

DEVIL  
IN  
RUIN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
TRISHA WOLFE

*BLURRED LINES SERIES*

# DEVIL IN RUIN

BLURRED LINES

TRISHA WOLFE

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“ Even the devil himself does not know where women sharpen their knives.

— LATVIAN PROVERB



*To my lil Monsters,  
He kicked the fucking door down for you <3*

## FROM THE AUTHOR

Full list of trigger and content warnings for *Devil in Ruin* can be found on the author's website here: <https://www.trishawolfe.com/standalone-novels-and-boxsets>

THUS LET ME AVOW

DOMINIC: TWO YEARS AGO

**M**y father was fucking insane. *Eccentric* was how other crime lords described him. The eccentric Raul Erasto, the great *mafia Veneta* don. Otherwise known as The Poet—a nickname imparted on him during his early criminal career due to his mad poetry ravings while he flayed the skin from his victims and left a trail of their eviscerated entrails as a token. The lunatic father, and the callous husband whose lawless reign built an empire of domination and brutality...and a dungeon of bones under his sprawling Italianate mansion.

My father was a monster.

I was raised on blood and carnage. Nurtured by violence and madness. Cultivated to rule an empire with a crazed malice even the most vile and wicked fear.

His voice is the monster inside my head.

Born an Erasto, right from the start, I had an extreme reputation to live up to.

Mafia legend has it that during my father's exclusive masquerade balls, the mad Venetian don would lure his enemies down to his wine cellar and inflict torture before burying them alive. After many years, rumors circulated, then soon other crime lords wanted in on the game, and the Cask Masquerade was born, aptly named after one of my father's most beloved tales, *The Cask of Amontillado*.

My father had an affinity, or more so an obsession, with Edgar Allan Poe, and being as the don hailed from Venice, his love of the Venetian Carnival was central to his event. The grim tale about a man who, amid the Carnival, lured his enemy to his wine vault and then entombed him alive spoke to my father's sadistic nature.

In truth, I didn't realize how bizarre it was until I was much older. By then, the masquerade had become a staple in the city

of Desolation and its hub of underground criminals, The Ruin.

During my father's reign, just like in Poe's story of Fortunato, the wine cellar under our home became a crypt for enemies of the collective crime syndicates. When I was a boy, I'd hear the screams echoing through the marble house, men slowly and painfully dying from their wounds and starvation down below.

Something like that leaves an imprint.

A stain.

I think it's the reason why my mother often looks at me with banked worry in her sharp gaze. She thinks I don't notice, but I've glimpsed that wariness in her pale eyes, the fear that my father's "eccentricity" has been passed down to her only child through his bloodline.

I fear it, too. When the bloodlust claws at the walls of my mind, talons raking and demanding I feed the ravenous hunger before the dark walls close in.

That bloodlust craves the screams when the silence gets too loud.

There is a crypt under my feet, and an enemy roaming my house, and the vicious bloodlust demands those screams now.

The current state of my home is a bustling commotion of noise and chaos, creating just the right amount of distraction for my purpose.

With deliberate steps, I move down the stairs toward the expansive foyer, where disorder teems and people swarm like worker bees under the queen's command. Fresh bouquets of white calla lilies and pink peonies are replaced with light-blue hydrangeas. Flower petals flutter to the imported Italian floor, walked on and dirtied to litter the porcelain like shrapnel confetti.

Decorations and last-minute details are frantically handled before the queen herself returns.

It's been a year since the accident that claimed my father's life, and Ellie Erasto is finally free to remarry, her wedding only hours away.

I could state how insulting it is for my mother to marry another man in the home my father built—but honestly, this is the least insulting thing Ellie has done.

As I am now the don of the *mafia Veneta*, I should have say over whom my mother marries. But, since burying the brutal bastard that was her husband for over two and a half decades, Ellie no longer takes orders from any man.

A point made clear when she went behind my back to negotiate her marriage contract to Ernesto Cassatto, *el padrino* of the *'Ndrangheta* New York syndicate.

My boots hit the landing with determination, and I turn toward Primo. My most malicious soldier hovers in a shadowed corner of the entryway keeping guard. Nodding once, I give him the command, and he immediately heads in the direction of my father's study.

Adrenaline surges the hollow cavities of my heart, flooding my nervous system with anxious energy that crawls beneath my skin until I'm forced to ball my hands into fists. My pulse slams my veins as I feel the weight of the Glock tucked in my waistband.

I stalk to the kitchen and nearly collide into one of the workers. She ducks her head. "Sorry, sir."

Ignoring her rushed apology, I locate Seb, my soldier awaiting his command at the end of the dining hall. Once issued, he moves swiftly, not far behind Primo.

Luca is the only man I have doing rounds outside of the guest room. For the past two hours, he's sent updates that Cassatto's guards are still stationed outside of the room.

I pull out my phone and shoot him a text with one word, his order to go straight to my mother and take her to the Catacombs.

Despite her betrayal, I will protect her. She's my mother, after all. A woman who commanded an empire after my father's death and raised a son in her own merciless image. She was born to this life and forged in the same hellfire I was.

In time, she will appreciate what I now have to do.

As I round the corner toward the study, I check the time. Primo and Seb should be in place.

By only utilizing a few of my men, I'm likely issuing my own death sentence. But any more and it would look suspicious. I would be watched much more closely. I wouldn't make it anywhere near Cassatto before I was taken out.

Most marriage discrepancies take place during the actual wedding event. Given Cassatto reigns over the most powerful organization on the east coast, he's no fool; he knows I have a huge fucking discrepancy with this arrangement.

What boss would simply hand over their whole empire without a fight?

That empire might be broken, but it's mine to rebuild.

If I die, I die fighting to restore my honor.

Since Cassatto has made himself my enemy, he will spend his afterlife buried in the crypt below my boots with the rest of the Erasto enemies.

With a rapid sweep around the hall, I roll my shirt sleeves up, then slip through the study door. I stalk to the oak bookcase and pull it forward. The Murphy door swings in, revealing the narrow passageway.

This corridor is a straight shot to the guest room.

The room where Cassatto retired on the eve of his wedding.

I grasp the handle of my gun and wrench the piece from behind my back as I storm down the dark hallway, my heart pounding in time with each quickening step. I pull the Glock slide back and chamber a round.

The door has been opened up ahead. A threadbare tapestry obstructs the view of the interior of the room but allows pinholes of light to bleed through. Before I reach my destination, a cold sensation prickles the back of my neck.

Something is off.

I rest my finger on the side of the trigger as I haul the tapestry aside.

The muffled sounds of a struggle tap my veins with ice. I enter the room with the barrel of my gun aimed. My gaze falls on the bare legs of a girl pinned beneath Primo on the king-sized bed.

*Where the fuck is Cassatto?*

Primo's hand is clamped over the girl's mouth. In the time it takes him to cut her nightshirt and for Seb to trap her wrists to the mattress, I've gauged the situation, and I make a snap decision for what needs to happen next.

This girl must die.

I have no idea who the fuck she is, but she's not supposed to be here. There's no way she can be allowed to leave this room and report what she's seen: three men with weapons sneaking into the room where Cassatto should be sleeping before his wedding day.

I approach the struggle with fire blistering my viscera, furious over the lost chance to take down my enemy.

Seb's large, inked hands restrain the girl's slender wrists. "The daughter," he says to me with a wicked blaze in his eyes. "Taking our spoils first, boss."

The floor beneath my booted feet shifts, knocking me off balance when his words penetrate the adrenaline choking my brain.

Cassatto's daughter.

*Fuck.*

I drag a hand down my face, releasing a string of curses under my heated breath. Shit just went from bad to fucked—and yet, it doesn't change the outcome. This girl will run to her father and rat us out.

Then a bullet will be put in my head.

Primo has her top torn open, exposing a lacy cream bra and the small swell of her breasts.

A red seam wounds the skin beneath her clavicle where his blade slashed through her shirt. He pinches her nipple through



the thin material. “Let’s see if the *’Ndrangheta* sluts taste as filthy as they look.”

I take a step closer, my decision cemented. I’ll grant this girl a mercy killing before my men savagely tear her virgin pussy apart. I twist the sound suppressor into place on my gun before lowering the long barrel to take aim.

And my eyes lock with hers.

The air is punched from my lungs. Gravity fails to hold my feet to the floor. In one suspended second, my soul is flayed, the demon haunting the shadowy corners of my mind exposed in light. The monster silenced for one fleeting heartbeat.

I am a devil gazing on what the angels envy.

Verses from my childhood claw up from the bowels of a disturbed past to rattle my soul, and this girl—this angel—is the closest thing to heaven I’ve ever seen.

As her amber eyes sear my flesh, pleading for help, my mind fractures. I can’t let her slip from my grasp like a grain of sand battling a stormy wave. Too young, too innocent, like the poem she hails from, this little Lenore will not die.

Goddamn, maybe I am just as fucking insane as my father. Because in a blink, I jerk the barrel of my gun to the left and pull the trigger.

The sharp whistle of the bullet sounds before blood mists the air. Primo’s head flops forward. His lifeless body drops on top of the girl and I ruthlessly kick him off. Her eyes haven’t left mine.

It takes the length of three wild heartbeats for Seb to realize what’s happened. Confusion twists the hard planes of his face before his reflexes kick in. He releases the girl’s arms and springs forward.

Gun knocked from my hand, I catch him by the shoulder and unsheathe the canted knife from the inside of my waistband, sending the sharp blade across the strained sinew of his throat.

The hooked tip tears the jugular from his neck, and a tide of red washes the girl’s bare skin as he gurgles his final breath. I

fling him to the side, away from her, and his body hits with a loud *thud*.

A knock sounds at the door. “Miss Cassatto? Is everything all right?”

Her large tawny eyes are still locked on me. Chest heaving, her bra and tan skin coated in blood, she refuses to release me from the intensity of her gaze.

She doesn't scream. She doesn't run. Whether from shock, I'm not sure—but as the doorknob jiggles and the guard on the other side gears up to break through, I have a small window to dart through the open door and escape.

Neither one of us move.

The *bang* of a shoulder ramming into the door, then the wood splinters. The door bursts open and three men rush the room, weapons drawn. They take in the sight of the blood-soaked girl, the two dead men on the floor, then me.

Shouts erupt. Furious demands for an explanation. Threats to my life.

Then a thick silence infuses the room as Cassatto enters.

For the first time since I looked at her, I drag my eyes away from the girl and face the man. I expect fear, or worry, or anger to crease his weathered face—some flicker of emotion which reveals his concern for his daughter. But the only thing I witness in his callously drawn features is satisfaction.

Instant realization hits me with a thunderous crash.

His daughter. In this room. *His* room.

The fucking filthy *'Ndrangheta* used his own flesh and blood as a shield. He suspected an attack before the wedding, and he was willing to sacrifice his daughter to protect himself.

The guard closest to Cassatto raises his gun higher and steps toward me. Cassatto lifts his hand to halt him. “Did you do this to your men?” he questions me.

He hasn't spared a look at the girl.

I look at her now, my gaze drawn to her long eyelashes that sweep high cheekbones when she blinks. Light freckles the same color as her whiskey eyes spatter the bridge of her nose. She pulls her torn shirt closed, her body trembling. She's as innocent as a fawn despite the layer of blood bathing her skin.

My gaze lowers to the deep cut that marks her flesh beneath her collarbone. She hasn't touched it, or shed one tear.

She's so beautiful the muscle caged in my ribs beats at a furious tempo and threatens to crack the bone walling my chest.

Accepting my fate, I let the knife drop from my hand and fall to my knees. "I killed my men," I say, my tone as sure as it is lethal. "And I would do it again."

Cassatto walks slow and measured steps around me. "Killing a member of your set is like killing family," he says. "Sometimes, this is necessary. In clan law, it is considered an honor killing to purify blood."

The *'Ndrangheta* are notorious for warring among their own families. Fuck their clan law. I didn't kill Primo and Seb to blot out a stain in my set, to purify my fucking tarred bloodline.

In the mafia, what I've done is considered a betrayal. I betrayed my men—men who trusted me with their lives—for *her*.

Cassatto notches his chin high as he stares down on me. "You swear fealty to me, Dominic Erasto?"

Without hesitation, I say, "Yes."

