up, feeling betrayed she’d even think I wouldn’t be on her side. “Mom, how could you think that? I’m your son. I’ve only ever wanted to protect you from him.” I walk away before she can answer. Nina follows me as I head off to the bathrooms.

I burst inside the bathroom, Nina right on my heels. “How could she not tell me? How could she think I’d blame her?”

Nina is silent as I pace around the room before clearing her throat. “Antonio ... this isn’t about you.”

I look at her sharply. “What do you mean?”

“You told me before you learned to respect women from your mom and your sisters. So, respect your mom now. When a woman is raped ... it’s not always a logical thought process. Yes, she loves you. But as she said, she didn’t know what kind of man you became away from your family. It’s not that she didn’t trust you. It’s that she probably didn’t want to lose you over the truth.”

I stop pacing and stare at my wife. “I’m being ass, you mean.”

She smiles slightly. “Maybe just a little.”

“Damn it, you’re right.” I run a rough hand over my face. “I just ... I knew Franco was a bastard. I just never thought that he would have ... done *that* to my mother. I failed at protecting my family.”

Nina cups my face in her hands, gazing up at me with that loving expression I’ve come to be obsessed with. “You didn’t fail them. You have the chance now to help them. What Franco did to her ... that wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t her fault. It was no one’s fault but his. And I *hate* him for it.” The vitriolic anger in her voice surprises me. “You need to go back out there and tell your mother you love her. I know what it’s

like to have a mom I can't depend on. But it sounds like your mom took a lot of Franco's anger so he couldn't put it on you and your siblings when you were just kids. Your mom sounds like a superhero. That's not something I have. Don't take her for granted."

"God, I love you, you know that," I say before I can stop myself. But the moment they come out of me, I realize just how much I don't want to stop them. I've been falling for Nina for weeks now. It's time the truth came out.

Nina's eyes widen at my words. "Antonio ..."

"You don't need to say it back if you don't feel that way for me. I just ... I guess I needed you to know. I love you, Nina." I kiss her head roughly. "And I'll go back out there and tell my mother I love her as well. What would I do without you?"

Her smile is strained. "I'm not sure."

Nina and I walk back out to my mom, who's still at the table, wringing her hands together. Without a word, I pull her into a hug. "I love you, Mom. I understand. There were things Franco tried to do to me that I could never speak about. You're so brave."

She sinks into my hold, clinging back just as tightly. "Thank you, Antonio. I've only ever wanted to protect you kids."

"I know." I let her go. "But leave it to me now to protect you. I'm going after Franco for good. I'll kill him. You'll be free of him. I promise you."

"There's also something else." She takes in a deep breath. "The twins. Lucia and Luca. They ..." She shakes her head, breathing roughly. "I haven't been able to say the truth about them either, but I need to. They're not your father's. They're Franco's."

It's like a bomb has gone off in my face. I sit down with a slump. Nina rubs my back, quietly showing me strength. "What?" I finally manage to say. But I know the answer. It all makes sense. They're ten years old now. Mom found out she

was pregnant a month after our dad died. I just assumed they were my father's kids because why wouldn't they be?

But now that I know Franco raped my mom ...

"Why didn't you have an abortion?" I ask.

She flinches.

"Antonio," Nina says in a warning tone.

"No, I need to know. How could you want them after what he did to you?"

"Because they're innocent," Mom says haggardly. "They didn't ask for how they were conceived. It's not their fault. Besides, I love them. They're my children. Yes, I look at them, and I see..." She gulps. "I see their father in their faces, and I hate it. But they also have my face. They're my kids. They're your brother and sister. I ... considered an abortion." She whispers the word like they're ugly. My mom grew up Catholic, so it's in her blood to hate abortions. I grew up Catholic as well, but my views have progressed and changed over the years.

"But," she continues, "I promptly pushed that idea to the side. I knew I'd never go through with it. So, every day, I have chosen to love Lucia and Luca. Even if it hasn't always been easy. For them, I've done it. I need you to understand that. I need you to love them as your siblings because they are. Please, Antonio."

I think back to my memories of my youngest siblings. I was almost thirteen when they were born. I mostly saw them as annoying nuisances, always crying and pooping.

But as they got older, I grew closer to them. And now when I think about my family, who've I missed so much, Lucia and Luca are a part of that.

With a deep breath, I take my mom's hands in my own. "I love them, same as I do any of my other sisters." Mom visibly relaxes at my words. "And when I take over, they'll still be a part of this family. I just ... This is a lot to take in."

“I know. But it was time you knew the truth. All of it. You need to know why I need you to kill Franco. Why I need you to do it soon. I’m so scared that after all your siblings are out of the house, Franco will kill me. He’ll have no reason to keep me around any longer. You need to kill him for me, Antonio.”

I squeeze her hands. “You know I will. You know it, Mom. But ... every time I’ve gone after him, he’s slipped right through the cracks. I don’t know how to do it.”

“Maybe you can help,” Nina says, surprising me. She’s looking at my mom. “Giulia, you’ve done a lot for your family. You live with Franco. If there was anyone on the inside who could help, it would be you. Maybe you could help Antonio take him down.”

“No,” I say instantly. “I won’t put my mom in danger.”

“That’s not your choice, is it?” Mom asks.

“No,” I repeat. “I ... I’ve done everything I can to make sure you were safe. If Franco knew you were even talking to me right now, let alone planning to go against him, he’d kill you on the spot.”

“I know. And I’m so scared,” she whispers. “Nina, I appreciate what you said, but I’m no help. Antonio, you have to do this.”

“That’s ok, Mom,” I tell her. “I wouldn’t want you getting hurt. You know that.”

Nina looks like she wants to object but doesn’t. She knows this is between my mom and me.

The dinner ends with Mom giving me one last hug before we part ways. Watching her leave the restaurant makes me feel like I’m back in that hospital bed when I was eighteen, telling her I need to leave for good to save her and the rest of our family.

Nina takes my hand, and it’s such a small comfort, but it’s all I need right now to make it through.

WHEN NINA and I arrive back at our apartment, I pull her into my arms, kissing her.

“Antonio?” she mumbles against my lips.

“I just want to forget for a little while,” I tell her. “It feels like my heart is fucking breaking, Nina.”

She places her hand over my heart. “Not from me, I hope.”

“Never from you,” I growl, kissing her again.

We end up on our bed, devoid of any clothes in a matter of minutes. Nina arches into my touch as I press my fingers against her pussy. She’s already so wet for me. I slide my finger right inside her while my thumb presses down on her nub.

Nina kisses me hard as I pleasure her with my fingers. My cock is growing harder by the second. I’m desperate to be inside her.

It only takes Nina a few more minutes before she comes shuddering on my hand. I hold her close as I continue to kiss her.

Once her body is calm, I line my cock up to her entrance. Our eyes are locked in a steady, fierce gaze. She opens her legs wider, a silent motion to let me know that she wants this, too.

Then I enter her.

We cry out together, our moans getting cut off as we kiss each other. It’s consuming. It’s unbreakable, this bond between us. I fucking love her. I know it with my entire being.

I hold Nina close to me as my hips thrust down, my cock going deeper inside her. She softly moans against my lips. Tonight, it’s much gentler than it was last time we had sex. It’s not about fucking. It’s about ... making love.

I've never thought of sex like that before, but I know it's true now. I've just never loved another woman enough to make love.

Nina holds me tightly as our bodies move together. Her hands roam up and down my spine, sending shivers over me. When I grind my hips down, she gasps.

I don't stop kissing her as I increase my pace. The friction sends pleasure all over my cock. I won't be able to hold out for much longer.

"Nina," I groan, coming after one more thrust. Nina grips her legs tighter around me as she comes with me.

"Antonio," she sighs.

Our bodies stay wedged together as we kiss. I could stay like this forever, with Nina in my arms. "I love you," I tell her again, unafraid to say it.

She gazes back at me, her eyes looking like fucking stars. "I love you, too."

Her words send a jolt straight to my heart. When I smile, she smiles right back.

POST-SEX, I'm always hungry, so I go in search of some food. Nina is still lounging on the bed.

I open the fridge and only find ingredients I'd have to assemble to make something. I just want a quick bite to eat.

I open one of the cabinets and search for food. My eyes land on a bag of cornmeal, and I snort. Of course, Nina would have cornmeal in the house. She's always making food for us.

I push it out of the way, still searching for something to eat, when my eyes land on a tiny bottle. More like a vial.

I frown, grabbing it. There's no label on it.

Then I remember the day Nina told me it was something to put in water to help it taste better.

I shrug and grab a glass, pouring myself some water. Then I open the lid of the bottle and start to pour it into the glass.

After swirling it around, I lift the glass to my lips.

“Stop!”

Nina’s shout makes me jump. I instantly put the glass down. “Nina?”

She’s standing in the kitchen with a silk robe on, looking frantic. Her face is full of fear. “Don’t drink that.”

I look down at the glass in my hand before looking back at her. Something niggles at the back of my mind.

I turn to face her head on.

CHAPTER 15

Nina

My heart practically beats out of my chest as I look at Antonio. When I came out and saw him with the vial of poison in his hand, I felt like I would die.

But now, I feel like I might faint from the look Antonio gives me. Confusion mixed with a little bit of anger. How am I going to talk myself out of this one?

“What do you mean?” he asks me. “Why should I not drink this? You told me it was just a flavor additive for water.”

“I ... I did say that. It’s just ... I was going to drink it. I didn’t want you drinking it.” I know how lame the excuse is as soon as it escapes me.

Antonio doesn’t buy it for a second. “Nina,” he says slowly, “why do you *really* not want me to drink this?” He holds the glass up. “What happens if I drink this?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“You don’t know?” The anger in his voice scares me.

“Yes, I don’t know. I don’t know exactly what it would do to you. Except ... I do know it would ...” This is it. I need to tell him the complete truth. I only hope he can forgive me. “Kill you,” I finish. “You would die.”

“What?” he asks in a low voice. “What do you mean I would die?”

“It’s ...” I gulp. Sweat beads down my body. “It’s poison.”

“Why the fuck is there poison in our house?”

I just stare at him.

The moment he realizes the truth, my heart breaks. He stumbles back, his eyes widening. “You ... you’re the spy? There’s only one person I know who would want me dead, and that’s my uncle. Are you working for Franco?” The way he spits out the accusation makes me want to fall through the floor and pretend none of this ever happened.

I could deny it all to him, but it’s too late for that.

And I’m tired of lying.

“I didn’t want to,” I say.

He shuts his eyes, bowing his head. “How ... how could this happen? How are *you* the spy?”

“I’m not,” I stammer. “I never told Franco about your plans.”

“Bullshit!” he shouts, throwing the glass onto the ground. I scream as it shatters into a hundred of pieces. “How else did Franco know everything? He wasn’t there for the drug shipment. He wasn’t alone for the meetup with your father. How are you *not* the spy?” I can see the betrayal in his eyes, and it’s killing me.

“I’m not. My father is.”

His mouth snaps shut as he stares at me. Anger radiates off him. For the first time since I’ve met Antonio, I’m afraid of him.

“Your father?” he asks in an eerily quiet voice. It reminds me of how my father can get when he’s angry.

“Yes. He told me to kill you. That you wouldn’t be expecting me. He’s the one working with Franco. Not me. I never wanted anything to do with this.” I step toward Antonio, but he backs away.

“Don’t,” he warns. “You ... you betrayed me.”

“No, I didn’t. I never wanted to kill you. My father was forcing me to. But I didn’t. Antonio, I didn’t.” I can see my

entire future with him slipping through my fingers. I grab his arm, and he wrenches away from me.

“Maybe that’s true. You still never told me your father was working with Franco. How long have you known?”

I don’t answer.

“How long have you known?” he shouts at me, his breath making my hair fly back.

“Since the day after our wedding,” I whisper.

The look that crosses his face destroys me. It’s complete betrayal. Antonio looks at me like I’m a stranger.

“Since the day after our wedding,” he says flatly. “That was over a month ago.”

I hang my head. “I know.”

“So, you’ve been sitting on this information for a month, and you never told me. Why? I thought ... I thought you loved me.” His voice breaks on “loved.” Tears begin to stream down my face.

“I do love you, Antonio. I love you. My father ... He threatened to hurt my sister if I didn’t comply. I was supposed to kill you because you’d never see it coming. I never wanted this. You have to believe me. I never wanted to hurt you.”

He scoffs. “Well, you’ve succeeded in hurting me, Nina. The problem is, I don’t believe you. How am I supposed to believe you? You’ve been lying to me ever since we got married!”

I flinch back from him. “I know. I know. And I know it was wrong.” I clutch my hands to my chest, feeling my breaking heart underneath. “But, Antonio, please. My father was making me. He was going to hurt my sister if I didn’t do something. I kept trying to put it off. I never wanted to kill you. He was going to send someone to kill you if I couldn’t. And then he’d kill me, too. Please believe it.”

“How?” The sneer he tosses my way makes me hunch forward, unable to bear the sight of it. “I don’t believe you, Nina. I don’t believe a word coming out of your mouth right

now. You knew your father was working for Franco this entire time! Your father is the one who's been sabotaging things for me. And you didn't tell me," he growls. "You didn't fucking tell me."

"I ... I was caught between you two. He's my father—"

"And I'm your husband!" he cuts me off. His voice reverberates throughout the room.

"I know. And trust me, I wanted to choose you." I grab his face, forcing him to look at me. "But, Antonio, he was going to hurt my sister. Can't you understand that? Can't you believe me? I didn't want this. I love you. I really love you."

His eyes soften for just a fraction before hardening again. "That doesn't matter now. It doesn't matter what your father was holding over you. You lied to me. You didn't throw that poison away, which means you kept it, knowing you'd use it on me one day. How can I ever trust you again?"

"That was a mistake. I should have thrown it out. But it does matter that my father was threatening my sister. That's the only reason I never told you. I couldn't bear the thought of her getting hurt because of me. I even told my father I was willing to die, but he didn't care."

"Then you should have come to me," Antonio seethes. "I would have helped you. I would have helped your sister. You know it. I love my family, and I'd do anything to protect them. That includes your sister. That included you." I don't miss the obvious. He said "included," as in past tense.

"Am I not a part of your family any longer?" I whisper.

He gently removes my hands from his face. "No, you're not. I don't work with people who betray me. I've spent the past five years wanting to kill my uncle because he betrayed me. You knew this. And yet you went and betrayed me anyway. I can't even look at you." He turns away from me.

I stretch my hand out to him, even though he doesn't see. "Antonio, please. Just ... please."

"You messed up, Nina. I thought we had something real. But it was all one big fucking lie."

I cry out, dropping to my knees. I can't stand the weight of my body any longer. I'm suffocating.

Antonio looks over his shoulder at me, anger and pity in his eyes. It makes me cry harder. "At least I know the truth now. I know I can't trust your father. I know Killian is on my side. I know who my allies are ... and who my enemies are." The way he tosses the word "enemies" at me makes it clear he considers me a part of that category.

"I want you gone," he says.

"Antonio ..."

"No. I want you gone, Nina. Our marriage is done. Your father may be the one working for my uncle, but you're just as guilty. You didn't come to me with the truth. You chose your father over me. I don't want to see you again. You're not welcome in this apartment. I want you out of my life."

I pause, taking in his words, barely able to believe them. I knew Antonio would be upset if he found out the truth, but I never knew he could just toss me aside like this.

"You told me you loved me," I say. "You can just push that aside?"

"Yes," he says bluntly, making me flinch. "I can. Because none of it was real. Now, go." He sounds so tired suddenly that I cry harder. "Just go, Nina."

"You're not going to hurt me?" I ask, standing up on shaky legs.

"Do you want me to?"

"Of course not."

"Then why even ask? To make you feel less guilty?" He scoffs. "I'm in no mood to make you feel less guilty, Nina. Now go."

I don't move.

He storms over to me and grabs my arms, making me cry out. "Did you hear me? Just go!"

This time, I run for the door, feeling my heart break with every step.

I HAVE NOWHERE TO GO. I've never had a place of my own. It was either my father's house or Antonio's. I've never even had a job to make money to get my own place.

I walk. I walk until I find a little park and sit down on one of the benches. It's dark out and chilly. I shiver in my nightgown. In my hurry to leave, I didn't even bother to grab a jacket. I just slipped on my shoes and left.

I knew the truth would come out eventually. And I knew it wouldn't be pretty.

But I still can't believe Antonio abandoned me like that. I know he's hurting, and he has every right to. I just thought that when he said he loved me, he meant it. I thought we could get through it together.

He didn't even have any sympathy for my situation. He didn't even care that my father was threatening to hurt my sister.

I hurt him too much for him to care.

I sit on the bench for a while, crying my eyes out. A homeless man walks by and asks me if I'm ok.

"Yes," I say, sniffing and wiping at my eyes.

He's dressed in dirty jeans and a long hoody, and he has kind eyes beneath his hood. In the cart he pushes, he has a lot of supplies, from extra clothes to a microwave. He pulls out a napkin from his pile and hands it to me.

I take it tentatively, but I don't use it on my face. Who knows where it's been? But I give him a smile of thanks anyway. He's a kind man.

"We have to stick together," he says, giving me a wink before walking off. It dawns on me he thinks I'm homeless.

I guess I am.

But there's a home I can return to; though, it's one I most definitely do not want to return to.

My father's condo.

Would he even take me in? I'll have to tell him the truth about Antonio. He'll find out soon enough, and I don't want to be on the receiving end of his wrath.

Even though it's the last thing I want, I force myself to get up and head in the direction of my childhood home.

I DON'T HAVE my key to get inside, so I have no choice but to knock.

It's my father who answers. "Nina? What are you doing here?"

"I have nowhere else to go," I say, sobbing. He lets me inside and shuts the door behind me, watching me with a calm expression. I know just how fast that calm expression can turn to anger.

"What do you mean? Did something happen with Antonio?"

"You mean, is he dead?" I wipe at my face. "No, he's not. In fact, he knows the truth now. He knows you're a traitor to him. And he knows the same about me."

Father stares at me for a moment. I'm waiting for him to scold me when he slaps me across the face instead. The sudden sting makes me step back and gasp.

"He knows?" Father asks in a quiet voice.

"Yes." I clutch my face. "He knows. So, you can kill me if you want to. It doesn't matter now. Everything is ruined. My marriage is done."

"Nina, this wasn't how this was supposed to go."

“I know!”

His lips twitch. “Then why did this happen?”

“Because I didn’t want to kill him! You were making me.”

“What’s going on?” Anna’s voice enters the conversation. She comes trudging down the hallway, wiping sleep from her eyes. “Why are you shouting? You woke me up.”

“Get back to bed,” I tell her, my heart constricting at the sight of my sister.

She huffs but stays rooted to her spot.

Father slowly approaches me, like a predator does to its prey. “You disobeyed me, Nina. You betrayed me.”

I scoff. “You betrayed *me*. You betrayed this whole family when you cheated on Mom.”

“What?” Anna asks, her eyes widening.

Father’s face contorts into something pure evil. “You don’t get to talk back to me like this.”

“Or what? You’re going to kill me? Then be done with it.”

He backhands me across the face so fast, I have no time to prepare for it. Anna screams as I fall to the ground. I can hear the unmistakable sound of my father’s belt buckle coming undone.

“What are you doing?” Anna screams.

“Antonio knows I’m working with Franco?” Father asks, standing over me.

“Yes,” I spit out.

I’m not prepared for the sting of his belt. He whacks it across my arm, leaving a red welt. I scream and curl inward.

“Stop!” Anna screams louder, running over to me. Father raises his belt at her.

“Do you want me to use this on you, too?” he asks. Anna hesitates before shaking her head no. Father snorts. “I didn’t think so.” He turns his attention back to me. “This has been a long time coming.”

Then he brings his belt back down.

He whacks it repeatedly across my back. Every hit brings new pain. I can tell I'm bleeding from the copper smell in the air. Anna continues to scream as our father beats me.

I can only lie here and take it.

"Stop," another voice says. It's my mom. I manage to lift my head to see her standing in the living room, glassy-eyed but on her feet.

Father does stop his assault on me, turning to face Mom. "Go back to bed, Elizabeth."

"Stop hurting our daughter," she says. "Just stop, Pavel."

"Please stop," Anna begs, kneeling beside me. I have no energy to even look at her. My back is on fire.

I think, for a moment, my father will resume his beating, but thankfully, he drops the belt. "I have a mess to clean up," he growls before storming out of the room.

Mom sways on her feet before dropping to the couch, hard. "Oh my god," she says more to herself than to me.

"Nina?" Anna whispers, shaking my arm. "Nina?"

"That's what I tried to protect you from," I tell my sister, forcing the words out. Even talking is hard right now.

"Your back," she gasps, her hand hovering over my back. It must look bad judging by her expression.

"We need to clean the wounds," Mom says, standing up and staggering forward. "Come on. Anna, help Nina up."

Anna does her best to help me stand. Even though Father didn't hurt my legs, I feel like I'm walking through cement with every step. I slump onto the toilet seat, letting my mom and sister take the top of my nightgown off.

Anna gasps as Mom winces.

"How bad is it?" I ask, my voice groggy.

"You won't need stitches, so there's that," Mom says as she grabs a rag out of the towel cabinet. She wets it with water and

begins to clean my wounds. I hiss with every touch.

“Anna, grab the large bandages,” she instructs my baby sister. Anna hurries over to the medicine cabinet and grabs the first aid kit.

“Here.” She hands them to Mom.

It amazes me how they work together to help me. I’m at my most vulnerable. I’ve never been this tired, scared, angry, or exhausted in my life. My marriage is over. My father finally beat me with his belt. He’ll go after Antonio, and Antonio will go after him, meaning only one will survive this whole ordeal.

I can only hope Antonio will. Despite what happened tonight, I still love him. I can’t imagine not loving Antonio for the rest of my life. He was the first and only man to ever show me kindness.

And now he’s gone. He tossed me out of his life like I meant nothing to him.

Now, the only people I have are my sister and mom. The two women I could never depend on.

Mom places her hands on my shoulders once she’s done bandaging me up. I lean into her touch.

“Why did Father do that?” Anna asks.

“Because he’s a bad man, Anna.” A bad man who’s going after Antonio.

And there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

CHAPTER 16

Antonio

I find Killian at the fight club, looking better after I beat him up. Now that I know the truth, guilt fills me once I see him. He was right all along. Petrov was the spy, and Nina was helping him.

Was she? A small voice asks at the back of my mind. It sounded like her father was threatening her to make her kill me.

No. I push the thoughts from my head. It doesn't matter if Nina was being forced to do it. She still should have told me the truth. There's no coming back from lying to me.

Killian stiffens as I approach. "Not back to hit me again, are you?"

"I said I was sorry before."

"I know." He takes a gulp of his beer. "Just checking."

"Your face is looking better."

Killian snorts, keeping his eyes on the fight. It's between Big John and Stinky Sam again. Looks like Stinky Sam is getting the lead. "Did you need something, Antonio?"

"Yes." I clear my throat, forcing the anger within me to calm down long enough for me to think of a plan. "You were right. Petrov is the spy."

Turning toward me with a raised brow, Killian says, "Huh. How did you find out?"

“Nina told me,” I say through tight lips. Killian has the smarts to not comment on that. “She was ... helping him. He wanted her to kill me because he’s working for Franco.”

Killian shakes his head. “I’m sorry, man. That sucks.” He pats my back. “How did this come out?”

“Nina decided to come clean.” I don’t bother mentioning the vial of poison. I don’t need to give Killian ammunition against Nina. For some reason, I still feel the urge to protect her, even if it doesn’t make sense. She hurt me. I should want nothing to do with her, and yet ...

I want her back in my arms this very moment.

“The details don’t matter,” I tell him. “What matters is I’m tired of waiting around while all these other men decide my fate. Franco. Petrov. I think it’s time to take over. No more waiting. Let’s go after Petrov and demand he set up a meeting with Franco. I’m not letting either of them live much longer.”

Killian rubs his hands together, an eager grin on his face. “How are we going to do this? Petrov won’t work with us now. But I’m all for trying anything.”