From this day forward, I pledge my life to the servitude of the *'Ndrangheta*, to the Cassatto clan. I revoke my birthright, my legacy, and I become one of them.

Yet the whole time I take the oath, damning my soul to the flames of hell, my eyes are on her.

She is the *cielo* (sky), the *sole* (sun), *angioletta*—my little angel.

And one day, she would be my death.

Obsession has a name.

Brianna Cassatto.

THE FURY OF A DEMON INSTANTLY  
POSSESSED ME

DOMINIC: PRESENT

To feed the monster, I have to draw blood.

My fist cracks against the hard outline of a jaw. The tight skin over my knuckles splits with stinging satisfaction. The dark-red blood welling from Gino's busted mouth fuels my next strike.

The wet *smack* of my fist connecting to his bloody flesh echos around the veranda.

"Boss..." Luca attempts to reach me past the red haze misting my vision. His voice is muted as the violent pulse of my heartbeat thuds chaotically in my ears.

He still calls me that, even though I lost that title two years ago, falling from grace like a wingless angel. I have the scars on my back to prove the demon I've become.

When the crunch of Gino's nose sounds above the raining blood spatter, my once devoted soldier backs off. There's no reaching me. Not tonight. Not when I can't put my fist through the face I truly want to mangle.

Instead, Gino here is taking my wrath as proxy.

The arms dealer was stupid enough to try to pass off defective ordnances in a recent trade. He's a greedy, solo mercenary. No one will miss him or come seeking retribution. I should just put the barrel of my gun in his mouth and pull the trigger.

But that would be far too quick, and not inflict near enough pain.

After what my mother confided in me tonight, I sought out a punching bag to alleviate the pent-up aggression.

Two fucking years' worth.

And Gino just happened to be stupid enough to show his face.

I drop another blow to that swollen face now, barely able to distinguish his smashed nose from his mutilated mouth. He's a literal bloody pulp.

With taxed effort, Gino holds up a shaky hand to halt my next strike. “Nic...please. I’ll make it right. Tell Cassatto I’ll make it right.”

His weak plea irritates me almost as much as his use of my name. Like I’m just Cassatto’s lackey, like I’ve never held the highest rank—like I’m just *Nic*.

Not Dominic Erasto, the don of the *mafia Veneta*.

A birthright stolen from me by my own blood.

“Friends call me Nic,” I say, glowering down at him. “Double-crossing pieces of shit don’t get that privilege.” I follow through with a bone-shattering kick to his face. “And this has nothing to do with Cassatto. It’s for my own fucking pleasure.”

This deviant bloodlust was instilled in me at the tender age of five. With sheer wrath and brutality, my father beat one of his capos to death with a baseball bat while I watched from my seat at the breakfast table.

Blood coated my scrambled eggs like ketchup. My father forced me to eat every bite.

My tiny hand gripped around a toy dump truck, I decided right then I’d never eat ketchup again, or play baseball. Didn’t really matter, though. By the age of twelve, I had already killed a man at my father’s command, and I was then a made man.

Mafia life is its own form of sport.

Since that moment, I’ve found I have a knack for anatomy. I studied every medical journal I could sneak past my father, learning the most lethal places to wound a man. I could take mercy on Gino now and crush his trachea, but like I told him, this isn’t business.

This is catharsis.

“Boss,” Luca says louder, “your tux is getting blood on it.”

I release the collar of Gino’s blazer and let him fall to the freshly trimmed grass. Elenore would have my head if I stained the Italian pavers.

Hand still fisted, I shake the excess blood from my inked knuckles as one of my crew hands me a handkerchief.

I clean the traitor's blood from my hands and drop the used rag over Gino's ruined face. When he regains consciousness, he's going to wish I'd put a bullet in his head.

Despite my fierce desire to spray a clip of bullets into the throng of guests, I did promise my mother no guns tonight. No dead men on Elenore's precious imported pavers or newly shined marble floors. It's the one night a year I'll keep this promise.

I glance down at the dark blood gleaming on the grass. "Get a hose and spray down the lawn," I command.

"You got it, boss." Luca is quick to order another guy to handle the mess.

"Don't call me that," I seethe, rolling my head to work out the strained muscles gathered in my shoulders. Quickly looking over my tux, I smooth out the wrinkles and use the rough pad of my thumb to rub at the blood splatter.

"Do you need to change, boss—Nic?" Luca asks, quickly correcting.

"Blood was its Avatar and its seal...the redness and the horror..." I mutter beneath my breath, the verse from *The Masque of the Red Death* slips out. It feels ominously suited for this evening.

Luca glances at Lenny, a skeptical furrow between his brows.

Out of respect, he'll never say it to my face, but I've heard the rumors. How I'm as psychotic as my father was. How I lost my empire and went mad and killed my own men. It's a very real possibility, and what feels like the only logical explanation for why I'd devote myself to a fiend like Cassatto.

Her face rises up from a forbidden channel of my mind to mock me.

"Just get him out of my sight," I say, motioning to Gino.

Luca snaps to and summons one of the guards standing at the veranda door. They gather the bloody heap into their arms and



haul Gino's near lifeless body toward the guesthouse at the far back of the grounds.

With one last glance over my tux, I decide to go as I am. Tonight, I'm wearing the evidence of my family's bloody legacy right on my pristinely pressed shirt for all to see.

After the night I swore fealty to Cassatto, he appreciated the way I spilled blood for him so much that he stripped me of my title and demoted me to an enforcer in the *'Ndrangheta* Cassatto clan.

The insult should've been met with my blade to his stomach.

But that night—just as this one—I found myself drawing blood and surrendering. Accepting the five lashes to my back that marked me as a member of the clan and, I suspect, Cassatto's amusement. His punishment to me for daring to think I could overthrow him.

He should've just killed me.

Bloodlust momentarily sated, I approach the guard at the front entrance of my home. He nods once in respect—what little I still command—and opens one of the high double doors of the mansion.

The walls of the long hallway are swathed in black satin. Dim candlelight flickers to illuminate the passage toward the ballroom. A cocooning effect meant to heighten the senses before guests enter into the main room and are exposed to the opulent stimulus.

My mother is dramatic.

As I enter the crowded ballroom, my senses are overburdened by the aroma of heady wine and sparkling lights from gaudy chandeliers. A sensory prompt that triggers every past memory of this event since I was a boy.

Tonight is the annual Cask Masquerade. Despite the tarnished reputation of the departed Venetian mob boss, for one night a year, the different crime syndicates still congregate under one roof to don masks and drink expensive Amontillado from flowing casks amid a Poe-themed celebration emulating the Carnival.

Since the unfortunate “accident” that claimed my father’s life, my mother has taken over hosting the masquerade. She’s kept the overall theme, but has made some changes to the main event.

No longer are enemies lured to the wine cellar to be chained and tortured and buried alive. Now, an invite-only exclusivity allows members to chain an honored guest of their choosing in the dungeon and inflict torture of a different nature.

I believe my mother’s intention was a deliberate “fuck you” to my father, but that’s a topic I avoid with her for obvious reasons. What Elenore does in her playroom is her business.

As if she senses my thoughts, like a bird of prey, my mother’s light-blue eyes home in on me from across the ballroom. She lowers the gold mask and arches a heavily lined eyebrow. Her expression conveys how unimpressed she is with my less than stellar appearance at her grand ball.

Correction: my *father’s* ball.

Where Elenore has made her second husband the guest of honor.

I may have hated the bastard, but I’d never dare insult my father’s memory in such a way.

Respect is given. Always.

But that’s my mother’s specialty: insulting the men in her life.

Her perfectionist fingerprint is everywhere. Surfaces are glossed to a high sheen. Casks of wine decorate the middle of the ballroom as fountains, and ornate masks adorn the cathedral-like walls. The theatrical clash of gold and black is meant to denote the festive Carnival of Venice.

This whole masquerade is one big ironic deception: a mask wearing a mask.

Near the end of his days, it became evident his mental deterioration had escalated. A man steeped in the old ways such as my father would never consent to any kind of evaluation.

Our family was approaching complete ruination before my father took a drunken fall down the stairs. Where his gun discharged. Shooting off his face.

I remember staring at the seared flesh, blown open to expose bone.

The accident was never investigated. The right pockets had been lined for years, and as long as those pockets kept getting lined after my father was six feet under, there would be no questions.

Besides, where would authorities start? Take your pick. The unified loathing of my father by every major crime faction was calling for his head. The only saving grace that spared my mother and I was my mother's pristine and lethal reputation.

But that only kept the wolves at bay for a short time.

After my father's funeral, as I became the youngest don in Desolation, the other syndicates sensed blood in the water, and it wouldn't be long before they'd strike.

An ember of rage smolders beneath my skin, and I swipe a flute from a passing tray. I down the champagne in one swallow, nose wrinkling at the fizz. I need something harder. From over the glass rim, I glimpse the sight of my bruised and blood-stained knuckles.

Elenore makes a subtle motion, instructing me to mingle with the guests. I catch sight of Marquez, the *consigliere* of the Mexican syndicate, approaching with his wife.

His wife's friendly smile falls when she's close enough to recognize the stains on my shirt as blood. Her grip on her husband's arm tightens and, with a curt nod from him, he directs their path in the opposite direction.

A crooked smile hikes my mouth as I nod to him in return. "The son of the *eccentric* don who allowed his empire to fall to ruin" the rumors boast. I'm simply dressed for the occasion.

My mother sends me a disappointed scowl. Albeit, to avoid her inevitable displeasure, I should have cleaned up. But I'm not here to impress the other syndicates, my mother, or

Cassatto. Especially not after the announcement that sent me on the warpath to draw blood.

I'm here to keep the last tattered remains of my territory marked.

Just a few years ago, when Elenore announced my succession to the throne of the Erasto empire as the Veneta don, I was barely eighteen, and so it was in title only. By using the sole male heir to the Veneta organization as a front, my mother was able to maintain control over my father's dealings from behind the scenes.

She's a very lucrative businesswoman—one who doesn't mind others assuming she's weak while she sticks a knife in their back. Sometimes, literally.

But even the cunning Ellie Erasto couldn't foresee how vastly her husband had fucked us.

My father was in debt to everyone.

And as a young don, the other crime syndicates watched me like a hawk watches its prey, a weak rodent just waiting to be picked off. If not for my mother's longstanding alliance with The Ruin that afforded me a level of protection, I probably never would've made it to see my nineteenth birthday.

But even then, my father's debts were too great. And when a don's head is the mark, all the eager, power-hungry players sharpen their knives with greedy anticipation.

In an effort to form an alliance with an outlier like myself, I took a stand against Carlos Carpella, the *Cosa Nostra* mob boss who numbered his days when he defected from The Ruin, the organized crime hub made up of every major crime faction in the city of Desolation.

With that thought, I spot Lucian Cross, the Madman of the Irish Syndicate, and his wife Violet as they waltz on the dance floor. Like the predator the hitman is, Lucian senses my stare, and his gaze seeks out mine through the throng of the softly lit ballroom.

I nod to him in recognition, and his wife sends me a warm smile, briefly lowering her hand from her husband's shoulder

to touch her pregnant belly. I'm not sure how far along she is, but by the size of her swollen belly, it looks like Lucian could be a father any day now.

I make a mental note to congratulate them in person before I escape the ball.

It's because of my alliance with Lucian and his syndicate that I maintained a measure of clout for my brief reign. By assisting him in the removal of his wife's treacherous uncle, Carlos Carpella, during their red wedding, I was able to negotiate deals again, proving myself to the other syndicates.

I had planned to start settling my father's debts in good faith right away.

But fuck if there isn't always another fucker waiting for their chance to steal your power.

The thing about crime is this: it's all about territory. And like someone once said, they're not making any more land. The warring to claim territory will never end. It's a constant battle to climb to the top, then once you're there, you have to fight even harder to keep your throne.

My father made a lot of bad deals and accrued even more bad debt. He fucked over bosses of organizations and gambled away half his amassed fortune.

The biggest debt of all was owed to the *'Ndrangheta* Cassatto clan, the most powerful crime family on the eastern seaboard.

Cassatto didn't come for me directly. That's not the swine's style. He wanted our family to pay my father's debt in a steady drip of blood, death by a million morbid papercuts.