“We go to his house, and we fucking torture him until he agrees to call Franco,” I spit out. “I’m getting Franco alone so I can kill him one way or another.”

“Sounds good to me,” he says, shrugging. “Let’s do this.”

I POUND on Petrov’s door. I’m not sure he knows that I know yet, but I’m not taking any chances. I have my gun ready to go.

When no one answers, I kick in the door. The sight of Petrov’s house pisses me off even more. The last time I was here, we were making plans together. I thought he was my ally. But this entire time, he was just helping Franco kill me.

The house is silent. With a growl, I head toward Petrov’s office. I find him inside on the phone, talking to someone in a

hurry. He looks up at me and pauses.

“Antonio? What a pleasant surprise.” He stands up with a smile on his face. Maybe he doesn’t know. “What are you doing here? And how did you get inside?”

“Petrov, I know the truth. You married me to Nina so you could get her to kill me. All for that fucking bastard, Franco.” I shove everything off his desk. Petrov doesn’t even look fazed. “Why him? What is it about my uncle that makes people want to work for him?”

The smile slips from Petrov’s face. There’s no more pretending. He must have known. A man like Petrov knows everything in this world. “Because Franco has the numbers, and you don’t. Where the numbers are, the money goes. Simple as that.”

I cock my gun, pointing it at him. Killian stands behind me for support. “So, it’s all just about money for you, is it?”

The laugh that escapes Petrov is cold and piercing. “When is life not about money, little boy? Everything is about money. You only wanted to work with me because I could offer you money. How are we any different?”

“The difference between you and me,” I say in a quiet voice, “is I don’t pimp out my family members to do my dirty work. If you and Franco wanted me dead, you should have done it the way any man would. With his bare hands.”

For a second, a glint of fear passes Petrov’s face, but then his normal confident smirk settles over him, and he’s back to being Petrov, the man with all the money. “So, that’s it, then. You’re here to kill me?” He buttons his suit jacket. “I’d expect nothing else from Antonio Moretti.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s baiting you,” Killian says from behind me. “Don’t listen to him. Let’s just get on with this.”

“Yes,” Petrov says. “Do get on with it, Antonio. Listen to your little Irish friend.”

“Wow, I’ve never heard anyone use the word Irish as an insult before,” Killian comments. “That’s a new low for me.”

I keep my gun trained on Petrov’s face. One slip of my finger, and he’s dead.

But I don’t want that. I need him.

I lower my weapon. “Come with us.” I walk out of the office, not looking back to see if Petrov follows. I expect him to.

“Come on,” Killian says, waving his gun at Petrov.

Reluctantly, Petrov follows us into the living room. “What is this? A game? I’m too old for games, boys.”

“This is no game,” I growl, punching him in his stomach. Petrov grunts and falls to his knees. “See, I don’t want you dead. Not yet, at least.” I grip his hair and draw his head back, forcing him to look in my eyes. “You’re going to call Franco and have him come meet us here. You’re not going to give him any sort of code you’re in danger. You’re going to do this, and I’m going to kill Franco, and I’ll consider letting you live.”

Petrov chuckles darkly, even though it’s strained. “That wouldn’t be wise. Letting me live. You still have a lot of growing up to do, Antonio.”

I wrench his head back harder, making him grunt. “Fine, then. I’ll kill you. But I’ll make your death quick if you help me. How does that sound. Better? More like something my uncle would do?”

“You’re nothing like your uncle.”

“I know.” It’s clear Petrov meant his words to be an insult. “And I’m fucking glad I’m nothing like Franco. Now, you’re going to help me.”

“No.”

“What?” I tighten my grip.

“Either kill me now or later, but I’m not helping you. In fact, I was just on the phone with Franco, and he knows you’re onto to him, which means you’ll never get close to him again.

You're out of luck, Antonio. You have no more options. Franco won. I won. So, kill me. Get it over with or draw it out. I don't care. Either way, you won't win."

I glare at Petrov, my hand gripping his hair is shaking. I could kill him, but I don't want to. I want Petrov to hurt. "One way or another," I whisper into his ear, "I'm going to make you scream tonight."

I shove Petrov to the ground and start kicking him in the stomach. Petrov groans in pain but not once does he scream. So, I decide to kick him in the face. The sound of his nose breaking is like music to my ears. But still, he doesn't scream.

"You fucking traitor!" I shout, raining hits down on him. Killian watches without saying a word. "You. Will. Scream. For. Me." Every word is accentuated with a hit.

And yet, still no scream.

Footsteps come running down the hallway. I don't even look at who it is. I'm too focused on hurting Petrov. By now, Petrov's face is swollen and covered in blood. But he's awake, which means he can still scream.

"Antonio?" Nina's voice makes me pause.

I just said goodbye to her only a few hours ago, yet it feels like it's been years since I've heard her voice. My heart yearns for her.

How could she break my heart like she did?

I turn to her, and what I see makes me go cold. It's Nina, but she looks ravaged by pain. She's hunched over. Her under-eyes are baggy. She looks like she might vomit. It's only been a few hours, but she looks like she's aged years in that time. What happened?

Behind her is her sister, clutching Nina's arm. I've never really had the chance to talk to Anna, despite Nina and I being married for a month. She looks so young. I remember Nina told me she was only thirteen.

Then I remember Nina's words. *He threatened my sister ...* That was the lengths Petrov was willing to go to make Nina do

his dirty work.

I can't look at either of them any longer. It hurts too much. If I waiver now, I'll never achieve my dream of killing Franco and rescuing my family. Nina hurt me. She betrayed me. I cannot feel sorry for her for any reason.

Staring down at Petrov, it's obvious he won't do what I want. He won't call Franco and get him here. I'll have to find a way to kill Franco some other way.

With a snarl, I let go of Petrov. His head smacks to the ground. "I'm not killing you in front of your daughters. You got lucky. But I'm coming back for you one day." I nod at Killian to follow me out of the house.

I don't look at Nina as I go, even though it's all I want to do.

KILLIAN and I end back up at the fight club. I need to hit someone again, and it's not going to be Killian.

I find Johnny at the bar and tell him to put me in the next fight.

"But, Tony, that's with Master Jim." Master Jim is one of the best fighters in the entire club.

"I don't care," I growl. "Just put me in."

With a sigh, Johnny does as I demand, but he doesn't look happy about it.

"Are you sure?" Killian asks. "Shouldn't we be out searching for Franco before he comes for you. Because surely, he'll be sending someone after you now."

"Oh, I know he'll be. But I'm not going to find him tonight, and I can't go on feeling like this."

That's how I end up in the ring with Master Jim less than an hour later. Master Jim is one of the bigger guys. Insanely

tall and with biceps that could break any man's neck between them.

But I'm not afraid.

The crowd cheers me on as I land a punch to Jim's side. He growls and swipes at my face, smacking me in the nose. I stumble back, but I don't feel any pain. Only the innate desire for more blood.

With a snarl, I lunge at Jim, and the force of my attack sends him back against the rope around the ring. He pushes me back, and I fall, giving Jim the chance to land punch after punch to my stomach. I kick up and hit him in the balls. He grunts, falling over. I get on top of him.

Within moments, I've turned Jim's face from that of a man's to that of an abstract painting. He doesn't even look like himself as I punch him again and again. My knuckles are red raw from all the hitting. The crowd has gone silent as they watch me pummel Jim.

Jim is no longer putting up a fight.

The ref pulls me off him and announces that I'm the winner. After a hesitant beat, the crowd cheers for me.

I wonder what I look like up here. Defeated? Covered in blood? I'm the winner, and all I feel like is the fucking loser.

I storm out of the ring and get cleaned up in the locker rooms. I can hear management discussing whether they should call an ambulance for Jim because he's so badly beaten. I don't feel anything at that. I'm only numb.

Killian comes to check in on me, but I tell him to leave me alone. I deserve to be alone after what I did to Master Jim.

"Are you sure?" Killian asks.

I shoot him a glare. "I'm sure."

He leaves, even though it's clear he doesn't want to. When the door opens again, I snap at whoever it is to leave me alone.

"Even if I'm offering you some relief." I recognize that voice. Glancing up, I see it's Joanna. I fucked her once. It was

good. But that seems like a lifetime ago. That was before I met Nina and fell in love ...

... and had my heart fucking ripped out.

“Joanna?”

She smiles in that sultry way of hers. “Yep. That’s me. I noticed your little wife wasn’t here with you. I thought that I could get you alone, and”—she trails her finger down my bare chest— “have some fun.”

I grab her hand, intending to push it away, but I pause. Nina and I are done. There’s no way we can recover, not after what she did. She tried to kill me. I can’t forgive her for that.

Maybe I need to take my mind off her in another way that doesn’t involve violence ...

“Let’s go,” I tell her. I’m not about to fuck in the locker room. Joanna smiles like she just won the lottery and follows me out.

I run into Killian on the way.

“What are you doing?” he asks, eyeing Joanna.

“I’m taking Joanna home with me.”

“But what about your wife?”

I glare at him. “What about her? We’re over.”

Killian lowers his voice so only I can hear. “It all happened tonight, man. Maybe don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

“Weren’t you the one accusing Nina of being a spy? I thought you’d be relieved to know you were right. Don’t tell me what I’ll regret.” I brush past him and motion for Joanna to follow.

We start making out before we even get inside my apartment.

But we don’t get further than that because Nina is here.

I instantly pull away from Joanna, feeling guilty. Fuck. I have no reason to feel guilty. I’m not the one who did the betraying here. That was all Nina.

She looks shocked at the sight of Joanna.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Nina. Joanna cocks her hip out, acting like she owns the place. It’s getting on my fucking nerves.

“I needed to talk to you,” Nina say. “I couldn’t leave things the way they were.”

I scoff. “Well, I have nothing to say to you. Now get out.”

She flicks her eyes at Joanna before turning back to me. “Please, Antonio—”

“He said get out,” Joanna says, cutting Nina off.

Nina looks like she might cry, and pain blazes through my chest. All I want to do is to hold her. She looks so fragile. What happened between her leaving my apartment and her going home to her father?

With a deep breath, Nina nods. “I just had to try again.” She takes one step forward and winces.

“Are you in pain?” I ask, unable to help myself.

“It’s not important.” She takes slow steps toward the door.

“What happened?” I demand.

The look Nina gives me sends ice to my heart. “You made it clear you don’t care.”

When she turns back around, I spot blood on the back of her shirt. “What happened?”

She doesn’t look at me as she finally answers. “My father finally showed me his belt. I hope it makes you a little happy that I faced the consequences of my actions.”

I open my mouth to tell her she’s wrong. That I’m not happy about any of this. But I don’t say anything as she walks out of the apartment.

“Thank god, she’s gone,” Joanna says. “Are we going to fuck or not?”

“Get out,” I say quietly.

“What?”

“Get out!”

Joanna jumps and hurries out of the apartment.

With a sigh, I slump onto the couch, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. Petrov beat Nina. I should have expected something like that would happen, but instead of protecting her, I let her walk away, right back into the lion’s den. What kind of man am I? Would my sisters and mom be proud of me at this moment?

I don’t think they would.

The sound of my phone ringing makes me jump. When I check the caller, I freeze.

It’s my mom.

She hasn’t called me in five years. She knows the dangers of reaching out like this.

“Mom?” I ask after I answer.

“Antonio, I know I told you I couldn’t help you with Franco.” She sounds breathless. “But I overheard him talking about his plans to kill you once and for all. He sounded serious about it. He’s coming after you, Antonio. I needed you to know that.”

“I know, Mom. But thanks.”

“And ... that’s not all.” Her words make me sit up straighter. “I’ve decided ... I can’t be afraid of him any longer. Your wife was right. I’m in a position where I could help you take down Franco. He would never think I’m capable of it. I can help you sneak inside our house and get close to him.”

“So, what are you telling me?”

She lets out a rough exhale. “I’m going to help you kill Franco.”

CHAPTER 17

Mina

The sight of Antonio with another woman breaks my heart into a million pieces. When I left, they were still in the apartment together. He's breaking the sacred vow of marriage just like my father did.