Over the course of my short seat in power, Cassatto picked off my family one-by-one. Starting with my cousin Luigi, who was the closest thing I had to a brother. Cassatto promised to take a life until the debt was either paid, or every member of the Erasto family was six feet under to join my father.

This was a ploy. Cassatto didn't want my empire destroyed—he wanted it for himself.

It was territory he wanted to claim.

To end the bloodshed, I vowed to go after Cassatto myself. Stop the hemorrhaging. I'd sacrifice my life to put an end to my father's legacy of ruin, and pay the debt with my blood.

My mother may be fierce, but she's still a mother, and instead of losing her only child, she took it upon herself to go behind my back and make a deal with Cassatto.

Because there was one thing Cassatto wanted just as badly if not more than my empire.

The widow of his enemy.

The beautiful and fearless Ellie Erasto, a coveted mafia mistress of The Ruin.

By signing a marriage contract with Cassatto, Ellie became Elenore Cassatto, and her family came under the protection of the *'Ndrangheta*. Cassatto took control of my empire, and our debt to the Cassatto clan was paid in full. The trail of bloodshed ceased.

My mother believes she bought peace.

But what she did was more than undermine me, it was an insult that stripped me of any and all power and dignity.

She did not save a son. A boy still died that day. His reputation doused in gasoline and set aflame and burned to ash. The death of my reputation was worse than if I'd just fallen on my own blade.

And the moment I swore fealty to Cassatto instead of taking my revenge, a monster was born from the ruin.

As I've now served under Cassatto for two years, I've been at the front lines drawing the blood of his enemies. My body is inked with every kill, every wound that didn't end my life is a scar marking me for the *'Ndrangheta*.

The fire of indignation brims beneath the surface of my skin as I hunt down a real drink to smother the flames. I make my way to the bar, avoiding any further interaction with the other syndicates. It's not difficult. The tarnished son of The Poet is easily avoided, even at his own event.

I give the bartender my order, and soon a crystal tumbler is slid along the marble surface before me. Tossing the whiskey back, I let the satisfying burn linger in the back of my throat before I swallow the bourbon down.

When my mother became Elenore Cassatto, she became the most powerful mob wife along the east coast.

And I became a lowly clan enforcer.

A man with nothing to lose is the most dangerous.

Regardless of my oath, after the wedding, Cassatto systematically dismantled my empire, making it damn impossible for me to regain a faction strong enough to overthrow him.

My bloody reach for the throne may have failed the first time, but letting me live would be a threat.

I doubt his loyalty to my mother has been what's kept me alive. It's all too easy to make me disappear on a job. To be honest, I'm surprised Cassatto didn't take me out the moment his marriage to Elenore was sealed.

There is a constant current of distrust between us.

So how has two years gone by and both Cassatto and I are still breathing?

The harmonic rise of violins from the string orchestra pull at my awareness like a summons, and I turn to face the ballroom of masked, dancing guests. The waltzing slows as heads turn to acknowledge the man entering the room.

Draped in expensive Italian threads, Cassatto stands in the doorway, formidable but accepting greetings as he welcomes his guests. My jaw clenches as I watch him play the role my father once played at his own fucking event. I can feel my mother's observant gaze on me, anticipating my reaction.

But I don't look her way. My sole attention isn't even on that gray and decrepit bastard Cassatto.

Like a sucker punch to the gut, her presence hits me harder than any fist, knocking the air right from my lungs.

Adorned in a flowing gown of sheer red layers, she looks like she's been dipped in blood. The perfect color for a mafia princess with fire in her veins. Shoulders bare, tanned skin soft as silk. Wisps of her dark hair escape the updo that binds her unruly locks at the crown of her head.

Brianna.

The only goddamn reason I still draw breath.

She dons a black mask with swirls of red to match her dress, but I don't need to see her face to know what beauty is hidden beneath. The features of an angel that can slaughter a man with one unforgiving look.

Her dainty arm is hooked through her father's elbow as he guides my stepsister through the throng of guests.

My chest is on fire. Sinew cords my bones like barbed wire, my muscles strung too painfully tight. I don't know what I want more: to stalk to the guesthouse and splash the stucco walls with Gino's blood, or wrap my hands around Bria's slender neck to make the pain stop.

I push the tumbler toward the bartender. "Another. A double."

When I feel my mother's presence draw near, I turn a hard gaze on the extravagant hostess. Elenore coasts up beside me and lowers her mask, her dyed platinum hair a shade lighter than the white gold of the mask. Her stony eyes soften as she studies me.

"You know, Nic, you could have married that little Cassatto girl," she says, a hint of mischief in her throaty voice.

I huff an amused breath.

"Exactly," she says with a forced sigh. "You wouldn't hear of marrying Ernesto's niece. So what choice did you leave us? The alliance fell on my head. It's not as if I had another child to marry off. And with the way you're going..."

She makes a show of waving to one of her guests before she returns her attention to me, head canted in disapproval as she glowers at the rusty dots on my shirt.



My mother likes to remind me about this often. As if any other marriage contract would have voided my father's debt to Cassatto. It wouldn't have, and there was no way I could marry Cassatto's niece. She was a child. Sixteen, for fuck's sake.

Yet, even as I think this, my inner devil taunts with a perfectly clear image of Bria at that same age. Her nightshirt slashed open, blood drenching her skin and soaking her tiny cream bra where I could make out the shape of her oval nipples.

I shut down the memory with a slam of the tumbler. Whisky sloshes over the rim and splashes my bloodstained knuckles.

My mother takes the hint to get off this subject.

I drain the remaining whisky. I have no plans to marry to appease Elenore. At twenty-three, I have a few years before I'm required to ally myself with a wife.

Besides, no marriage contract then or now would change my fate. Cassatto had his sights set on my mother and our empire. He was going to take what he wanted one way or the other.

Marriage or war.

Two favorite pastimes of the mafia.

"Oh, Nic." My mother frowns and swipes her hand down the blood-splattered placket of my tux shirt. "Just...be cordial. It's not as if you have to fuck Ernesto."

"*Madre Gesù*—" I curse.

She laughs, her raspy voice sounding over the string orchestra. "Ah. There's my son's lovely baritone." Her genuine, endearing smile makes a rare appearance.

My jaw tightens, but soon I cave under her even rarer vulnerability.

My mother protected me when the vipers of the underworld were vying for my head before I came of age. She's done unspeakable things for the love of her family—and that is why I will always defend her.

There is nothing in this world thicker than blood.

But my mother became too comfortable in her temporary role as mistress of my empire, and she stepped way out of bounds when she negotiated an alliance with Cassatto.

A grave mistake I will be forever paying the price for.

I expel a heavy breath, releasing the tension from my lungs. “I’ve served under the bastard all this time,” I say, my hands throbbing with the fresh bruises. “I’ve been more than cordial.”

I’ve been a loyal fucking dog.

A pet stepson the fucker can wield as a weapon with no blood ties to his vast kingdom.

My gaze darts to the area of the ballroom where the guest of honor is flanked by his junior clan members and guards.

I try to avoid the red dress vying to steal my attention, and finally turn toward my mother. “You know my feelings,” I say to her. “My voice is best left out of tonight’s festivities.”

I’m not disrespecting Elenore. Real respect comes with a healthy dose of fear and moderate loathing. We have to be cruel to protect those closest to us and, truthfully, she understands this best of all.

My father was a sadistic bastard, and my mother suffered his abuse longer and far worse than I ever did.

She did what she had to in order to protect us.

“Your voice is needed, *amato figlio*, because you are the Veneta don.”

My molars gnash together. “What lies you tell yourself, Mother. Impressive.”

She clears a lock of my dark hair from my forehead affectionately. “That is your future, Nic. You will be the don again. Of a greater empire than your father could have ever conceived.” She drops her voice lower. “Ernesto won’t live forever.”

I cock an eyebrow. Knowing my mother, that vague statement could be taken as a threat.

“Your word carries just as much weight,” she says, and levels me with a serious look. “When Ernesto officially announces Brianna’s engagement—”

A growl works its way from the depths of my chest, effectively silencing her. “Like I said before, that’s none of my concern.”

The fine wrinkles around her mouth deepen as her features draw together in a stern glare. “Your sister’s engagement is absolutely your—*our*—concern, Dominic Raul Erasto.” Her nostrils flare with her severe inhale. “Who Brianna marries will determine everything, my dear son.”

I’m not sure what drives the red-hot poker farther under my skin: Elenore’s use of my father’s name to call me out, or her use of *sister*.

My next action after this fucking ball is to head straight to the guesthouse and disembowel Gino. It’s a far wiser choice than interrogating the guests in search of the man Bria has been promised to and running a blade through him.

I choke back the anger and straighten my back, pulling myself up to my full height. “And why hasn’t he yet?” I demand, facing Elenore. “Why hasn’t Cassatto officially announced it?”

My mother smoothes a hand down her black sequined gown before casting her predatory gaze out over the dancing and mingling guests. “All I could ascertain from Ernesto was that there’s a delay with the contract,” she says. “You know how these things go, the fine details to iron out. But, I felt you should know it’s coming.”

The flash of concern in my mother’s creased features says too much. The ever observant Elenore was worried I’d fly into a jealous rage and stab Bria’s suitor through the eye.

My mother would never accuse me of harboring a forbidden lust for my stepsister; she’s too cautious for that. But she would do everything in her power to dissuade it in her own covert way.

Since, one, it would hinder her plans.

And, two, she’s not yet ready to bury her only son.

When I don't deny her veiled remark, she presses on. "You have so much of my stubbornness in you, Nic. And god forbid, so much of your father's impatience. A terrible combination. Don't be so nearsighted and focus only on the short-term. You've been able to swallow your pride and devote your allegiance to Ernesto—"

A mocking laugh slips free. "I was *forced* to," I say, baring my teeth in a leering smile. "You gave me no other option, *dear mother*."

My words are the truth, and yet, a tiny thorn of guilt festers around my stone heart.

That's not the sole reason I swore allegiance to Cassatto.

With a frown, my mother says, "You did so, regardless, in order to keep your life. So you can play along for a short while longer until it's finally our time, Nic."

Her mask slips back into place. Not the gold one she carries in her hand, but the cold and callous mask of a mafia mistress who has been conditioned by the harshest elements.

I drop my gaze to the empty crystal tumbler on the bar and tip the glass. The last dregs of amber liquid slosh at the bottom, the same beautiful color of her eyes.

I have no reason to be here tonight other than to inflict torture on myself.

As if reading my thoughts, Elenore says, "When the engagement is made public, your approval of your sister's marriage contract must be observed by all, especially Ernesto. Whoever she's been promised to will rise when Ernesto falls, and you cannot appear as a threat to Brianna's husband before then, Nic. This is how we play to win."

The word *sister* burrows deep beneath my flesh. I have the sudden urge to unsheathe my knife and carve it out.

My hand tightens around the glass. The cuts on my knuckles pulse with white-hot heat. "Whatever you say, Mother."

"You will be the don, *amato figlio*." She touches my arm reassuringly, her tone certain. "I made sure of that once, and I

promise—”

Her words stop short, forcing me to cast a glance over my shoulder.

“Here comes our lovely family now,” she mutters under her breath. My mother inhales a fortifying breath and perks up, fixing her practiced smile into place. “Do make sure to wish your sister a happy birthday, Nic.”

The reminder spears me right in the middle of my sternum. Bria turned eighteen this week. Two years of censoring my thoughts, forcing my roving gaze away from her body, and now one of the barriers that has kept me in line has suddenly been torn down.

Cassatto heads this way, towing his daughter along. His guards form a wide arc behind him. Close if needed, but giving the illusion that Cassatto is a strong boss who stands on his own. Never mind his feeble gate that gives his growing physical weakness away.

The young woman on his arm is not there to show his treasured esteem for his daughter; she’s a crutch placed there to help keep him steady.

I reach into my tux inseam and produce a black mask. Placing the string over my head, I situate the mask over my eyes, then kiss my mother’s cheek.

“Don’t worry, Mother,” I say in a hushed tone. “If your husband becomes too much of a burden, you can always have Cross pay him a visit. Although, with Cassatto’s reputation, you’ll both have to be more creative than a flight of stairs this time.”

She turns flared eyes on me in warning, but quickly composes her features before our “family” closes in.