The sad part is, I can't even blame him.

I broke our marriage by keeping my father's secret. Antonio made it clear we're done. If he wants to be with another woman, then that's his right.

It still shatters my heart, though.

I stumble home, my back on fire with every step. After Antonio came by my house and beat my father up, I knew I had to see him again, even if it meant hurting myself more in the process. And it did. He's with another woman, and I'm returning to my father's home, feeling even more dejected than before.

When I arrive back to my family's house, all is quiet. Father must be holed up in his office. Antonio really did a number on him. I was both afraid and pleased at the sight. What does that say about me?

I take slow steps to my parents' bedroom, where Mom is asleep. She managed to rouse herself up to save me from my father, but judging by the empty pill bottle by her head, she's succumbed to her addiction again.

I lay in bed beside her, holding her close just to make sure she's still alive. Her pulse is strong, which is a good sign.

Before I know it, I'm crying into my mother's back. All I want is for her to hold me. All I want is to feel safe.

It takes until morning for her to stir awake and turns to me, concern in her eyes. "Nina?" Her voice is groggy like it usually is after she's taken so many pills.

"Mom, I need you," I whisper. "I really need you." The sight of my mom drugged up isn't so scary in the light of morning.

She sighs and pulls me in closer. I wince when her hands touch my back. It's going to take a long time for my wounds to heal, but they will heal. It's just the emotional scars that will linger.

"Why do you do that to yourself?" I ask.

Her arms stiffen around me. "Why do I do what?"

"You know. Your pills. Do you hate us all so much you prefer pills to us?"

She sets her chin roughly against my head. "Nina, it's because I love you all so much that it hurts. I take my pills to help me get through the day. To help me withstand your father."

"But you've left Anna and me alone to fend for ourselves. Look what happened last night. Father ... beat me," I whisper the last two words.

"And that's why I stopped him. I know I'm not the best mom, but I saved you last night. Give me some credit."

She has a point. If it weren't for her, Father might have beaten me to death.

"Mom, there's something I need to tell you." Every truth is coming out. There's no point in keeping more secrets. "Father ... he ..." I swallow hard. This is the one thing my father was adamant I never tell my mom, but she has the right to know. And my father should never have made me keep his secrets. "When I was twelve, I caught him with another woman."

Her body tenses, but she remains quiet as I talk.

“He told me to not tell you,” I continue. “He made me keep it a secret or he’d ... do what he did last night. You need to know what kind of man he is.”

“Oh, Nina. I know what kind of man he is. That’s why I take my pills. To get away from him. I always suspected he was with other women. But I never knew you knew.”

I sit up, shaking my head, tears brimming my eyes. “I’m tired of keeping his secrets. The cheating. Antonio. I’m tired of it. He thinks he can get away with anything. That he’s invincible.”

Mom pushes a strand of my hair behind my ear. “Your father isn’t invincible. He’s just a man at the end of the day. I keep hoping one day, I’ll never have to see him again. And I hope for you girls the same.”

“But you never did anything. You could have taken us away.”

A flash of anger spreads across her eyes. “And taken you where? Where could we have gone your father wouldn’t follow? It was easier to appease him than to fight him.”

“So, that’s what you’ve been doing all these years. Appeasing him?” I shake my head. “I’m tired of appeasing him. I want to fight him. I want my own voice. I’m tired of all these men dictating what I can and cannot do with my life. I’m done.” I stand up.

“Where are you going?”

“To confront Father. He can kill me for all I care. But at least I tried.” Before I leave the room, I look at my mom over my shoulder. “Just make sure Anna is safe. Please. Do right by her.”

Mom takes a beat before she nods. “Ok. I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

I hurry out of her room and go to Anna. If I’m going to die, I want to say goodbye to my sister first.

She’s awake when I come into her room. Fear is in her eyes. “What’s happening? Why did Father hit you? And why

did your husband hurt him?"

I pull Anna into a hug. "Because Father wanted me to kill Antonio and Antonio was getting his revenge. Our father is a bad man. Never trust him. Never." I kiss her head before pulling back.

"Where are you going?" she asks, reaching out her hand to me.

"I'm going to tell our father he doesn't get to get off scot-free. He's hurt. He threatened to hurt you." Her eyes widen at that info. "I refuse to let him continue. Our marriage might be over, but I don't need my husband to protect me. I need to learn to protect myself."

"Nina, wait!" She scrambles out of bed. "Be careful."

"I'm done being careful. Look where it got me." I motion toward my back. "I've only gotten hurt by being careful and undecided in life. For once, I'm deciding for myself." I give Anna one last smile before heading to my father's office.

He's slumped over his desk, looking even worse this morning than he did last night. But he's alive.

"I hate you," I say. He lifts his head up.

"Nina? You don't get to speak to me like that." His voice is strained. It's clear he's still in pain from what Antonio did to him, which makes me happy.

"You don't get to get away with all you've done."

He smirks, though it's distorted in his swollen face. "What are you going to do? Kill me? You don't have it in you."

"Maybe not. But I do have the power to take your family from you. I'm taking Mom and Anna, and we're leaving. You'll never find us again. I wanted you to know that."

He tries to stand up but can't. "You're not taking my family."

"We're not your family. I learned what it's like to have a family that loves you. Antonio would do anything to protect his family. You married me to him because you wanted me to

kill him. But you never thought I'd learn something from him. I now know what it's like to fight for what you want. And all I've ever wanted was to be far away from *you*."

"I have power you can't even dream of. You won't get far."

"I'm leaving."

"No, you're not," someone else says. I recognize the voice. Turning around, I come face to face with Franco Moretti.

I stumble back as he scans me. "What are you doing here?" I ask, some of my bravado disappearing.

"Your father called me to come. Antonio is making his move, and I can't let that happen. We're going to discuss plans, but now that you're here, I have a better idea." Franco grabs my arm, pulling me in roughly toward him.

I try to wrench free, but his grip is too strong.

"From what your father told me," Franco says, his lips turning up into a sneer, "Antonio cares for you. You're going to be the thing I use to make sure he doesn't hurt me."

"What are you talking about?" My heart constricts with fear.

"If you're my hostage, he won't risk you getting hurt by trying to kill me. You'll be my shield. Antonio won't attack if you're with me."

"You'd use a girl to fight your battles?" I snap back, then look at my father. "And you're ok with this?"

Father shrugs. "You're the one who just said we're no longer family. So, why do I care what happens to you?"

"No!" I scream as Franco grabs me around the waist and drags me out of my father's office. Father just watches, a small, content smirk on his face.

Franco grips down on my arms so I can't use them. But I still have my legs. I remember one of the parring moves Antonio taught me. I kick back with my foot, landing a solid hit to Franco's shin. He stumbles, his arms loosening. That

gives me enough time to jam my elbow back into his stomach and make a run for the door.

But then footsteps come running down the hall. Light ones. Not those of a grown man. I turn to see Anna run into the living room. She must have heard all the commotion.

Franco looks between my sister and me and makes a grab for Anna. Anna screams and tries to run, but Franco nabs her around the waist.

“Let her go,” I say, standing tall.

Anna struggles in his grip. “Only if you come with me,” Franco replies.

“Nina,” Anna whimpers.

I let out a rough breath. “Ok. Ok. Let my sister go. I’ll go with you.”

Franco releases Anna, and she goes running back down the hallway. I stand still as Franco takes my arm and walks me out of my family’s house.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask.

“Back to my house. If there’s any place Antonio knows where I’ll be, it’s there.”

I think back to the house Antonio took me to. His childhood home. “But he wouldn’t risk his family by going back there.”

“Oh, I know. It’s going to kill him knowing I have you, and there’s nothing he can do about it.”

Franco pushes me through the building doors and to his car. “Get in.” He opens the door for me, motioning me inside. I don’t put up a fight. Not when Franco could just walk back inside and hurt Anna.

“Why do you hate him so much?” I ask as Franco drives us to Antonio’s childhood home.

Franco snorts. “Because Antonio is competition. He’s the only son of Riccardo Moretti. He has to die if I’m ever to be fully in power. And besides, the little bastard refuses to die,

and it pisses me off. So, yes, I want to see him suffer. And you're going to help me with that." He strokes his finger down my face. I smack his hand away.

Franco laughs as he continues driving. "You have a fire in you. I like a woman who fights it."

I think back to Giulia's confession when we had dinner together with Antonio. She said Franco had raped her. Multiple times. Franco is the epitome of a horrible person. The only hope I have now is that Antonio manages to kill him, once and for all.

THE FAMILIAR BROWNSTONE is ultra-white in the morning sun as Franco pulls up to it. He tells me to follow him inside.

The inside of the house is full of warmth and yummy smells. Not at all what I imagined for Franco. It must be because of Giulia that this house has any warmth to it.

And speaking of Giulia, she enters the foyer, freezing when she sees me. "N—" She stops herself from saying my name. She's not supposed to know who I am. "Who? What?"

Franco pushes me toward Giulia. "This is Nina, Antonio's wife. She'll be staying with us for the time being. Make sure she's welcomed." He steps close to Giulia. "And that she doesn't leave."

Giulia nods quickly. She's been playing Franco's game for the past eleven years. She knows how to act around him.

Franco doesn't spare me another glance as he walks away. Once he's gone, Giulia rushes to my side.

"What's going on?" she asks. "Antonio?"

"He's fine. But Franco took me. He wants to make sure Antonio doesn't attack him here."

A frown crosses Giulia's face. "That's going to be a problem. I called Antonio last night to tell him I'd help him with Franco. The plan is for me to leave with the kids today so

Antonio can come in and kill Franco when he's not expecting it. But now that you're here ..."

"I'll be fine." I grab her hand, making her look at me. "You need to think about you and your kids. Antonio will be happy knowing you're out of the picture so he can come after Franco. Don't worry about me. Please. Stick to your original plan."

Giulia hesitates. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Ok, then. I won't tell you any more of the plan in case Franco asks you any questions."

"Smart."

"What are you two whispering about?" Franco asks, coming back into the room.

Giulia pulls me into a quick hug. "I'm just happy to meet my daughter-in-law. That's all."

Franco looks between us, then sniffs, like he thinks women are incapable of planning anything behind his back.

"Breakfast is almost ready," Giulia says. "Let's all go eat."

I find myself at the kitchen table a few minutes later with the rest of Antonio's family. The only person who doesn't belong to the family is a guard who stands in the corner of the room. The twins, Lucia and Luca, sit beside each other, talking about the *Harry Potter* series, which they just got into. Cecilia, who I can tell from the cross around her neck, looks at me curiously but doesn't ask questions. Antonio told me they looked almost like twins, and I believe it. That just leaves Antonio's other sister, Mia, who decides to ask me who I am.

"This is Nina, Antonio's wife," Giulia says, introducing me.

Cecilia's eyes widen. "You're ... Antonio's wife? I didn't even know he was married." She looks terribly sad at the thought.

“There’s a lot we don’t know about Antonio,” Mia says. “He’s been gone forever.”

“Where did he go?” Luca asks, swatting at his twin sister. Lucia sticks her tongue out at him.

“That’s not important,” Giulia cuts in. “We should all eat. No more questions.”

Franco nods approvingly, and Giulia relaxes somewhat.

After breakfast, which is filled with minimal conversation, Giulia tells Franco she needs to take the kids to the dentist.

He pauses. “The dentist? All on the same day?”

“Yes.” Giulia doesn’t lose her resolve, which is impressive. “It’s just easier that way. You understand. We’ll take a guard with us. Theo.” She nods at the man in the corner.

Cecilia glances at Theo and quickly averts her eyes, her face growing pink. With a closer look, I can tell Theo is handsome. It seems like Cecilia has a crush on the family guard.

Franco looks between Giulia and the rest of Antonio’s siblings. “You can’t take them one at a time?”

“No,” Giulia says firmly. “This is just easier. And I’ve already booked the appointments. We’ll only be gone for a couple of hours.”

“But I want you here,” Franco says.

“And the kids need to get their teeth cleaned. So, we’re going. Do you have a problem with that?”

Franco flicks his eyes to me before settling back in his seat. “Fine. Take them to their dentist appointment. But hurry back. Nina and I will enjoy each other’s company in the meantime.”

Giulia looks at me guiltily, but I nod at her, letting her know it’s ok. She needs to get out of the house with the kids, and with me being here, Franco might not question her as much. This is her only chance.

With a deep breath, Giulia turns to her kids. “Come on everyone.”

Mia groans. “Do we have to go to the dentist?”

“Yes,” Giulia says firmly. She makes Lucia and Luca stand up, and Cecilia gets up obediently.

But before leaving, she turns to me and in a quiet voice says, “Is Antonio all right?”

“Yes,” I whisper, aware Franco has his eyes set directly on me. “Now, go with your mom.”

Cecilia frowns before her eyes widen. Does she realize there’s a plan afoot? She doesn’t say anything else as she follows her mom and siblings out of the kitchen. Theo goes with them. I relax slightly when I hear the front door shut. They made it out.

Given what Giulia told me, Antonio must be on his way.

But until then, that leaves just Franco and me.

He settles back in his seat, watching me with dangerous eyes. “Does my nephew please you?”

I gulp. “Yes. He’s been kind to me.” Until he told me he no longer loves me and that it was all a lie.

“No. I meant, does he please you in bed?”

My body goes rigid. “I’m not comfortable answering that.”

Franco smirks. “No? Would you be more comfortable, then, if I touched you?”

My heart is pounding, but I try to keep my posture and face calm. “Why do you want to touch me?”

“To hurt Antonio, of course. If he knew I fucked his precious wife ... ooh. It would make him so angry.”

“Are you asking for him to come kill you?”

“Not at all. I want him to suffer before I kill him.” Franco stands up and stalks over to me. I remain still as he trails his fingers down my face. “What do you say? Let’s hurt him together.”

A moment passes.

I stand up, running past him. Franco grabs me around the waist, pulling me flush against him. His laugh is full of darkness. It makes my skin crawl.

“Not so fast.” He pushes me down onto the table, face first. “He doesn’t get to have such a pretty wife. And you were supposed to kill him.” He tosses the end of my dress up. “I told your father you wouldn’t do a good job, but he didn’t listen.” Franco’s hands grip the edges of my underwear. “Now, this is punishment for both you and Antonio.” He rips my underwear down. I try fighting him, but he presses a hand against my back, keeping me in place. He’s digging his fingers right into one of my wounds. The pain is unbearable.

I can feel Franco’s erection against my inner thigh. I shut my eyes and hope the moment goes by fast.

“Let her go,” Antonio’s deep voice rings out. My eyes snap open, and I see the man I love standing in the kitchen, pointing his gun at Franco.

CHAPTER 18

Antonio

The sight of Franco standing behind Nina with his cock out makes my blood fucking boil.

“Let her go,” I warn. Franco jerks back, stuffing his cock back into his pants. I guess he doesn’t want to die with his cock out. Smart.

Nina slumps to the ground, curling into a ball. I don’t have time to ask her how she is, even though it’s all I want to do. She’s my wife, and it’s my job to protect her.

But right now, I need to focus on Franco. Focus on killing him.

Franco smirks once his surprise wears off. “Antonio? So, you’ve finally come to kill me, have you?”

“I have.” I point my gun at his head.

“Before you do,” Franco says, raising his hands. “Let me tell you something. If you kill me right now, none of my men will follow you. One of them will take over instead. So, killing me is pointless. You still won’t get the Moretti family business. You’re not strong enough. Not beloved enough. Think on that.”

“I’m done thinking.” And I fire my gun.

Franco dives out of the way, and the bullet misses him by an inch. It wedges itself in the wall where he was standing moments ago. I turn toward where he hides behind the kitchen table.

“Come out, Franco.” I stalk toward him, firing again, but just like last time, he manages to get out of the way at the last second. He’s using the table for protection.

Franco skids on his knees toward Nina and grabs her from behind. She cries out, and the sound sends pain straight to my heart. He holds Nina in front of him. “Shoot, why don’t you, Antonio. But then you’d risk hitting your wife. Killing her, even.”

I lower my gun slightly. “Let her go, Franco. Or do you want everyone to know you used a girl as protection against me?”

“I don’t care about that. I only care about living.” He grips Nina tighter, making her whimper. I desperately want to tell her she’ll be all right, but I’m not sure. Franco is a wildcard.

I watch in horror as Franco grabs his gun from his jacket and presses it to Nina’s head.

“Antonio?” she whispers, tears streaming down her face.

“Let her go,” I seethe.

“No. You can’t kill me. Not when I have your wife like this. You have no choice but to let me leave. Alive.” Franco slowly stands, bringing Nina with him.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I warn him.

“Oh, but I am.” The vicious grin on his face makes me see red. He thinks he’s won. Bullshit.

I drop my gun to the ground. “How about a fight? Just like old times? No guns. Just you and me.”

Franco hesitates, eyeing me. “And why would I do that?”

“Because then you can say you beat Antonio Moretti in hand-to-hand combat. You won by beating him in a fist fight. That’s more impressive than sneaking out of the house with a girl in front of you.”

“I’m not afraid to fight,” Franco scoffs.

“Then prove it. Fight me. After all, you were the one who taught me most of what I know. This should be a cakewalk for

you.”

Franco glares daggers at me. Even though he looks pissed, I know he’s considering my offer. He’s been wanting to kill me for years. Now is his chance.

“Fine,” he finally says, making me sigh in relief. “We’ll fight. But no tricks.”

“No tricks,” I promise.

Franco shoves Nina to the side so hard she hits the table. When she cries out, I turn my attention toward her, wanting nothing more than to protect her.

When I’m not looking, Franco rushes my side. I grunt as he forces me onto my back. He swings his fist down and lands a solid punch to my nose. My vision goes black for a second. Franco smiles triumphantly and raises his fist again, but this time, I buck him off and roll onto my side. I get up just before Franco can come at me again.

I land a kick to his stomach, which makes him smack against the wall. “You’re not the only one who knows how to fight.”

“I can see that,” he growls, coming at me again. He barrels right into me, slamming me into the wall this time. Franco punches my side. I grunt and counterattack, landing a hit to cheek. Franco stumbles back. “But you don’t know everything.” He swipes his leg out, knocking me onto my ass. When he lunges forward to grab me, I back out of his way.

I kick up and hit him in the nose. The crunch of his nose breaking is satisfying. “I’ve been fighting for money for the past five years,” I say. “I know how to fight.”

Franco shakes himself off and comes at me again. He lands on top of me, pushing me to the ground. When he presses his arm to my throat, I begin to panic. He smiles savagely as he presses down harder. “You think you’re so smart, Antonio. You think you’re just as good as your father was. But I have a secret to share.” He leans down and says into my ear, “He died because of me.”

I freeze. “What?” I manage to force out. It’s getting harder and harder to breathe.

“He got sick gradually, didn’t he? I know you remember. It was because I was poisoning him. Slowly but surely until the day he died. If I was able to take down the great Riccardo Moretti, then I am more than capable of taking down his pathetic excuse for a son.”

Rage fills my vision. Franco killed my father, and now, he’s about to kill me.

I try bucking against him but he’s too strong. My windpipe is slowly getting crushed. It’s hard to even breathe let alone think of a plan to get out of this situation.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nina stand up. Franco doesn’t even pay her any attention.

Then the gunshot goes off.

Franco jerks, his eyes widening as he sits up, letting me go. I suck in a ragged breath. He reaches around to touch his back. His fingers come away with blood.

I look toward Nina. She has a gun in her hands and is pointing it at Franco.

I stand up and run to her, grabbing the gun from her hands. Nina slumps over, sobbing. I turn to Franco, gun aimed at him.

“You said no guns,” he growls, his voice sounder weaker than I’ve ever heard.

“I don’t care about rules. I just want you to know that before you die, Antonio Moretti, son of Riccardo Moretti, is the reason you no longer exist.”

Franco’s eyes widen. “Wai—”

I fire.

The gunshot to his head cuts him off.

A small gurgle escapes Franco’s mouth before he falls face forward onto the floor. The moment I realize he’s dead, I sink to the floor, dropping the gun and letting my head rest in my hands. It’s not until Nina touches my arm I realize I’m crying.

“Antonio?” She shakes me. “Antonio, talk to me.”

I curl in on myself, crying for all the pain Franco put me through over the past five years. For the pain he put me through over the past twelve years since he killed my dad. My family’s and my lives were never the same after that, and it was all his fault.

Nina sits beside me, resting her head on my arm, not saying a word. I can hear her sniffles as we cry together.

The front door opens. I look up, expecting to see my family, but instead, I see another person I fucking hate. Petrov.

He looks between his daughter, the dead body, and me. I can see on his face the moment he realizes I’ve won.

I lunge for him as he turns to run away. Grabbing him by his jacket, I haul him into the house, shoving him to the ground. Nina backs away, scrubbing at her eyes.

“Wait, Antonio,” Petrov says, holding his hands up as I stand over him. “Wait. We can still work together. Now that Franco is gone, you’ll take over. You’ll need a man like me at your side.”

“Shut up,” I growl, hitting him in the face. He grunts as his head snaps back and hits the floor. Nina gasps. “You tried to get your own daughter to kill me. What kind of man *are* you? What kind of father?” I punch him again. Petrov’s already messed up face is looking even more fucked up. “You tried to have me killed. Why the fuck would I ever want to work with you?” I rain punches down on him. Petrov is too weak to put up a fight.

“Why are you even here?” I ask, sitting back slightly.

Blood gurgles out of his mouth. “I had a feeling you ...” He swallows. “That you’d be going after Franco.” He inhales a ragged breath. “It made sense to check on Franco at his house. I didn’t ... I didn’t know you’d killed him.”

“If you had, you would never have come here.”

“Obviously.” He spits, splattering his blood on my face. I don’t flinch.

“Well, you can join your friend in hell.” I let go. With reckless abandon, I hit, punch, and kick Petrov all over. I don’t hold back. The sounds of his bones breaking are music to my ears. The sight of his blood on the floor looks more like a painting than an act of violence.

“Stop!” Nina shouts.

I don’t listen to her. Petrov is still alive, groaning in pain but still alive. I have to end him.

“Stop!” Nina grabs my arms, trying to pull me off her father. I push her off me. She lands on the floor, crying out in pain. The sound makes me stop.

I look over at her. “Nina?”

“Stop,” she cries. “You’ve hurt him enough. Just stop. Please.”

It starts to dawn on me how I look. Covered in blood. A grin on my face. Petrov slowly dying beneath me.

Like a punch to my own gut, I stumble back, snapping out of my rage-fueled violence. Petrov coughs up blood. I turn to Nina. She backs away from me when I reach out for her.

“Nina ...”

Eyeing me warily, she stands up slowly. “Just let my father go.”

I frown. “I’d thought you want him dead for how much you hate him.”

“I don’t have murder in my heart, Antonio. I never did. Now that Franco’s dead, you’re the new leader of the Moretti Mafia. You can control him now. My sister and mother will be safe from him. I’ll be safe from him. He doesn’t need to die. You’ve punished him enough.”

I stare down at my blood covered knuckles. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she says firmly.

I could still kill Petrov despite what Nina wants. She did betray me after all. Why should I care about what she wants?

But I do. I still love Nina. That hasn't changed.

I turn to Petrov, kneel beside him, and tell him to leave. "I never want to see you again. If I do, I might actually kill you that time."

Petrov nods frantically. I kick him toward the door. With a groan, he stumbles forward, barely managing to get out. I shut the door behind him.

"Happy?" I ask Nina.

"No," she whispers. "None of this makes me happy."

I look down at Franco's dead body, taking in the bullet hole in his back. "Why did you shoot him? He was about to kill me. I thought that was what you wanted. Me dead."

The softness in Nina's eyes almost breaks me. "No. I never wanted you dead, Antonio. Nothing I said was a lie. My father was forcing me by threatening to hurt Anna. If someone threatened to kill one of your siblings, wouldn't you consider doing anything you could to save them?" She has a point. I would. "But I never wanted to kill you. It was killing me inside. I shot Franco because I wanted you to live. Because I love you."