Though I’ve known the truth all this time, we’ve never openly spoken of how Elenore hired a hitman to make my father’s death look like an accident.

But, here we are, and there’s no affair more ironically appropriate than a masquerade to start removing our masks.

As Cassatto approaches, I lower my head to give a respectful greeting. He extends his weathered hand, and I accept the handshake, the gesture forced despite conducting ourselves in a mostly civil behavior for observers since he placed a ring on my mother's finger and the scars on my back.

I turn to face Bria, my forearms tense. I instantly regret not beating Gino to death as I lock eyes with her past the masks disguising our faces. The depth of those amber eyes eviscerates my soul, and I want to savagely murder the man who will look into them daily.

I lean down and place a kiss to her cheek. Her scent of gardenias in the evening fires through my receptors with molten, destructive force. I clench my jaw as I pull away, my hand balling into a fist.

It's like I've been cursed. The moment she's in my field of vision, every torturous story and poem I was able to escape when I put my father in the ground whispers in my ear. Of haunting eyes and vengeful angels and tragic, immortal love.

My father may be the voice of my monster, but she...she is my madness.

"Hello, Brianna." My voice comes out guttural as I throttle all emotion from my tone.

"Dominic," she replies in kind.

Just one word—my name issued in her sexy cadence—pours liquid fire into my veins.

Crossing my wrists before me, I stand composed, shoulders rolled back as I look between father and daughter. "Happy birthday, by the way," I tell her. "I hope you did something fun."

Her desirable red lips pull into a smile, but the action doesn't meet her whiskey-hued eyes. "I did, thank you. My family in Calabria planned a birthday dinner. It was nice."

I hold her gaze a moment longer, hungry to remove the mask that prevents me from seeing the smattering of freckles that lightly dust the bridge of her nose. I force my gaze to break away.

Cassatto has lost interest in the formal and uncomfortable conversation. He moves away from his daughter and wraps a possessive arm around my mother's waist.

I don't push Bria for any further details. Instead, we turn to watch the dancing couples on the ballroom floor. Her nearness is like an electric current lashing at my body. I can't focus on anything other than her presence so close, like a black hole consuming every particle of my being.

I take a purposeful step to the side, seeking air not infused with her intoxicating scent so I can fucking breathe.

Her frame noticeably stiffens. She's uneasy around me. She has been since the moment I ruthlessly slaughtered two men before her eyes. Since that first encounter, I have given her no reason to be anything but fearful of me.

While I've kept my physical distance, I threatened every man in her vicinity to keep their eyes off her, to not even speak to her, or else their spinal cords would be ripped out through their mouths. Her two bodyguards answer to me. I've made it clear my "sister" is my responsibility to protect.

And when we've been forced into the same room and I can't temper the deviant thoughts and need to touch her...anger is the emotion I summon.

Bria has seen no other side of me these past two years other than the feral killer who takes life without remorse.

I seal my eyes closed as the violins swell to an unearthly crescendo, piercing the acoustics of the room. The shrill octave chills me, just as her imploring gaze did that night.

From the peripheral of my vision, I make out the white scar beneath her clavicle. An ache burrows beneath my ribs, the anger still alive and stirring my blood.

I have killed for her. I have killed my own men for her. Every command from Cassatto to take a life, I have taken that life in vow to her.

Loving a woman I can never have is hell. But I will spend eternity in that hell willingly, as long as I make sure no other man can have her either.

So whoever has been contracted to be her husband better pray to the mother fucking saints I kill him quickly, or else I will revel in glutting the monster with the marrow from his bones.

I need no other reason to kill the man Bria is promised to. I just need the opportunity.



LEAVE MY LONELINESS UNBROKEN

BRIANNA

**T**he lingering feel of Nic's mouth on my cheek flushes my body with heat.

My whole being vibrates with an intense awareness of him. I inhale a cooling breath of his classic scent. Clean ocean and dark notes of a storm, the merciless waves beating the shore.

After all these months apart, he hasn't changed, not even his cologne.

Nine months spent at a private school in Reggio Calabria for my senior year has done little to douse the torrid emotions that tear through me whenever he's near. I had hoped the distance would sever the hold he has over me—the way he consumes my thoughts, the way my body feels suspended, waiting for even the smallest command from him, so I can move, can breathe.

I train my gaze ahead, unfocused on the ballroom of motion as my peripheral appreciatively tracks his strong silhouette outlined by leanly carved muscle. Beneath his tailored tux, his skin is a mosaic of ink; beautiful blackwork art in contrasting shades that took hours to perfect. Script merges with a dark rose on his neck, and a graphic skull covers the back of one hand.

The simple black mask shields the top half of his face, but I can still make out his eyes, those coal orbs darker than the shadows which frame them.

His features are in a constant state of broody. When he doesn't realize I'm looking, however, and I catch a flash of his smile, the arresting beauty of it seizes my heart. I used to think that, if Nic ever smiled at me fully, I would combust on spot and burn to ash.

He is that brutally striking, but it's the glimpses I catch of him when he believes he's alone—the small window into his mind—that clenches my heart. Nic reading an old, dusty book in the corner of his father's study. The intense, inward stare he

gets when he's deep in thought. The way he commands action with one carefully chosen word rather than a generic threat. And when he disappears inside himself, the lines of softly uttered poetry that sometimes slip past his lips.

Some say he's mad like his father was. The Poet, they called him.

Maybe so. There's a furious blaze behind his eyes that used to make me wilt beneath that pitch-black gaze. Nic harbors a thirsty bloodlust for pain that intimidates the most feared killers.

He's smart, intelligent. Almost to a frightening degree. He's not like either of my bodyguards, or any of the clan. Nothing like the men I've grown up around in this dark underworld. There's something deeper, darker buried within Dominic Erasto that the mafia can't touch, yet he shields that piece of himself behind an impenetrable mask he refuses to remove.

Especially for me, the loathed daughter of the man he set out to kill when he stormed my room. No matter what my father wants me to believe, I know that's the truth of that night.

I was simply in the way.

"Nic, why don't you escort Brianna in a dance," Elenore suggests, startling me from my thoughts.

On reflex, our gazes clash. Tightness rims Nic's mouth before he directs a glare at his mother.

"Your sister has just returned to us after so long," Elenore continues. "It would be lovely for our guests to witness the two of you together on the dance floor. You're both so stunning tonight."

I notice how Elenore's stone-blue gaze first hardens on Nic's chest before she pans over to me with a vibrant smile. My stepmother often says one thing while thinking another. She's always thinking, always cunning.

Tension thickens the air around us, and I open my mouth to alleviate Nic of the obligation, but my *papà* flashes me a stern look. "Brianna. Go. Entertain my guests." His tone and words are clipped to disguise the wobble in his voice.

I lower my head in obedience. Nic is quick to deliver them both a curt nod before he rolls his shoulders and extends his arm out to me in offer.

A tangle of anticipation and unease knots my stomach. I expel a breath to loosen the tightness in my chest as I lift my chin and force a smile. I try not to let him feel me shake as I slip my arm through the crook of his elbow.

Rigidness cords his body, and that somehow makes me feel even smaller next to him. Like a delicate figurine, one he can crack at the slightest touch.

Bolstering my resolve with an edge of disdain, I lift the hem of my gown and allow Nic to walk me into the dense flow of lavish gowns and tuxedos. The women are draped in custom designer dresses, as if they stepped right off the Milan runway. The men are an eclectic blend of gaudy wealth meets mafia chic, their masks making them appear even more nefarious, some with elongated beaks, others with horns.

The Carnival masks should be frightening, but it's the faces beneath that drive terror into the hearts of their victims.

Decorations glitter with precious stones and gems beneath the delicate lighting, the chandeliers above strung like diamonds across the cathedral ceiling. The decorative casks of wine give off a soft glow as red wine flows from one golden barrel to the next in a cascading waterfall of fountains.

The whole atmosphere of the masquerade is timeless and romantic, and as Nic spins me into his arms, I could pretend we're sheltered by this dark and enchanting realm, hidden by our masks, free to touch and taste and feel...

But the cocooning effect is broken almost immediately when his fierce eyes meet mine.

This is not a lovers' waltz.

As he takes my hand in his, I feel the fresh cuts on his knuckles. The dried blood. The brutality that always encases him.

His eyebrows draw together over his mask, the planes of his face hardened into a grave expression. He selects a location

close to the string orchestra, where the music is loud enough to drown out the erratic beat of my heart.

His frame is unyielding as he moves me into position. We've danced before at events. At Christmas, and New Year's Eve. I long ago memorized the touch of his rough hands on my body. He always places his palm center, right above my lower back. The proper placement.

He follows suit now, holding me at an even more respectable distance from his body. He looks down and spares me one glance from beneath his mask before he steps forward to lead me in the waltz.

I follow his commanding steps, our movements in time and synced. Choreographed. Robotic.

The uncomfortable silence between us strings my nerves tight, and I blurt, "How was your year?"

Nic's gaze stays aimed ahead. He barely makes an effort to respond. "Fine."

Heat flushes my cheeks. I'm annoyed at the way his indifference still affects me. The bruised ego of a little girl with a secret crush on her stepbrother.

It's not like I didn't know how wrong it was to feel an attraction to him. I knew, and yet that didn't stop me from pining for him and trying to get his attention and wanting him to touch me...or just talk to me...

I push those wounded feelings down beneath the disgust that has now taken up residency in the pit of my stomach, and try to ignore the way my heart batters my chest, betraying me as the haunting moan of the cello further heightens my emotions.

Gaze aimed at his broad chest, I notice the specs of blood along his white shirt, what Elenore must have seen. I wonder who was at the receiving end of Nic's wrath tonight, and if Nic left them alive.

The sight should disturb me, should make me fear my stepbrother even more, but I'm strangely relieved. Selfishly, I hope Nic killed the person. He's always calm after he returns

from a job, like the momentary peace within the eye of a storm.

With the dexterous moves of a man who takes life with skilled hands, he turns me around the room, every dip and sway sharp, precise.

He's always exact in every move he makes. But I have one memory of Nic where—for a fleeting moment—I saw something untamed and feral.

When he stood over me, the hilt of his knife gripped in his hand, chest heaving and dark eyes pooled with fury. Three heartbeats—the length of time it took for Nic's eyes to soften after he slit a man's throat. And they softened on me, driving my fear and pain of the attack far from my mind, my body aching with a heat I'd never felt before beneath his intense gaze.

He has never looked at me like that since.

But that one memory of him has been what's kept me longing, hopeful, obsessed that every time I glimpsed just a flicker of burning embers in his eyes, that it was for me, no matter how prohibited.

That memory was the root of my deception, and I angrily shut it down now, banishing it from my thoughts.

I'm no longer that naïve girl.

With boldness I barely manage, I tilt my head upward and arch my back, feeling reckless and forcing Nic to look down at his dance partner. His mouth is bracketed in hard lines, nostrils flared. Irritation etches the sharp curve of his jawline.

This is the truth of how Nic sees me—like the daughter of Cassatto, like I'm simply a mafia princess waiting to be married off.

Like I'm an obstacle in his way.

As my *papà* has no sons, my only purpose in this life is to marry a powerful man and make a profitable alliance for the clan, for my father.

I drag in a breath, Nic's cologne clawing my lungs as I desperately seek to escape the searing ache. He doesn't release me from his penetrating gaze, making me feel trapped.

As the music builds, Nic dips me, lowering my body to hold me at an angle beneath him. I ready myself to be lifted, but he keeps me dipped a beat too long. Cool air touches my cleavage as the bodice descends an inch too low, exposing the tops of my breasts.

Tipping my head upward, I catch sight of Nic's gaze as it wanders over my chest. My nipples tighten under his intense perusal. Then I follow his line of sight to the scar along my collarbone—the scar inflicted on me the night of the attack by one of his own men.

Before his stare becomes obvious, he effortlessly draws me upright, immediately commencing the dance.

A weight bears heavily on my chest, the scar aflame and pulsing with renewed pain as if his eyes have sliced me with a fresh wound.

What I see banked behind his mask is not shame or guilt or god, even lust.

It's regret.

I'm seconds away from abruptly ending the dance when I feel Nic's hand graze lower, below the proper location on the small of my back. Heat curls in my belly as I chance a look up into his shadowed face.