I suck in a deep breath. "You really do love me?"

"Yes. I wasn't lying when I said that. Were you lying when you told me you loved me?"

I open my mouth to answer ... what? I know I still love Nina, but how can I know she won't break my heart again?

The front door opens again, saving me from having to answer.

It's my mom.

She's alone as she hurries inside the house. Once she sees me, her eyes water as she pulls me into a hug. "Oh my god. Antonio. You're alive."

"I'm alive." I hug her close to me. Nina steps aside to let my mom and me have this moment. When we pull apart, Mom turns to Franco.

“He’s ... really dead?”

“He is.”

Relief flashes through her eyes before they darken. “Good.” Then she does something I’d never expect from Giulia Moretti.

She spits on Franco.

“He can rot in hell for all I care,” she says.

“You really hated him.”

She huffs. “Of course, I hated him. He made my life miserable for the past twelve years. I’ll never get those years back. But I can rest easy knowing all my children are safe from him forever. You’re safe, Antonio.” She cups my cheek, her eyes watering. “But now you have to take over, and you need to do it soon before someone else steps in. You’ve worked so hard to take Franco down. Don’t let someone else get in your way.”

“Never,” I say in a ragged voice. “I’ll get rid of his body, and that will be that. I’ll be the new head of the family business. I always will be. I’ll make Dad proud.” My voice cracks on the last few words. My fingers brush against my father’s pendant around my neck.

Mom smiles wider. “I know you will. You’ve been making him proud your entire life.”

I bend down by Franco’s head. An idea occurs. “Do you have a plastic bag I can use?” I ask my mom.

She nods and goes to the kitchen as if in a daze. Nina is looking at the floor, not acknowledging me at all. When Mom comes back with the plastic bag, she asks what I’m doing.

“This,” I tell her, plucking out a few of Franco’s hair and stuffing them in the bag.

“What for?”

“You said the twins are his kids. I want to make sure. They could be Dad’s, and you’re carrying around a weight you don’t need to carry.”

“Oh, Antonio.” Mom kneels beside me, stroking back my hair. “I appreciate what you’re doing, but you don’t need to. It doesn’t matter now who Lucia and Luca’s father is. They’ll have me as their mom. And they’ll have this family supporting them.”

“But if news got out that they’re Franco’s kids, it could hurt their reputation.”

“It could,” she agrees. “That’s why you shouldn’t do the test. It’s better ultimately to not know.”

I stare at the plastic bag in my hands, a few strands Franco’s dark hair inside it. I shove it into my pocket. “I can’t get rid of it. Just in case.”

Mom smiles sadly as she pats my cheek. “Ok. Just in case.”

“Where’s Cecilia and everyone else?”

“I didn’t want them to come back here just in case you were ...” She gasps, covering her mouth. *Killed*. Just in case I was killed.

“I understand,” I tell her. “Once I dispose of Franco’s body, you can bring them back.”

“And you’ll get to see them again. I know Cecilia misses you so much.”

“Me, too.” The pang of missing my sister is slightly lighter today than it was before. I lost out on five years, but I plan on being a part of my family’s life for the rest of mine.

Mom turns to Nina. “Are you all right?” Nina looks even more withdrawn. I can see my mom take in Nina’s dirty dress, the blood stains on her back. “Why don’t you stay here for the night? I’ll make sure you’re all right.”

“No,” I say before Nina can answer. “She was just leaving.”

Nina’s head whips up to stare at me. I look away before I can talk myself out of it. I may love Nina, but I can’t forgive her betrayal.

“Are you sure?” Mom asks.

“I’m sure,” I say. “Nina was leaving. Weren’t you?”

Nina opens her mouth to ... what? Object. But then, after giving me a sad look, she nods and stumbles to the door.

Once she’s gone, I instantly regret it. I can’t turn back now, though. I’ve made my decision.

“You do know Franco kidnapped her?” Mom asks. “Why would you turn her away? She’s your wife.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” I say through tight lips. “But I need to get rid of Franco’s body. We can talk later.”

I grab Franco’s arms and start dragging him toward the back door before Mom can object.

FRANCO’S BODY falls into the water with a splash. The rocks tied around him help sink him to the bottom of the Hudson River. His head is the last thing to go under. The moment it’s gone, I feel relief for the first time in years.

My uncle put my family through hell for twelve years, all because he decided to kill his brother. I’m glad he’s gone. He can rot in hell like my mom said.

I don’t go back to my apartment. I’m afraid Nina will be there, and I can’t face her after I told her to leave. So, I go to my childhood home.

It’s nice to be back and not be afraid for my life.

When I step through the front doors, I’m greeted by the sight of my sister, Cecilia. She doesn’t say anything as she hugs me, silently telling me I’ll be all right.

I hug her back.

CHAPTER 19

Antonio

I can't deny the flicker of nerves that pass through me as I enter the high-rise office building. It belonged to my father before Franco took over. Now, it's mine.

And it's where I assembled all my father's men to meet me.

With Killian's help, we spread the news about Franco's death and that I'm the one who did it. I can only hope it makes these men respect me. The last time some of them saw me, I was just a kid.

When I enter the conference room, I'm confronted by the twenty most important men in my father's business. From my spying on Franco, I know they did the most work for him.

Some of them look happy to see me while others look worried. And one—one looks like they don't respect me at all.

The one who doesn't is a man named Oliver Martin. He took over as Franco's second-in-command after I killed Alfonso. His feet are on the table, and the smirk on his face says a lot. He doesn't think I'll make a good leader. To a lot of these men, I'm just a kid.

I need to show them I'm a man now, more than capable of being a leader.

All the men have the decency to at least be quiet as I enter the room and take my place at the front. Oliver is there, and I have to subtly nudge him out of the way.

“Looks like the new boss is here,” he mocks. A couple other men laugh while the rest look on in respect.

“You’re right,” I say, standing up tall with Killian at my side. “I am. I killed Franco. And he killed my father. So, if he gets to take over, then so do I.”

“Scary,” Oliver says sarcastically. As a short man, I think he’s compensating for something.

With my eyes on him, I take off my father’s pendant and ...

... bash him in the head with it. He slumps against the table, a gash on his head. The other men jerk, finally giving me their full attention.

“This,” I say, holding the now bloody pendant up for everyone to see, “belonged to my father. Many of you were at his funeral and saw my mother put it on me. I am the rightful heir to this business. I have worked hard over the past five years learning to be a fighter. Learning how to make alliances. Learning how to stay alive. I know what it takes.”

I make a point of looking at Oliver, who’s now groaning and holding onto his head. “Some of you may still see me as a child. But a child wouldn’t do that.” I nod at Oliver. “I know what it takes to be ruthless. And I know what it takes to be kind.

“Now,” I continue, putting my pendant back around my neck, “I don’t want to lead with fear. I want to lead as a man you can respect, and that might take some time. But you all respected my father. And I *am* my father’s son. I am asking you, not telling you, to accept me as your new leader. I won’t stop until I have all your respect.”

The room is silent.

Until the first clap comes. A man stands up—I recognize him as David Garcia, one of my father’s oldest employees. He was old even when I was a kid. He has to be pushing eighty by now. Judging by how the other men look at him, it’s clear they respect him.

“I see your father in you,” he says in a warm, rich voice. “And that’s more than enough for me. I’m more than willing to give you a chance, Antonio.” He looks at the other men, his lips sneering slightly at the sight of Oliver. “Antonio has a right to his family’s business. I accept him as our new boss.”

“So do I,” another man says.

“And I,” someone else chimes in.

Soon, the entire room is standing and showing me their respect. For some, I knew it’s real. For others, I’m sure it’s just an act. That’s the thing I learned about Mafia politics—it’s always evolving and changing. I’m sure I’m going to have to deal with some of these men wanting to kill me. But what’s new? I’ve been dealing with people trying to kill me for the past five years. What’s another sixty years?

Killian claps me on the back. I know I have at least one ally I can completely trust. Killian was with me when I was at my lowest. He’s a true friend. I can’t wait to help him achieve his own success someday.

I grab my father’s pendant and hold it close to my heart. Looking out at all these men, all I can think is—*This is for you, Dad.*

I’ve finally done it.

I’m the new leader of the Moretti Mafia.

I ARRIVE BACK at my childhood home. I haven’t returned to my apartment since I killed Franco. I don’t think I could bear seeing it empty. I told Nina to leave, and now, I miss her so fucking much. It hurts like nothing ever has.

Mom welcomes me inside and to the dinner table, where she has food ready to go. Cecilia, Mia, and the twins are already seated.

“I just got off the phone with Emilia,” Mom says as she scoops food up for me.

“Ma, I can feed myself,” I tell her, but she just waves me away.

Mia rolls her eyes while Cecilia leans in close to me. “She’s just happy you’re here. I’m so happy you’re here.” She grabs my hand under the table, squeezing it. I squeeze back.

“And,” Mom continues, setting a plate full of food down before me, “she’ll be coming from LA with Marco later this week. And so will Francesca and Leo. I also called Gemma and told her she needed to come over with Viktor so we can all have a family meal together.”

“Without Franco,” I mutter.

Cecilia raises her glass. “Hear, hear.”

“Why do you hate Uncle Franco so much?” Luca asks, taking a large bite of his chicken. Mom scolds him for chewing with his mouth open.

I exchange a look with my mom before turning back to Luca. He’s only ten. He doesn’t understand. “He wasn’t a good man. He tried to hurt me. Now, he’s gone.”

“Gone where?” Lucia asks. She sticks her tongue at Luca as he swipes food from her plate.

“He’s dead,” Mom explains.

“What?” Lucia’s eyes begin to water. “How?”

“In a car accident,” she says. “It’s ok, honey. You can cry.” I know it pains Mom to say that. After everything Franco did to her, I know she hates him, but for the twins, Franco was the only father they knew.

Lucia buries her head in Mom’s arm as she sobs. Luca is trying to stay strong, but I can tell it’s taking a lot out of him to hold back his tears. I remember how it was for me on the day of my dad’s funeral. I tried so hard to keep it together. It wasn’t until my sisters told me it was ok to cry that I finally let go.

“You can cry, too,” I tell Luca. “It’s all right. No one will judge.”

Luca lets his tears come as he runs from the table. While holding Lucia, Mom watches in anguish as he leaves. Mia and Cecilia are both quiet. They might not know all the horrible things Franco did to Mom, but they know how much darkness he brought to the family after our dad died.

Dinner ends early as Mom goes to comfort the twins, leaving Mia, Cecilia, and me alone at the table. The moment Mom leaves with Lucia, Mia gets up and is already on her phone. “Happy you’re home, Antonio,” she says without taking her eyes off the screen. Though she does give me a quick hug before heading off to her room.

That leaves just Cecilia and me ... and Theo in the corner.

I give him a nod. “We’re fine here for the night.”

“It’s my duty to guard your family,” he replies in a deep voice. Cecilia smiles slightly, but when she catches me looking at her, she blushes.

“I understand that, but I’d like to talk to my sister alone.”

Theo nods once and leaves the kitchen. He’s probably just standing outside the room, but whatever.

I turn to Cecilia. “You still like him?”

She blushes even more if that were possible. “I know I shouldn’t,” she says, clutching the cross around her neck. “He’s not someone I’ll ever marry. Mom told me I’ll have to marry some high, political power or something.”

“That’s right. A bodyguard isn’t a suitable husband for you.”

She frowns. “Oh? And you know what makes a suitable husband, do you? You haven’t been here, Antonio.”

“Which wasn’t my fault.”

“I know,” she says, deflating. “But still. You don’t get to tell me who I get to marry.”

“I do, actually. I’m the new head of the family business, which means ... technically speaking, I’m your boss. I’ll have to find a suitable husband for you and soon. I’m in a new,

unsteady place where I'll be proving myself. I'll have to make smart alliances, and a marriage between you and someone influential could provide me with a strong alliance."

She eyes me critically. "I don't know if I'm prepared for this new side of you. You don't sound like my best friend right now. You don't even sound like my brother."

"Who do I sound like?"

"Like Father. Like ... Franco," she whispers his name.

"I am not Franco," I snap, standing up.