"I suppose I should also congratulate you on your engagement," he says around his locked jaw.

Shocked by the sudden sound of his voice, it takes me a moment to process his words. The gravelly tenor is a flame licked over my skin, and I can't help the tremble that follows in its wake.

"How did you find out?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

His chuckle is mocking and gruff. "Nothing stays secret within these walls," he says, spinning me in the opposite direction of

the orchestra.

His statement feels more like an accusation, or a threat. As if I was daring to try to keep my engagement from him.

The gold ring that bears the Cassatto crest weighs heavily on my finger, and I try not to look at it, knowing soon an engagement ring will replace the heirloom.

I flew home the day after my birthday, and I wasn't inside the house five minutes before my father ordered me into his office where he told me there was a marriage contract in place.

I've known for less than twenty-four hours that my future has been decided.

"I was just made aware yesterday," I say, the words falling free on an unstable breath.

His brow furrows, but I'm not sure if his expression conveys confusion or annoyance. His hand grips mine more securely, his clutch almost painful, and the fierce, destructive desire rises within me to lace my fingers through his and cling even tighter.

"You don't seem bothered by the arrangement," he says.

A bite of anger gnashes at my patience. "I was trying not to think about it tonight," I admit to him. "Two weeks isn't much time, so I wanted to—"

"Two weeks?" The growl pitched below his incensed words is unmistakable.

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, giving myself a second to collect my thoughts before I spit them out. "Yes. Two weeks," I repeat. "In a very short time, I will be given to Salvatore Carpella, and I'm barely even eighteen. That is my future."

He slows our movements, the dance near stalling, as his gaze narrows into a lethal glare. His chest rises with a quick intake of air, and his tux rubs abrasively against my gown.

Nic's eyes drop, fixed on my neck, where I feel the pulse in my vein quicken under his predatory stare. I fear making any sudden move.



Nic all but tears down the invisible barrier between us as he grasps the fabric of my gown at my back. His body tenses, the sinew of his neck cords tight, and those eyes behind the mask darken to pitch-black with dangerous intent.

A muscle tics along his tight jaw and, releasing my dress, his hand deliberately travels up my back and wraps around the nape of my neck. He draws me against his chest, placing his mouth next to my ear.

“Salvatore Carpella,” he seethes, the question implied in his deathly tone. “That is who you’re promised to?”

My heart raps frantically against his hard chest, as if trying to beat free. My breasts ache from the pressure. “Yes,” I whisper in confirmation.

The music heightens into a crescendo, the rising whine of violins pebble my flesh with goose bumps. A warning shot fires through me, but I’m already filling the silence between us before my brain receives the signal.

“Regardless of his age—” I swallow the hot ache “—he’s the don of the *Cosa Nostra*. Of course my *papà* would arrange the most beneficial—”

Nic’s fingers curl into my hair and tug my head back, effectively silencing me. He stares down into my face, all fire and wrath and feral beast barely concealed behind his stone-cold façade.

My breath climbs to match the furious tempo of his, our chests burning with friction against each other. I’m scared to look away, scared to blink, frightened the intensity I see in him will disappear.

It’s clear now Nic was not made aware of all the details of the marriage contract.

I search his face, trying to determine what he’s thinking, feeling. Wondering if he’s thinking about that night, questioning how different his life would be right now had he just sank that bullet into my head.

Because that is what should’ve happened two years ago.

After all this time, the pining, naïve girl finally realized that this is where his seething anger and hatred for me stems from. That is the regret I see carved in his features when he looks at the scar on my chest.

I lick my lips, and his heated gaze drops to my mouth. I shiver as his hand tightens in my hair, the empty ache between my thighs building with the violent beat of my heart.

“You look like you want to either kiss me or kill me,” I say, a light whisper that traces his lips. “Which is it, brother?”

My daring words catch him off-guard. He’s quick to mask it—but I see the brutal truth in the split second my accusation lowers his defenses. That night, when he stood over me, the barrel of his gun aimed down, that chambered bullet was intended for my head.

Only something stopped him.

It could’ve been that even a cold-hearted, ruthless killer like Nic couldn’t bring himself to kill a young girl.

Or that Lenore would be furious if Nic allowed her fiancé’s daughter to be savagely murdered on the eve of her wedding.

But, for so long, I had allowed myself to believe that, maybe, whenever I’d catch him watching me, his hardened gaze tracking my movements like a predator waiting for its prey to step out of the brush, he was fighting the same intense attraction I was.

I had secretly hoped that whatever stopped him from pulling the trigger would also be the thing that, once I turned eighteen, would help him see past our parents arrangement and no longer view me as just a girl, his stepsister, and choose me, *us*.

“Bria,” he says my name in warning, the first time he’s used my nickname, and it collars my throat in a tight grip.

I raise my chin higher. “*Nic*,” I fire back, refusing to let him see the tremble of my lips. “Is there something you want to say to me?”

Our waltz has slowed to a crawl on the dance floor. He stares down at me like I’m some strange, foreign creature, and this is

the very first time he's ever lain eyes on me.

The fact is, Nic is meeting Bria for the first time—the woman who has taken her life into her own hands.

My father revealed something else to me in his office, the reason for the rushed engagement, why it's so imperative I marry Salvatore quickly.

My *papà* is dying.

In the underworld, a weakened don is prey for the wolves. The syndicates will descend on his territory and take it over piece by bloody piece. Without an heir in place, his own men will greedily make deals and forge alliances with organizations to earn protection, tearing the *'Ndrangheta* Cassatto clan apart from the inside.

And I'm staring at the man who will be among the first to make the move.

In two weeks, the don of the *Cosa Nostra* will have a claim to what is rightfully Nic's throne.

My father might despise that I'm a girl, but that is only because he has always seen me as weak. A tiny, fragile thing in need of constant protection.

Allying me to the *Costa Nostra* is a move to protect not only his legacy, but his only child.

Fathers governed by this ruthless world are ruthless in their love.

Nic's next words are uttered with precision, demanding only obedience. "Go to your room. *Now.*"

With forced effort, Nic releases me, leaving my body a trembling mess.

Backing away, he straightens his tux lapels and cautiously glances around the ballroom, making sure he hasn't drawn attention.

Then, with one last furious look directed my way, he pins me with the silent order to "do as told" before he stalks off

through the throng of dancing couples toward the glass doors of the terrace garden.

A kaleidoscope of emotions swarm me, the mounting feelings all verging into one blaring warning:

*Run.*

But I can't cower under Nic's wrath. Not tonight. I've made my own vow, and I'm here to see it through.

As I take a step off the ballroom floor, I'm at least thankful for the clarity he's afforded me in finally seeing the truth of us. It's what was needed in order to accept the second half of our story.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who worshiped the gallant knight who stormed the tower room and saved her from the bad men. Who, even while facing off against the dragon of her father, did not take his eyes off her. She believed he was there to protect her.

That he would always protect her.

He looks at me not with desire but hatred. Not with tender adoration but resentment.

I have to accept the man who I thought I once loved, despite how wrong and prohibited, has always been my enemy. An enemy who would carve out my heart before he would ever covet it.

So I'm thankful to Nic tonight for finally lowering his mask and showing me his true face, one of a monster.

It makes killing the man who once spared my life that much easier.

ONCE CONCEIVED, IT HAUNTED ME  
DAY AND NIGHT

## DOMINIC

**A** black, moonless night swathes the sky above the terrace garden. A reflection of my soul, or whatever remains of it. Any piece of my humanity not tainted by the blood I've spilled is buried too deeply to excavate tonight.

As soon as Bria revealed a name and put a face to the fucker who will soon take possession of her, I couldn't see past the flames searing my vision. The violent urge to wrap my hand around her neck and strangle her silent rose up so fiercely, I had no choice but to leave her.

*...kiss me or kill me.*

Her words torment me, that I lost control for even a moment where she got a glimpse of the demon lurking in my depths, and she didn't run...

She should have.

Right then, I could have done either.

The *snick* of the glass door closing comes from behind. I haul a deep breath into my constricted lungs and turn to face Lucian Cross. As I stormed toward the terrace, I made eye contact with him, a subtle signal that we needed to talk.

The sounds of the ball bleed through the stained glass, the garden cocooned with enough muffled noise to give the illusion of privacy, but I lower my voice to keep the conversation between us.

"We have a problem with Salvatore Carpella," I say, tugging my bowtie loose to alleviate the restriction around my throat.

Lucian's eyebrows draw together. "What problem?"

His confusion is warranted. Since Lucian and Violet's wedding, when our syndicates joined forces to take out Carlos Carpella, any disagreements with the *Cosa Nostra* have been settled swiftly and without incident.

Lucian made sure of that by burning the Carpella mansion to the ground with Renz, Carlos's son, inside its walls. The only Carpella left to take over the organization was Salvatore, Violet's own father. A slimy and weak mob boss to say the least, but the Cross's have been able to maintain a level of control over Salvatore to keep the alliance strong.

"Did you know about Salvatore's marriage contract?" I demand of my friend.

Lucian's sharp features strained, he sends a glance over his shoulder into the lighted ballroom before he meets my gaze again. His shoulders retain a measure of tension as he sinks his hands in his pockets. "Cassatto arranged the contract for his daughter," he says, putting the pieces together.

My jaw clenches as impatience grips my nerves. "Yes," I confirm.

"No. I wasn't aware of the marriage contract," he says, but he doesn't seem bothered by this information.

Impatience sings my already short fuse. "I'd figure you'd be a little more concerned about Violet's father forming an alliance without your knowledge."

He nods slowly and takes a step forward. "I don't see how this is a bad thing, Nic." Before I can interrupt, he removes a hand from his pocket and holds up a finger. "Hear me out. Both Salvatore and Cassatto are ancient, practically dinosaurs in their organizations. They're a dying breed. In a few short years, maybe less, you'll look to inherit the Veneta territory again. And you'll have an alliance already in place with the *Cosa Nostra* through your stepsister and Salvatore."

Rage threatens to tear the sinew from my bones as every muscle in my body tenses. "I want my empire back now."

Lucian cocks his head, studying me. "Why now? You've been patient for the past two years under Cassatto's reign. What's changed..." His sentence trails off as he tosses another glance through the glass doors. Lucian locates Bria in the crowd, her dress signaling like a red flag. "Ah, I see." Then his gaze flicks

over my tux. “That explains your choice of blood as a fashion statement tonight.”

That remark drives the fire deeper beneath my skin. “It’s not what you think.”

“Then the thought of Salvatore fucking Brianna on her wedding night doesn’t make you go feral with jealous rage?” The smug curl of his mouth begs to be punched.

The unwanted image of Salvatore claiming Bria in just two short weeks tears through my mind with destructive force. I fist my hands. My knuckles split the healed-over cuts wide open.

“Don’t patronize me, Lucian,” I warn him. “As if you didn’t try to burn the whole *Cosa Nostra* to the ground for a woman.”

His eyebrows wing up. “You’re right. But there was bad blood in place, a revenge debt that needed to be settled.”

“Cassatto owes me a debt for the lives he’s taken from my family,” I say, my tone dropping in dangerous warning.

“And again,” Lucian says, drawing closer until he’s able to look me directly in the eyes, “you’ve waited all this time to exact that revenge. You knew this day would come, that Brianna would be contracted for marriage. What was your plan, Nic? To simply kill every man she’s promised to one-by-one?”

My back teeth grind, and I look away, out over the illuminated garden. “If you’re going to use logic, mother fucker...”

His laugh is a deep boom. Anyone else, I’d have unsheathed my knife and eviscerated him by now. But I have bled with Lucian. We’ve taken lives together. There should be bad blood between us, as he’s the man who took my father from this world, but as the job was commissioned by my mother, I can’t hold any grudge against him.

Rather, he saved me the unpleasant task of having to kill my father myself.

In truth, Lucian’s guidance has replaced the man who taught me the rules of this world with a fist and baseball bat. I respect



his opinion, even if it's not what my wrath seeks to hear.

Lucian walks up and places an inked hand on my shoulder. "I won't let my friend get himself killed by acting on impulse if I can help it," he says. "Wait it out, Nic. Claim your spoils in the end and spare the war. Don't repeat his mistakes."

He has the decency not to use my father's name or my relation to him.