"I know, Antonio. I know. But you're already talking about making alliances. It's something I've overheard Franco talking about for years now. That's just what it takes to be the leader. Just tell me you won't lose the part of you I love so much."

"Which is?"

"Your kindness."

My breath hitches at her words. Kindness. That was how Nina described me when we first met.

I haven't been kind to her at all.

"I have to go," I say suddenly.

Cecilia blinks. "Go where?"

"To save my marriage." I squeeze Cecilia's hand. "You know I love you. We'll talk more about this, ok? I don't want to force you into something you don't want."

She relaxes slightly. "I appreciate that."

"But I really have to go." I pass Theo on my way out the door. I turn to him and say, "Be careful with my sister."

Theo's stoic face barely changes. "I'm always careful with your family. It's my duty."

"Right." I guess he doesn't know about Cecilia's crush on him. Good.

I hurry out of the house and head back to my apartment, hoping beyond hope Nina will be there. But when I find my

apartment empty, I know where she'll be. It's not somewhere I want to go, but I have to.

I pound on the door to Petrov's condo. No one answers. I keep knocking until I hear a scream. Then I kick down the door.

What I see when I step inside chills me to the bone. It's Petrov, and he's beating the shit out of Anna with his belt. Nina is on the floor, passed out. Or dead. Nina's mother is nowhere to be seen.

With a snarl, I shove Petrov away from Anna. He stumbles into the couch and falls over. I crouch beside Anna and check her wounds. They don't look too bad. Hopefully, Petrov wasn't at it long before I showed up.

"You're ok now," I tell her, helping her sit up.

"Nina?" she cries, looking at her sister.

I hurry over to my wife. After checking her pulse and realizing she's still alive, I gently pat her face. "Nina? Nina, please wake. Wake up." I shake her more firmly. "I can't live without you. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I was so mad. I'm sorry I pushed you away. I shouldn't. You weren't to blame. I should have listened harder to what you were saying. Nina? Please." In my desperation, I kiss her while whispering for her to wake up.

Nina stirs.

I pull back. "Nina?" She slowly opens her eyes, blinking up at me.

"Antonio?" She touches her head, wincing. It's then I notice the gash on her head. Petrov must have given it to her. I help her sit up.

"I'm so sorry, Nina. But I'm here. I'm here now. I love you. I never stopped loving you."

Her eyes water before they settle on her sister. "Anna?" She crawls over to her. "Anna, are you ok?"

Anna is crying and holding her arms around herself. "No," she sobs. Nina grabs her sister and glares at her father as he

stands up.

I stand up, too, and face Petrov head on. “I let you live. That was a mistake.”

“We were trying to leave,” Nina explains. “But he stopped us.”

“You’re not going to stop, are you?” I ask Petrov.

He grunts. “They’re my family. They belong to me.”

“No. They’re not your family any longer. They’re mine.” I turn to Nina and Anna. “You two might want to shut your eyes for this.”

Nina’s eyes widen. “Are you ...?”

“Yes. He won’t stop otherwise.”

After a moment, Nina nods and hugs Anna closer to her, making sure her sister doesn’t see what’s about to happen.

I turn back to Petrov, lift out my gun, and point it at his head. He doesn’t even put up a fight. He must know it’s pointless, especially now that I’ve killed Franco and am the new leader of the Moretti Mafia.

I pull the trigger.

The gunshot is loud in the quiet space. Petrov jerks, then falls backward, landing on the ground with a hard thump.

Then all is quiet again.

I put my gun away before going back to Nina. I crouch beside her and her sister. “You two are all right. You never have to fear him again. Now, let’s get out of here. You’re both coming home with me.”

“What about Mom?” Anna asks, pulling back from her sister’s arms.

Nina shakes her head sadly. “She can’t protect us. She never protected us like she should. But Antonio can. We can make a new family ... with him.” She turns to me. “Did you really mean everything you said?”

“I did. I love you so fucking much, Nina.”

Nina gasps and leans into my arms. “I love you, too.”

“I have a lot to make up for,” I tell her. “But I want to spend the rest of my life doing it.”

“So do I,” she says into my ear. “We can do it together.”

Anna watches us for a moment before rolling her eyes. “You two are so gushy.” Even though her words are snappish, her tone is just tired.

Nina and I smile at each other.

I help them out of the condo without seeing the dead body of their dad. They leave their mom behind.

I hold both sisters up as we walk away.

CHAPTER 20

Nina

Entering Antonio's apartment makes me feel like I'm home again. And this time, I have both my husband and sister at my side.

Anna is still shaken up over what happened with our father. Antonio shows her to the guest bedroom.

"Do you need me?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "I just want to lie down. Everything that happened ... I'm ..."

"You're in shock. I'm here if you need me."

Anna nods and shuts the door. Antonio touches my shoulder, his fingers sending that familiar fiery sensation over my arm. "Now that your father is gone, he can't hurt you or Anna ever again. You're safe with me, Nina." He nods at towards my head. "Let me bandage that up."

After Antonio bandages up my wound, we head back into the living room where he opens his arms up for me, and I slide in between them. "I'm sorry for everything," I say.

He kisses the top of my head. "You don't need to be sorry. I'm the one who's sorry for pushing you away. Your father beat you because I didn't protect you. I'll carry that with me forever."

"No. I'm tired of feeling guilty and I don't want you to feel that way either. I suggest we start anew."

"Anew?"

“You’re now the leader of the Moretti Mafia. You have your family back. My sister is now safe. Are you ok with putting everything behind us? Because I am.”

The softness in his eyes makes my heart feel full. “I’m more than ok with that. I love you, Nina. I want to be a good husband to you.”

“And I want to be a good wife to you.” I cup his cheek, and he leans into my touch. “Starting today, it’s a fresh start. No more lies, I promise. We vow to always be there for each other.”

“I promise that, too.” Antonio gives me a lingering kiss. When he pulls back, the intensity in his eyes makes me kiss him this time.

Soon, we find ourselves in our bedroom, clothes off, on top of each other.

When Antonio runs his hands down my body, I realize I’m shivering. “Are you ok?” he asks, leaning over me.

“I’m ok. I just thought we’d never have this again.”

“What, sex?”

I place my hand over his heart. “No. This. Intimacy. Love. I thought it was broken. I’m just so happy to be with you again.”

Antonio smiles as he kisses me. He’s so careful about my sore back. I’m still recovering from the wounds my father gave me. So, Antonio rolls us both onto our sides. We face each other. Nothing could make us stop kissing, not even if the world were ending.

He slides my thigh onto his thigh so he can press his length against my opening. My body is already willing and open for him. The way he so tenderly touches my back and kisses my lips and gazes into my eyes, how could I not be ready for him?

When Antonio wraps me into his arms, I know I’m ready for this. He slides inside me, and together, we moan. The only sound in the room is our panting breathe and kisses.

Antonio grips my hip as he gently thrusts forward into me. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, keeping him close. Together, we move as one.

It's not frantic like in the past. This is slow and loving and gentle. It's truly making love.

And I love him. My heart can barely take how much I love this man.

Soon, we're coming together, whispering each other's name. When we finish, Antonio pulls me into his arms and holds me.

We stay like that for the rest of the night.

THE DELICIOUS SMELLS of a pot roast waft into my nose as Antonio, Anna, and I enter Giulia's home. It's family dinner night, and for the first time in five years, Antonio will be with his entire family all in one room.

Giulia greets us, welcoming us into the dining room where the rest of Antonio's family is already sitting. There are his three older sisters with their respective husbands on one side of the table. His younger siblings are on the other side, with Giulia at the front of the table.

There's an empty seat at the other end of the table.

His family greets me like I'm an old friend, with Emilia giving me a kind smile and Gemma teasing me that I'm in it for the long haul with Antonio. Everyone laughs as we take our seats.

Cecilia leans in close to me. "Thank you for being there for my brother. It means a lot to me."

"You're welcome." I get choked up at her praise. I've never had someone thank me before for anything. "But it was easy. Antonio is easy to love."

Antonio is about to sit next to me when Giulia tells him to stop. She walks over to the empty chair at the other end of the

table and pulls it out for him. “This was your father’s seat. Now, it’s yours.”

Antonio blinks and clears his throat, trying to hold back tears. “Thanks, Ma. But ... are you sure?”

Gemma rolls her eyes as she holds up her wine glass. “You’re the man of the family now, which I hate because you’re still my baby brother, but you deserve it.”

“You really do, Antonio,” Emilia says. “You saved our family from Franco. That cannot be underestimated.”

Giulia motions toward the seat. “Come on. Sit. You’re now the head of the family business. It’s time you take your seat at the head of the table.”

I squeeze Antonio’s hand, letting him know it’s ok. He gives me a wink before settling down in his new seat.

“You look right there,” I tell him.

“I agree,” Giulia says, wiping a tear from her eye. She claps her hands. “All right everyone. Shall we eat?”

Around the table, everyone starts chatting. At my old home, dinners were always silent with Father preferring us seen and silent. Giulia’s home is full of laughter and light and love.

I pull Anna close to my side and grab Antonio’s hand. I’m between two of the most important people in my entire life. Anna and I have wounds that need to heal, which will take time, but as she smiles slightly after Gemma’s husband, Viktor, makes a joke, I know she’ll be all right. She’ll have me, and she’ll have a new family that will be there for her.

And so will I.

All because I married a Moretti.

Antonio and I share a smile, silently letting each other know we’re here for each other.

Always and forever.

The End.

**Check out the fifth book in the Moretti Mafia series,
Unholy Union, starring Cecilia and Theo!**

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– the first book in another Italian Mafia Romance Series!**

I had a choice: either let my father die or marry a monster.

I chose marriage,

Even though it would be my downfall.

Dante Bernardi is a man with secrets,

Scars cover his face and body.

He shuts me out,

While all I want is to love him.

Now, I'm stuck in a marriage filled with rage and regret.

I try my hardest to crack my husband's shell.

But how can I learn to love the beast,

When he can't even love in return?

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SNEAK PEEK

Chapter One:

DANTE

I live in darkness, preferring it to the light. The curtains are always drawn, and I avoid the mirrors as I walk the hallways of my home. Every picture of me has been put away. I can't stand to look at them. To be confronted with how I used to look. It brings back memories I'd rather forget.

I glance down at my hands, covered in scars. Just like the rest of me. Body and face. Scarred.

I stomp down the hallway, heading to the ground floor of my mansion. My younger brother, Nico, loves to mess with me and tell me I'm incapable of moving quietly. He says I tramp around like a bull. Rather than get irritated by his comments, I embraced them. I want anyone who meets me to be intimidated. I want them to fear the sight of me. I'd rather have fear than pity. Pity makes me sick to the stomach.

I tromp downstairs, making my way through the main foyer. Everything is dark. Barely any light seeps through the closed-off windows. All the lights are dimmed.

A servant passes by—one of my maids. She averts her eyes as she walks past, carrying fresh sheets to make my bed. All of my staff know to avoid me at all costs. There are consequences otherwise.

I sneer as I watch the maid walk away. Of course, no one can look at me. All they see is a hideous beast.

I rush through the foyer and down another hallway, reaching a door tucked in a corner. It creaks as I open it, as if from a horror movie.

My steps are loud as I descend the stairs into darkness. All I can hear is the shaky noise of someone breathing. My lips twitch into a grin.

I finally reach the bottom step, entering a long, cold, stone corridor. Multiple cells are lined up against the wall. This is

where I take my prisoners, people who offended me, people I'm at war with.

Right now, I have one measly little thief.

I approach one of the cells. A figure is huddled in one corner. It's almost pitch black down here except for the faint light from a window high up in the cell. I never bothered installing lights. Darkness is terrifying for my enemies. For me, it's where I thrive.

The huddled figure looks up at me. It's a man—around sixty years of age with gray hair and way too many wrinkles for his age. I guess the stress of his life made him age faster.

“Please, let me go, Mr. Bernardi,” the man pleads.