I swallow the jagged lump in my throat. "I can't do that," I confess.

Lowering his hand, he sighs. "All is not fair in love and war," he says. "Remember that. You risk losing her either way."

I would be the villain.

I will kill mercilessly to stop any man from taking what I vowed to protect, what I have already claimed as mine.

Bria didn't run from a small taste of my darkness—but what would she do if she came face-to-face with the monster that's always brimming just beneath the surface.

"Then stop the wedding from happening," I say, my tone unyielding. "Violet can make this happen. She has sway over her father."

He rubs the back of his neck, already dreading bringing this request to his wife. "I'll see what can be done in that regard. But, you know it's not Salvatore who is manning this contract. You know that."

I do. Cassatto wants this alliance in place. His daughter—his only heir and chess piece—is all he has to further his empire. Salvatore is a weak, feeble don. This is a fact. Cassatto aims to dominate the organization, and the marriage is just one of his moves on the board.

Cassatto has proven that, when he wants to take over a syndicate and its territory, he will do so by marriage or war. To him, love and war are the same. He won't stop with a simple alliance.

Lucian has to see the war on the horizon.

“This doesn’t only affect me, Lucian. If Cassatto aligns with the *Cosa Nostra*, it’s only a matter of time before he wants complete claim over its territory. Peace between the *Ndrangheta* and *Cosa Nostra* is tentative. It won’t last.”

He nods slowly, weighing this reality in earnest. “And if that day comes, we’ll be prepared. We can’t incite a war on an assumption, Nic. Not even for your Helen of Troy, because we both know that only ended in tragedy. You need to be patient.”

I nod, but say nothing. My mind is made up.

Cassatto has known for longer than the past two days of his plans to unite his empire with the *Cosa Nostra*, and he’s failed each and every time in my presence to make me aware.

I may only be a lowly clan enforcer, but I still hold claim to the Veneta territory. Cassatto’s disrespect is a figurative knife to my back. It would be less disrespectful if he actually stabbed me and watched me bleed out on my mother’s treasured Italian pavers.

My thoughts volley back and forth over his intentions. Either he planned to keep me in the dark as long as possible to avoid conflict, or he thought he’d never have to tell me.

Suddenly, I’m very aware of my surroundings, picking up on every noticeable sound around the terrace. A night where every syndicate is housed under one roof would be a prime opportunity to have me removed.

“One week,” I say to Lucian. “I’ll give you a week to have Salvatore cancel the marriage contract. After that, I have no choice but to act.”

“Then I’ll have your back,” he says. “You know I will. But I hope you’ll use this time to think it through. I have a son on the way. I want peace, Nic. And I really don’t relish the idea of upsetting my pregnant wife.”

Lucian may believe this discrepancy can be settled without incident, he may crave peaceful days, but that’s not the bloodthirsty world of greed and power where we reside.

I nod once in agreement. Lucian holds no loyalty to Salvatore, would just as soon be the one to sever his head from his body

for the wrongs the *Cosa Nostra* committed against his family, so he won't stop me from removing the don from this world. But despite the wrath burning to do just that, I have no desire to cause Violet harm by murdering her father.

"Christ, Nic. You're in for a long, grueling game of whack-a-mole," Lucian says, a devilish smile tipping his mouth.

"If I have to kill every don on the east coast," I shrug shamelessly, "that's what I'll do."

Lucian shakes his head, but I see a glint of respect in his pale-blue eyes. Maybe my friend isn't truly craving peaceful days just yet.

"Stay out of trouble," Lucian says as he claps my shoulder. "We'll talk again soon."

As Lucian retreats to the ballroom to join his wife, I seek out Bria, her blood-red dress a summons, tempting me like a siren in a dark and violent sea.

There is another option to kill the marriage contract—one the monster inside my head growls in response to, rattling the bars of its cage.

I could ruin her.

One single act would void the contract.

One single act would postpone any marriage to Bria indefinitely.

Bria would suffer. She would be punished. Her reputation would be destroyed.

I have fought my nature all this time in order to never cause her pain, but my whole body demands I storm into the ballroom and throw her over my shoulder, haul her down to the wine cellar and expose her to the terrors of my world, to let the monster feast and bathe myself in her virgin blood.

I lick my lips as I hungrily watch her. The thought of taking her festers into an obsessive infection as it takes root in my deviant soul.

O CRAVING HEART, FOR THE LOST  
FLOWERS

## BRIANNA

**A**t five years old, I was told I wouldn't attend school. Taught at home by tutors and my mother, the first half of my life was painfully sheltered, but my education advanced.

At nine years old, my father ended all my extracurricular activities. He was concerned horseback riding and dance would tear my hymen, and I'd therefore be considered damaged and ineligible for a good marriage match.

Never mind my humiliation, unable to understand why I was being punished, I realized right away that being a girl was a bad thing.

When it was accepted the Cassatto *padrino* would father no sons to carry on his legacy, at the age of twelve, I was guarded like a rare treasure.

Well, rare isn't quite accurate. More like a cursed treasure, one that was derided for being a woman instead of a man, because at that age, the age where boys were becoming men in our clan, I was becoming a woman in my own right.

But my change was not celebrated.

They drew blood and were praised. I bled and was shamed.

I haven't lived a day without the constant reminder that I failed my father by simply being born the wrong gender.

The only thing that kept me from hating him completely was that the fear I witnessed in his eyes for me was almost greater than his worry over my mother's failing health.

Then, by the age of sixteen, after my mother passed away from a stroke, I was told I'd have a stepmother and a stepbrother and I'd attend school in Italy. While my father furthered his vast empire, I was merely a burden in the way. His constant worry over my safety was a hinderance.

He was taking possession of the *mafia Veneta*, and after the attack that proved I was at risk during his conquest, I was

thrust out of my sheltered cocoon and jettisoned in a foreign country. Unskilled, unaware, clumsily stumbling through a strange world.

And I was in love with Dominic Erasto.

My father entrusted me to our extended Calabrian family. His sister, my Aunt Margo, took me in and I attended a private school with my cousins.

At seventeen, I suffered my first heartbreaking betrayal. And being born of the underworld where men breathe this vice like air, that's significant.

All it took was one of my father's junior clan members delivering one debasing remark toward me, and I watched Nic plant a bullet in his forehead. Strangely, that had no effect on my feelings. Nic was my protector. I trusted him with my life.

The crushing blow came later when I overheard Luca make a veiled comment about Nic's feelings for me being more than those for a sister. Nic turned dangerous eyes on him and declared: "She's still just a child. I will remove the little bitch and take back my empire when it's time. Until then, no one fucking touches her."

The world I existed in shattered.

I went back to Calabria with opened eyes, my newfound clarity a painful, gaping wound. Nic was never my guardian angel. He wasn't my protector. He was the beast guarding the tower to his prisoner.

I spent months combing over every moment with him, our interactions, correcting how I first misinterpreted his behavior toward me as affection, reshaping my delusional infatuation, and finally accepted the truth.

My stepbrother was my enemy.

Now, at the age of eighteen and finally of value to my father, I'm like a ripened peach, ready for the razor-sharp teeth of the mafia to sink its teeth into my plump flesh.

I have a purpose.

I've been promised to Salvatore Carpella, the don of the New York *Cosa Nostra*, the second most powerful crime organization next to my father's. In less than two weeks, I will be traded from one cage to another. A marriage contract binds me to a man I've met once, and only so he could appraise me in person, valuing me like cattle at an auction.

Which is fitting, since I feel like I'm just waiting to be sent to the slaughter.

Despite my father's neglect these past couple of years, I suppose I should be grateful to him for doing the one thing that truly benefitted me, unintentional though it may have been. For the past two school terms since he married Elenore, where I was shipped off to my aunt, I returned a little more independent. A little more aware, savvy.

Lethal.

The specific skills I acquired far surpassed the advanced education I'd already mastered by my tutors.

As a woman bound to a crime organization, the art of seduction can not only keep you alive, it's vital to manipulate the seemingly strong-willed men around you. My cousin Elena taught me this. Her and my Aunt Margo made me understand the dire necessity to wield my body as a weapon.

And then, of course, there was my actual, literal weapon training.

No matter what room I'm in, I make sure there is always an object in my vicinity I can employ as a weapon. I never give anyone—not even my bodyguards—the chance to back me into a corner or isolate me.

My Calabrian family operates a shade differently.

After hundreds of years of abuse and oppression, the Calabrian women of the *'Ndrangheta* have formed an underground alliance amongst themselves. The wives and daughters of the clans no longer suffer in silence; they have found ways to protect each other. To hide when necessary, and strike undetected when there is no other choice.

This whole new world shifted my perspective and, at first, I was terrified. I wanted nothing more than to jet home to my safe cocoon, where my father's toxic mix of love and hatred had kept me safe.

Only...had it?

The night Nic tore into that room to rescue me, that was not my room. My father had placed me there, trading rooms the night before his wedding. His action was deliberate, intentional.

He used me as a pawn.

And Nic didn't rescue me from his men, his stealth attack on my father was botched. As his own words revealed, from that night forward, he was simply biding his time until his prey was fattened up enough for the kill.

When the veil was lifted and I saw my world for the very first time through clear eyes, it was impossible to unsee.

Every man in my life was a threat.

This thought strengthens my resolve as I ascend the stairs toward the bedroom I claim as my own while at the Erasto mansion. My bodyguards, Dante and Vito, trail me a few steps behind.

Before I'm allowed to enter the bedroom, they thoroughly sweep the area. Dante checks under the bed while Vito goes directly to the bookcase Murphy door—the same door two men once used to issue an attack on me.

A lock has since been installed on the interior of the frame to bar entrance into the room. I mean, why would anyone unlock it from this side after what happened that night? Why would I, the innocent, naïve daughter of the boss who was attacked, the victim, ever conceive of doing so?

Dante pans the room one last time and nods. "It's safe," he assures me. "Will you be leaving again tonight, Miss Cassatto?"

I feign a yawn, looking bored. "I hadn't planned on it. The masquerade really wasn't that eventful when you've just spent



months in Italy.” I add a touch of snobbery for good measure.

Dante trades a look with Vito, then they leave and resume their guard post outside my bedroom.

“Night, guys,” I say as I enter the room and close the door. The soft *snick* of the lock sliding into place unwinds my tense muscles. With the sounds of the ballroom muffled behind the thick oak, I remove my phone from my clutch.

I release the pretense I’ve held all night with the drop of my shoulders and pace the room as I fire off a text to my cousin Elana.

Me: *This was a mistake.*

When my father told me of the marriage contract, my cousin was the person I called. We knew it wouldn’t be long before I was contracted, but the day after my birthday was still a harsh shock.

I wasn’t prepared.

I’m *still* not fully prepared—but desperation honed my focus.

I see Nic’s scathing features from just moments ago as he ordered me to my room like a child. A tendril of fury curls in my belly, and I have to stifle the need to throw my phone.

Neither my cousin nor my aunt know of my plan for Nic. They believe I’m here to say my final goodbye to my father, to make my peace. Then my aunt has her own scheme in place to use her resources to help me escape into a new life.

At first, this was exactly what I wanted.

After I returned to Calabria nursing the heartsickness of Nic’s ruthless confession, I desired nothing more than to run away and stay hidden. Disappear into another life.

But hurt has a way of mutating into anger over time. Wounds heal and harden, thickening up the scar tissue. Betrayal of the heart is the deepest wound, forming and requiring the toughest shell.

I no longer want to run from my life.

I no longer want to hide from Nic.

I want him to see me as a woman for fucking once, to see the real *me*, before I drive a blade through his heart.

With one purposeful act, I can remove him as my greatest threat and prove to my dying father I'm capable, thereby earning his respect and the freedom to make my own choice in whom I marry or *don't* marry.

The most powerful crime organization is not in need of an alliance. That's a farce on my father's part. What it will soon need is a leader—one who can issue change.

I don't stop pacing the room until I see the three dots bubble up on the message.

Elana: *Your father is a deranged bastard. Don't let him get to you.*

Me: *I'm talking about...him.*

Elana: *Oh. Him. You're stronger than him, B. Don't let him get to you either.*

Phone gripped tight, I punch out a reply. *It's harder than I thought. Being in the same room as him...being so close to him. I don't feel strong.*

I'm referring to our conversation before I left, the one where I admitted how I feared Nic could still wield power over me. Only I had no idea how true that statement was until I was standing before him tonight. I haven't seen him in months, and let's be honest, having studied the art of seduction and actually employing it are two very different things.

A silent, broody Nic who avoids eye contact with me, that's who I was ready to challenge tonight. That is the Nic I see every Christmas vacation. That is the man I spied on from the pool while trying desperately to get him to notice me in a bikini.

That was not the man I was confronted with tonight.

Despite my preparation to challenge him, I was ill equipped for Nic's intensity. For the daunting sight of him in a tux. For the way he pressed his strong body against me while we

danced, leaving my skin tight and feverish. For the way his coal eyes seared through me, branding my soul.

Most of all, I wasn't prepared for his heated reaction to my marriage contract.

Neither Nic nor his mother are supposed to be aware of my engagement to Salvatore. My father promised not to make it public for another week. I suppose that doesn't include keeping it from his wife, however.

"Shit." I rake my freshly manicured nails through my hair.

Nic knowing about the contract means I don't have near as much time as I thought. After he's waited all this time to finally reclaim his territory, he won't yield to another organization. And since he doesn't have the resources to challenge the *Cosa Nostra*, he'll take out the weakest rung in the ladder to his ascent.

If Nic is half as cunning as Elenore, they'll make me disappear well before the wedding date.

Everyone can see how sickly my father has become. He doesn't have much time. Hence the rush to marry me off and grant Salvatore the keys to the kingdom, preventing Dominic Erasto—the son of his enemy—from making any move to reclaim the Veneta syndicate.

I'd like to believe my father was more concerned for my safety, that the rushed engagement to Salvatore is his way of protecting me as he claims. And maybe some part of him does want to protect his only child.

But a *Ndrangheta* grudge outlives the life its attached to, to be carried on by the next heir in line.

My father has no son to carry on his grudge. The deal with Salvatore ensures that Nic will never inherit his empire, even from my father's grave.

Thoughts running rampant, I seat myself on the edge of the bed, kick off my Chanel pumps, and stare down at the flowing red layers of my gown. Telling my father about Nic's threat is the smartest course of action. He could find a way to "dispose"

of Nic. It wouldn't be difficult, our world is violent and dangerous.

Suddenly, I'm unsure of my whole plan, and very real fear cinches a tight fist around my lungs.

I bring my phone to my lap, desperately willing Elana to give me the answer.

Finally, my phone vibrates with a message.

*Elana: There is only one thing a made man cares for, and that's his pride. You're just an obstacle to him. I'm worried about you. You should get on a plane and get back here.*

I lower the phone and drag in a breath so deep, the cavity of my chest aches from the pressure.

My cousin is right. I know she is. But if I run now, I'll never stop.

Despite what others see, I'm not that different from the men I've been raised around. My pride is just as easily wounded. If I attack Nic for this reason—out of pride, revenge, even rejection—then I will be absolutely no different.

I touch the scar beneath my collarbone, tracing my fingers over the smooth skin. I was left with less feeling in the damaged tissue.

This is how the men have ruled their dark kingdoms, by toughening their skin, becoming unfeeling.

If change is to ever take place, then it needs to come from a place of vulnerability, not vengeance.

This is what I learned during the months I devoted to weapon training and studying the history of the *'Ndrangheta*. That the heartache of a little girl vastly pales in comparison to the very real pain and suffering I witnessed of the women in the organization.

I have a bigger mission now.

So I can't run to my father. I can't live in fear of the day Nic decides to carry out his threat. I won't be trapped inside a

world dominated by men, fearful, hiding behind a husband who can't actually protect me.

Moving to stand before the floor-length mirror, I slip off the mask. Tonight, I selected a gown I thought would make my deranged stepbrother finally see me as more than a little girl. Because when I confront him, I don't want him to hold back.

As I touch the delicate fabric, I feel the press of Nic's coal eyes dragging over my chest, his intense gaze on my skin. For a moment, I felt seen by him.

Then I was nothing but a child to him again.

If a gown won't work, maybe *no* gown will.

I tear the sleeve off my shoulder. The satisfying sound of shredding material sends a thrilling shiver over my skin.

Nic's weakness was never the sexy seductress.

I reach behind my back and unlace the gown. I tug the satin slip down the length of my body and step out of the pool of red on the floor. Then I go to the bed and drag out the suitcase from underneath. After I enter the combination on the lock, I unzip the top of the case.

As I lift the panel to reveal the hidden compartment beneath the clothes, I touch the sheathed blade of the dagger.

The one thing I have to my advantage is every man's assumption of me. No one troubled themselves to check my luggage before I boarded my father's jet. Why would they? I'm his princess, his little sweet, innocent Brianna. A girl so easily dismissed.

The black hilt of the weapon is metal and fits perfectly in the palm of my hand. The three-inch blade makes the knife easily concealed, but the edges are razor-sharp and lethal. I remove the dagger and the glass vial next to it before I close the panel, then I select a nightshirt from the folded clothes.

I can admit it's my own vanity that wants Nic to see me differently before I sink a dagger into his heart. An eye for an eye. Or rather, a wounded heart for a wounded heart.

Only, that vanity will get me killed.

A flash of Nic's strong physique surfaces to heat my face. He can overpower me. This is a fact. He's a brute with muscles who's been trained to kill since he was able to crawl. I felt that power in him tonight as we danced. The cruel and vicious man who has fought at the front lines as one of my father's enforcers, collecting lives and tallying them on his body like a serial killer collects trophies.

I've studied Nic for two years. His intelligence. His lethal ability to take life. His ruthless disregard. His maddening emotions and passion that makes him a fierce opponent.

For all the reasons I fell for him, admired him, felt protected by him, I now have to use against him.

There's only one area where he's vulnerable.

The way he sees me is his weakness. The little girl in need of saving.

I take off my strapless bra and tug on the oversized nightshirt.

The clothes of an innocent girl.

I send a text to Elana. *I miss you. I'll be home soon.*

After I delete the text messages from my phone, I place the device on the bed, then I bury the dagger between the mattresses.

In order to level the playing field between us, I had to find a way to make Nic's physical strength less of a challenge. There are a number of different options: a Taser, gun, poison. But not only did those choices feel impersonal...there was still a way for Nic to turn each of those attacks around on me.

Taking the glass vial in hand, I inhale a fortifying breath, then I look at the gold ring on my finger. I spin the crest around toward my palm and slide it aside. A microneedle springs out.

While in Italy, I commissioned a jeweler to design a replica of the family heirloom I wear daily. The custom ring has a tube inserted in the hollow shank, and I fill the band with the contents of the vial.

It's amazing how easy it is to turn an everyday object into a weapon—one no one will question as it's always on my

person.

I place the vial of sedative in my dresser drawer next to the real ring.

As I turn to face the mirror, I remove the clips in my hair and let the dark locks tumble loose around my shoulders.

Nic and I have history. We have unfinished business.

I'm going to finish what he started in this very room two years ago.

If I'm going to rule a kingdom of men, I have to first know I can take down the one man who still has a claim to my heart.

The masquerade was the dress rehearsal.

I look over my reflection in the mirror and I shove the collar of my nightshirt off my shoulder, exposing the scar.

It's time for the production.

But first, I have to set the stage.

TAKE THIS KISS UPON THE BROW



## DOMINIC

**T**he ballroom is empty. A used up husk. The lights of the chandeliers are toggled down to the dimmest setting, casting the interior in an unearthly glow. Masks lay abandoned on the floor. Confetti from the final waltz litters fine linen tablecloth and Italian marble.

For the past few hours, I've been a shadow haunting the corners. I've watched guests enter and exit my home. The few trusted men I have in my crew are walking the perimeter of the mansion to confirm every single crime lord and henchman has vacated the premises.

It's a futile attempt on my part as I don't have the numbers to defend myself against an attack if—*when*—Cassatto decides to remove me permanently. All I have is my fight. I won't go down easily with a sneak attack or a sniper bullet to the back of the head.

Seated in a chair outside on the terrace, I stare into the darkened hull of the ballroom, wary of any movement. I spin the half-empty bottle of bourbon on the stone table before I decide to pour another shot.

After I savor a generous swallow, I release the pressure from my chest with a lengthy exhale.

My tux jacket lies discarded across a stone bench. The sleeves of my ruined dress shirt are rolled up my forearms, the bowtie hangs open around my unbuttoned collar. My hair is in disarray from running my fingers through it repeatedly. Each time the thought of Salvatore touching Bria assaults me, I shove my hand into my hair, as if I can drive the maddening thought from my skull.

With a groan, I drop my head in my hands, fingers splayed into my hair as I stare at the blocked stones. I'm seconds from dragging myself to bed when a *clink* sounds from inside the ballroom.

Tension gathers my muscles, and I slowly raise my head to peer through the glass doors.

And my heart slams the wall of bone in my chest.

Bent over a table, her arm stretched as she reaches across the center of the round surface, Bria wiggles her fingers in an attempt to catch the lip of a glass wine bucket.

My entire body stills. An electric shock courses my veins like a live wire and locks me in place as my gaze tracks over her in slow, deliberate perusal. Her wavy dark hair draped in a silky curtain over one shoulder. Her thin white nightshirt, the hem hitting her upper thighs. As she stretches to grasp the bucket, to gain better leverage, she lifts her leg and props a knee on the edge of the table, giving me the full, unobstructed view of her ass and the trim patch of pink panty between her thighs.

“Oh, goddamn.”

My cock jerks inside my boxers, growing rock-hard at the erotic sight.

Bria finally achieves her goal and snags the rim of the bucket. Drawing the wine bottle toward her side of the table, she lowers her bare foot to the floor. Hand clasped around the bottle neck, she presses the rim to her mouth and tips her head back to pull a hard sip.

I push the heel of my hand against my raging cock to situate myself as I continue to watch her, lost in lurid, deviant thoughts, not alert enough to move until she starts to walk away, her steps sloppy.

*The fuck.* Blood rushes to my head to restore braincells, and I push out of the chair and storm through the glass doors. Bria doesn't notice the hard drop of my footfalls until I'm right up on her.

“Where are your guards?” I demand.

She flinches and brings a hand to her chest. “Shit, Nic,” she says, wobbling slightly off balance. Her hair spills over the side of her face as she manages to prevent the wine bottle from slipping from her dainty fingers. “You scared me.”

The hand held to her chest flattens between the valley of her shapely breasts to reveal the fact she's wearing no bra. My gaze drifts over her erect nipples peaked against the flimsy material before I rein in my deviating thoughts and meet her glassy eyes.

"Where the fuck are your bodyguards?" I demand again.

She lowers her hand and glances around, then shrugs, uncaring.

My nostrils flare as a furious whip of anger lashes my insides. "How did you get down here by yourself?"

"I have legs, Nic," she snaps. Then, at my narrowed gaze, one of her sculpted eyebrows arches and she says, "You know how I got down here." With a blatant dismissal, she grips the wine bottle with both hands and brings it to her mouth.

The secret passage. The one I revealed to her that night, and the one I put a fucking lock on to keep anyone from entering her room. It didn't cross my mind that Bria would unlock it from the inside. Now I wonder how often she uses the passage to sneak off on her own, and the sudden thought sears my blood.

Jaw clenched, I lower my gaze to her bare legs. "You think it's smart to sneak off and traipse around half naked and drunk?"

She huffs a sardonic breath. "I'm not drunk," she argues, not denying my first allegation. My stare intensifies, and she balks. "Are you serious right now? This is my home too, isn't it?" She whirls around and starts off toward the hallway.

I reach out to capture her wrist, but think better. If I touch her like this, I don't trust myself to stop touching her. "Bria, fucking stop."

She turns flashing eyes on me, her breaths coming hard.

"I'm getting *married*, Nic," she says. "If I'm old enough to be bartered off like cattle, expected to breed sons for my clan, then I think I'm old enough to drink and *traipse* wherever and *however* the fuck I want."

Features creased in a mix of anger and resentment, she turns up the bottle. She chokes back a bad swallow, and the red wine dribbles down her chin.

A curse exits on a furious exhale, and I seize the bottle easily from her hand.

Coughing, she clears her airway, her watery eyes catching the soft glow of the chandeliers.