I scoff. “You're a thief. You stole from me. You really thought you'd get away with stealing over a hundred grand from my business?” I run one of the highest-rated strip clubs and escort services in the city. It brings me in millions each year, and it's just one of the many business ventures I own and run. Though, none of my employers have ever seen me. I hire others to handle the day-to-day work. They make it possible for me to remain in my mansion, tucked away in the Italian countryside. I live about an hour from Florence. I get the perks of being near a large city while having the solitude of the countryside.

And this man stole from my club, looking for easy money.

“Mr. Vinci,” I say to him, watching in glee as he flinches, “you will face punishment for your crimes. You will remain here until I decide what to do with you.”

“Will you let me go?” he asks hopefully.

I laugh. It's harsh and gruff. I haven't laughed much in years. “Only in death, I'm sure. Now just wait in there. I'll come back later.”

The screams of Francesco Vinci bounce off the stone walls, and I smile as I walk away. I like to taunt my prisoners, make them think there is hope, then snatch it away. My brothers call me sadistic. I call myself a mafia man. As the oldest, I'm in line to take over after our father passes away.

And it shouldn't be too long now since he's been on his death bed for years, sick with cancer. I've been pretty much running things with my brothers' help for a while now.

As I make my way back upstairs, I think more about Francesco Vinci. He's from one of the lesser Italian mafia families. One of the poorer ones. One with little standing. He was just a blip on my radar until he decided to steal from me. He must be facing hard times to grow that desperate. Maybe I should've considered helping him and his family. Maybe then he wouldn't have stolen a hundred grand from me. But I'm not one to help people. I'm here just to do my job. Make sure money flows through my businesses. Make sure my men stay in line. And make sure to punish anyone if they step out of line, like Francesco Vinci.

I also have to keep our enemies at bay. I can't afford to have anyone thinking they can steal power from my family. Part of my power comes from my solitude. It intrigues people and wrings fear from them. A person's imagination is always more terrifying than reality. Though with me, that might not be true. I'm just as terrifying as anything anyone can imagine.

I close the door to my prison behind me and enter the foyer. Someone calls my name as I head to my office.

"Dante, looking a little worse for wear, aren't we?"

I scowl, shaking my head. I turn around and find both of my younger brothers sitting in my living room, lounging on the couches. Well, only one of them is lounging. And that someone is Nico.

As the middle child, he always feels the need to make sure his voice is heard. And he does that by making snide remarks. He thinks he's funny. I think he's just annoying. He's the one who spoke just now.

My other brother is sitting ramrod straight on the couch across from Nico. Santo, the baby of the family. The most by-the-book out of all of us. He likes to follow the rules, and he's very stern about it.

All three of us share the same family markings—black hair, dark eyes, and tan skin. The only differences between us are Nico’s tattoos and my scars. Santo’s skin is the opposite. Unblemished. He doesn’t harbor scars like me, and he thinks tattoos are beneath him.

“Get your feet off my table,” I snap at Nico, whose leather boots are resting on my very expensive coffee table.

He ignores me. “Were you just with a prisoner? I thought I heard screams.” Nico looks over at Santo. “Typical Dante. Where he goes, screams follow.”

Santo doesn’t even crack a smile. Instead, he focuses on me. “I take it you didn’t hear the news.”

I frown, crossing my arms. “What news.”

“Father is dead,” Santo tells me.

I inhale sharply. Both brothers watch me carefully. They’re the only ones who know about the pressure I’ve been under, preparing to take Father’s place. They’re the only ones close enough to me to know.

After processing the news, I nod once. “When?”

“Just an hour ago,” Santo says. “I was with him when he passed. I called Nico, and we drove over here. I thought you should hear the news in person.”

I remain standing. I refuse to show weakness. “Thank you.”

Nico sighs. “I, for one, am glad dear old Dad is dead. He was a fucking asshole.”

“Nico,” I warn as Santo frowns at him.

“What?” Nico asks, pretending to sound affronted, though nothing ever bothers him. He’s the opposite of me. Where I thrive in darkness and anger and fear, Nico lives in the light. He eats up attention. He’s “Mr. Calm, Cool, and Collected” personified. He takes everything in stride with a smile, a wink, and a snarky comment. “He was! And we all know it. I’m just saying what everyone else was thinking. And besides, now we can rule how we want without Dad’s interference.”

Santo clears his throat. “You mean, how Dante wants to rule. Because it’s Dante who’s taking our father’s place. It’s not you, and it’s not me.”

Nico glowers at Santo. “I appreciate the information, brother,” he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “I know that.” He glances at me. “But Dante will give us a little leeway to do whatever we want, isn’t that right, big brother?”

“What? So you can sleep with any woman you want to? You already do that, Nico,” I remind him. “If you’re worried about your life changing now that I’m in charge, don’t be. Just continue doing your part in the business, and you can fuck any whores you come across.”

Nico smiles indulgently. “Why, thank you, Dante. But I don’t just fuck whores. I also fuck married woman, widows, and virgins. I don’t discriminate.”

Santo’s lips twitch like he wants to sneer, but he won’t let his composure drop for anything, not even our annoying brother.

“All I ask of you two is to continue your duties,” I say. “Otherwise, your personal lives are none of my concern.”

“Except for marriage,” Santo points out.

“What do you mean?” I say gruffly.

Santo looks between Nico and me. “Marriage, Dante. It’s expected that if Nico or I ever want to get married, we need your approval as head of the Bernardi Mafia. It’s in your best interests to ensure matches that will further our business and power.”

I scratch the back of my neck, feeling the raised indentation of skin there. “I hadn’t considered that,” I admit.

“It’s what Father would have done,” Santo reminds me.

“Yeah, if he’d lived,” Nico says snarkily. “But he’s dead, so who cares what Dad would have done?”

“We’re not the only ones in this family,” Santo says. “All of the men who worked for our father and now work for you,” he looks at me, “will expect you to continue our father’s

legacy. We don't want a war within our family. That will just incentivize other mafia families to think they can steal our power."

"That's true," I say. "I need to continue Father's work."

Nico gives me a look. "You're really agreeing with this?"

"I'm not going to force you into a marriage you don't want," I reply. "To either of you. But yes, if a marriage is advantageous for our family, we must follow through with it."

"And that includes you, Dante," Santo says.

I still. I'd only been thinking of my brothers. A marriage of my own hadn't even crossed my mind. I scoff. "Marriage ... for me?"

"Yeah, look at him," Nico says, nodding at me. "Any girl will take one look at him and run away screaming. We'd never get a woman to agree to a marriage with him."

I glare at Nico. "Sometimes, you talk too much."

Nico smiles brightly. "It's my best quality."

"Your most annoying, you mean," I growl.

"But Dante is now head of the Bernardi family. I can't imagine there aren't any families who wouldn't want a taste of that power. You'll be getting marriage offers left and right now," Santo says.

"I don't want a wife," I grit out. I just want to be left alone. I prefer solitude. I hate socializing. And I'd have to socialize if I had a wife.

"You might not get a choice," Santo continues saying. "All of your men will expect you to marry now that you're in charge. So, I'd consider it real soon. You could secure more power for us if you married the right woman."

I rub my nose, sighing. "I will marry when I want to. I won't be pressured into it."

"Didn't you just say that if an advantageous marriage came around, we'd have to follow through?" Nico says.

I glare at him again. “I did. But I was speaking about you. Not me.”

Nico scowls. “Not fair, Dante. Not fair.”

“When is life fair? I’m in charge now. I make the rules.”

“Yes, but ...” Santo shrugs. “You know it’s not that simple.”

“I know,” I grit out, realizing that I really will have to get married.

“Anyway ...” Nico says. “Who do you have locked up this time? I’m always curious.”

“Nice change of subject, Nico,” Santo says dryly.

“I aim to please,” Nico fires back.

I shake my head, pushing thoughts of weddings and women out of my mind.

“Just Francesco Vinci,” I say.

“What did he do?” Nico asks.

“He stole a hundred grand from the club.”

Nico whistles. “That’s steep. Man must be desperate for money. Doesn’t he have a ton of daughters? Must have too many mouths to feed.”

Santo sits up straighter. “That’s right. He does have daughters. Three to be exact.”

I look over at him. “What are you saying?”

Santo shrugs. “I’m just pointing out a few options you could choose from for marriage.”

I scoff. “Vinci is poor. He doesn’t bring any power to our family. Why would I marry any of his daughters?”

“And why would you? Have you seen Francesco? His daughters are probably just as ugly as him,” Nico says.

“Not helping.” I scowl.

“I’m just saying,” Santo says. “There are a lot of eligible women from families that work for us. You could have your

choice of any of them. You could ensure your power by making loyal followers.”

“And why would I want a thief as a loyal follower?”

“Better a follower than a thief. You don’t want word getting out that someone has stolen from you. It would weaken you. Better to shut this man up either in death ... or in marriage ties.”

“Why are you toying with him anyway?” Nico asks. “I never understood your obsession with taking prisoners. If someone pisses me off, I just kill them.”

“And that’s the difference between you and me, Nico,” I say. “You’re impulsive. I like to lay in wait, then pounce. Death isn’t fun if I can’t torture someone first. And locking them up in a cell is just part of my torture.”

“Touché,” Nico says.

“It’s just an idea, Dante,” Santo says. “Since you’re officially our boss, you can choose who you want to marry. But if I were you, I’d do it soon. Better to make our followers happy sooner rather than later.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, walking out of the living room. “You’re welcome to stay. Just keep your damn feet off my furniture.”

Nico just laughs behind me.

I return to my prison, Santo’s words filtering through my mind. I have no desire to marry, especially one of Francesco Vinci’s daughters. But it does give me a fun idea for torture.

I approach Francesco, and he scrambles up, his expression fearful.

“Are you here to kill me?” he asks.

“Now, where’s the fun in that?” I grab the bars, staring in at him. “I have an offer for you.”

“An offer?” He approaches the bars.

“Yes. I’m willing to let you go.”

As he lets out a sob, his shoulders slump. “Thank you. Thank you.”

“But,” I say sharply, and he looks up at me. “I’ll let you return home, and I won’t bother you again. You can keep your life intact. And in exchange, you have to send someone in your stead.”

“W-what?” he stutters. “Who?”

“One of your daughters,” I growl. There’s no way he’ll agree. No self-respecting father would. “If one of your daughters comes back here and takes your place, I will spare your life. But if you’re unable to get anyone to take your place, I’ll go to your home and kill you in front of your daughters.”

Francesco cries out. “You can’t!”

“I can. And I will. But you can’t force your daughters to take your place. If one wants to come, she was to willingly.”

He shakes his head. “None of them will agree to this.”

I pull out a key and unlock the door, opening it wide. “Then I guess I’ll see you in hell. But this is your only option.”

“I can’t just stay in here?” he asks, looking around the cell.

“No. I’ll grab you and force you out. I’ll have someone take you home so you can’t escape. There’s no getting out of this, Francesco. Either convince one of your daughters to come here or expect your death.”

He walks out of the cell. “Then I’ll expect my death. I would never send any of my daughters to the likes of *you*.”

I chuckle darkly. “Let’s see if you’re so brave when I come to kill you. Now, get out of my sight. And don’t try to run. I’ll find you. You have three days to send one of your daughters. Or you can come back yourself. Or you can let me come to you.” I scan him head-to-toe, taking in his skinny, sickly frame. “I know which option I would choose. Now go.”

Francesco stumbles up the stairs and out the door. I text my guards at the front door to escort him back home. I only want to see his face again when I kill him.

There's no way he'll convince any of his daughters to come here. Which means there's no way I'm marrying any of them. Which is exactly what I want.

I don't care for the likes of marriage, but I do care for torture. And this is the ultimate torture for Francesco. Either give up a daughter to me or die.

It's almost comical.

I smile as I walk back upstairs. Just another day at the office filled with torture and suffering.

I can't wait to kill Francesco for stealing from me. Though I wonder what his daughters look like. I guess I'll just see them when I end their father's life.

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I was meant to protect her... instead I consumed her.

Sofia Di Luca is spoiled and innocent.

A mafia princess I was chosen to keep safe.

I wasn't supposed to desire her.

To press my mouth against her soft, plump lips.

To show her pleasure she's never known before.

Her body was off limits.

Until evil men threatened to take her away.

So I made a choice.

I claimed her instead...

Even if it means my death.

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