Without thought, I reach out and run my thumb over her chin, clearing away the spilled wine. Her body goes still, and fucking hell, those deep, soulful eyes filled with tears do something hazardous to my barely held restraint.

Her skin is soft and fragile under the rough pad of my thumb, and the desire to keep touching her, to sink my hand in her hair and draw her mouth to mine is a primal demand barreling through my whole being.

Forcefully dropping my hand, I take a step back, as if that can stop my infuriating need. Even with a whole ocean between us, I couldn't stop the maddening, obsessive thoughts of her.

I look away. "You've obviously already had enough tonight. Go to bed, Bria."

"God, after years of me not existing, all of a sudden you're acting like an overbearing brother." She shakes her head, drunkenly tipping off balance.

The accusation is molten anger firing through my veins. She has no idea the sacrifices I've made these past two years to keep charge over her, and in one night, she's testing every fraught measure of my control.

"No. You know what?" She stubbornly crosses her arms. "I think I've taken enough orders from the men in my life for one day. Thanks." At that, she shoves past me, knocking into my arm.

I turn and watch the sexy sway of her hips as she stalks to another table and snatches an open wine bottle. Then she proceeds to stumble into the corridor leading to the wine cellar.

A dark groan works free of my constricted throat.

This is a side of Bria I've never witnessed. It lights the fuse already cut too short when it comes to her, and stokes the flaring embers into a roaring fire.

My dark thoughts from earlier tonight goad me to chase after her, to bend her over a table and yank off those pink panties and put an end to my suffering and the marriage contract.

I grip the back of my neck and tamp down that demanding urge to ruin her.

I took an oath to protect her, and that means even from me. No matter how badly the monster wants to violate her, that would be like desecrating a holy artifact. She's the angel to my devil.

She's above me.

*My angioletta.*

I have to find another way to stop the wedding from taking place, with or without Lucian's help. And in the meantime, I need to get Bria into a pair of fucking pants before she drives me right out of my fucking mind.

With a resigned sigh, I set the wine bottle on a table and follow after her, intent on keeping a close watch until I can either convince her to go to bed, or I'm forced to haul her over my shoulder and take her there myself.

"You're not allowed down there," I call after her.

Bria hovers near the top of the stairwell, gaze cast down into the dark wine cellar.

Typically, a guard is stationed at the entrance to prevent uninvited guests from entering. But as the masquerade drew to an end, so did the taboo playtime for Elenore's VIP guests.

After she takes a liberal sip of wine, Bria places the bare metatarsal of her foot to the first step. "I've always been curious about what's down here." She glances at me with a defiant gleam lighting her features. "No one has to know, Nic. It could be our secret." A mischievous smile tips her full lips before she looks down the stairwell and starts to descend.

*Jesus.* I swipe a hand over my face. I swear to god, she's playing with fucking fire. I yank off the loose tie from around my collar and toss it to the floor. My body is a furnace.

"One look, then you're going to bed," I say as I trail behind her.

The soft pad of her bare feet on the oak steps makes me realize what she could step on or *into* down there. I mutter a curse under my breath. Not giving her the opportunity to argue, I grab her wrist and draw her arm around my neck, scooping her lithe body into my arms.

Her tiny frame goes rigid against mine, and she kicks her feet. "What the hell, Nic?"

Holding her against me feels too damn right. She's a perfect fit. My fingers splay over her bare thigh, the soft feel of her skin wreaking havoc on my nervous system.

"Trust me," I say, taking two steps at a time to get us to the cellar faster. "You don't want to touch that floor."

As I hit the pitch-black of the cellar, I feel a shiver roll through her. I find the switch along the wall and flip it on. The cellar illuminates with the gauzy glow of flickering LED candles.

Bria brings the bottle dangling in her hand to her mouth and takes a sloppy drink to bolster her nerves. "I've heard the rumors—"

"Everyone has heard the rumors," I say, moving us farther into the room so she can take in the full view. "If I ever hear of you coming down here during the ball—"

"What?" she demands, turning an incensed expression on me. "I honestly don't think you or anyone else can make threats anymore. My future has been stripped away. What could you do to me that would be any worse?"

I hold her stare with a tense breath fisted around my lungs. "Trust me," I say, "there is always something worse that can be done to you."

Her strained swallow moves along the slim curve of her throat before she forces her gaze away.

I stop ahead of a row of cages. This is as far as I'm taking her. Glancing around the cellar, I locate a discarded tux jacket and drop it to the concrete floor, then place Bria's feet to the silk inseam.

"Thanks," she says distractedly as her gaze wanders over the cages.

Ropes drip from a silver ring suspended in the middle of one. Chains thread the bars of another. Leather floggers and whips and other various instruments meant to deliver pain and derive pleasure scatter the partitions of the room.

In her own way, Elenore took what my father used to instill fear and punish and converted it to infuse a different type of fear, doling out a variety of punishments...and pleasure. All of it a metaphoric slap to her husband's dead face.

As Bria further absorbs the shocking sights, I study her face, gauging the subtle shift of her features. I have Bria in a sex dungeon. Alone. No one knows where we are. With only the thin barrier of a nightshirt between my skin and hers.

Evil has a taste, like the bitter bite of venom mixed with the coppery flavor of blood. And it fills my mouth as I sink my teeth into my lip, jaw clenched to the point of pain.

This was a very bad mistake.

My phone buzzes, and the reprieve trickles through my overheated body like a cool stream as I pull the device from my back pocket, a welcome diversion. A message from Luca displays on the screen. He sends an update every half hour. The perimeter of the mansion remains clear and safe.

A small measure of relief further encases me as I push the phone into my pocket—but that soon dissolves as I look up to see Bria standing in front of the nearest cage.

Hand bunching her nightshirt, she lifts onto her toes to inspect the rope. Her naked thighs are a sinful dare, the temptation to see her sexy thighs spread before me a wicked tease.

*Just a taste*, the monster prods. She said it herself; no one has to know.

Bria flicks wide eyes in my direction as if she can hear the vile thoughts torturing my mind. “This is what happens down here?”

Crossing an arm over my chest, I brace my elbow on my forearm and cover my mouth with my hand. I watch her with equal parts frustration and fascination. “Among other things,” I tell her truthfully.

Her features sober for a brief moment. “Is this what my husband will do to me?”

Rage cords the sinew roping my bones to damn near snapping at the mere thought of Salvatore so much as looking at her. The idea that he could force himself on her, chain her down, whip her with leather and break her...

The primal urge to pin Bria to the cage and bury myself so deep inside of her before he can lay any claim thrashes at my feeble control.

“God, fuck.” I drag a hand over my face. “I’m not the one to answer these questions for you.” I expel a breath. “Come on. Tour’s over. You’ve seen enough.”

She sways a little on her feet, the wine bottle slipping from her grasp. I bend in time to catch the bottle before it hits the concrete. Her hand lands on my shoulder, fingers digging into the fabric of my shirt to steady her.

My gaze roves up to lock with hers, and in this position, kneeling before her, I feel swallowed by the tide.

“Please, Nic.” Her words, spoken on a broken exhale, silence the furious beat of my heart. “I’m never alone. Always being watched, judged. Told what to do. Where to go. Just...give me a while longer.”

It’s the sensual plea in her tone that renders me helpless.

“Besides,” she says, shakily drawing herself upright. “You’re with me. I’m safe here.”

The monster within snarls. He’s been rattling the cage since I first placed her feet to the floor. Hell, since I first laid eyes on her in that sinful red dress tonight.



I'm the furthest thing from safe for this girl, and she has no idea.

The only thing keeping me from tearing into her is the vow I swore to protect her. But I might not be able to keep that promise if my sanity fucking cracks.

Unable to voice my response, I nod once, drawing far enough away I escape her seductive scent. As she turns toward the cage, I lean against the wall and cross my arms. If I was smarter, I'd grab a set of handcuffs and shackle my damn wrists.

Even then, I think as I hungrily track her bare skin and the shapely curve of her ass through the shirt, that wouldn't stop me.

"It's fitting," she says, and hiccups.

I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips. I wipe my hand over my mouth, then tunnel my fingers through my hair. "What's that?"

"*La petite mort*," she says. Her clear polished fingernails trace the grooves of the jute rope, examining the rough thread like it's a foreign object. "It's French. It means the little death."

As she spins slightly toward me, placing her back against the cage to steady herself, I'm held captive at the sight of her, at the soft cadence of her voice, the elusive words that are every bit as foreign to me.

"I wasn't privileged to attend a private school like some," I say, enforcing an edge in my tone. "Please, enlighten me."

But really, I just don't want her to stop talking. This is as close to Bria as I've ever been since the night I stood over her, knife gripped in my hand, caging a beast that I'd battle for the next two years.

And it's goddamn torment now, this tiny measure of distance between us that I could easily devour in one second and have her in my arms.

Bria smiles, her amber eyes heavy with wine. "If the rumors are true," she says, her fingers gingerly caressing the rope,

“then it’s fitting that a sex dungeon would be among the dead.”

She’s referring to the rumors of my father burying his enemies alive down here.

I refrain from confirming it, letting the bones buried in the walls continue to keep their silence.

She grasps the rope fully and circles her hand, winding the coarse length around her wrist.

Hands fisted under my arms, I grind my molars. My chest caves under the heavy pressure as I strain to control the breath trying to tear through my lungs. I’m damn near panting like a wild animal at the sight of her bound by rope.

“The little death is experienced after an orgasm,” she further explains, then captures the corner of her full lip with her teeth. I want to move closer so I can see the blush I know is claiming her, so I can tug her lip free. “The French believe that, in the moments after sexual ecstasy, you experience such an intense euphoria, it’s like the moment right before death. Tranquility. A peaceful bliss. Or, so I’ve read.”

My jaw is clenched so tight, my head pulses with the frantic beat of my heart. My cock riots to tear free of the confines of my pants at just her unsure, sensual words.

I’m a fucking doomed man.

She glances at her arm, at the rope spooled around her slender wrist. I watch as her thighs press together, and god-fucking-dammit, I can almost taste her arousal.

She licks her lips and says, “We’re surrounded by death and sex. Both can be dark and mysterious and frightening. So in that vein, death can be...erotic. Sex can be just as forbidden. Imagine taking your last breath during an intense climax. The rush.” She tilts her head and stretches her other hand up to grab a bar, displaying her body to me like an offering.

“What do you think, Nic?” she asks, her voice breathy. “How do you think that would feel?”

An ache burns at the back of my throat, a hunger like I've never felt before. I'm terrified to move one inch closer to her for fear I'd devour every inch of her and still need more.

Expelling a tense breath, I say, "What I think is that you're drunk."

A flicker of anger creases her features. "I'm just a silly little girl to you," she says, the accusation as unsteady as her stance. "Just like..."

As she trails off, I take a bold step forward, desperate for her to finish that sentence. "Like what?"

Her swallow drags along the narrow column of her throat. "Just like how you saw me then, a little girl in trouble. The night you saved me."

We've never openly spoken of it. All this time, trading knowing glances and letting the silence build with the charged current of what we leave unsaid. But it's there, a force, present in every moment we're near each other.

I match her hard swallow, moving another defiant inch closer to her, just to absorb the shuddering breaths that slip past her lips. "You were a girl," I say.

She blinks, taken aback. "*Were*," she repeats, a dare buried beneath her unsure tone. "Yes, I was a girl then. But what about now?" Something hesitant and wary passes over her features, but there's some other emotion there, too—longing, desperation. Desire. "How do you see me now?"

I inhale a lungful of cool cellar air laced with her arousing scent, torturing myself, my head dizzy with her. "Now you're my family by marriage. Cassatto's daughter. Promised to a don, and belong to the *Cosa Nostra*." I lean in close to her ear, her hair feathering along my cheek. "Forbiddingly off limits to every man."

*Especially me.*

She shivers, and I pull back enough to catch sight of her eyes closing half-mast. "You're wrong about one thing," she says.

“Yeah? What’s that. Make it quick, because it’s time for good little tipsy girls to go to bed.”

She grits her teeth, eyes narrowed. Her hand grips the rope tighter. “I belong to no one.”

The fire brimming in her amber gaze could burn me to ash. I almost plead for her to do so, to put me out of my fucking misery.

“Maybe I was a weak girl that night, but afterward? I was changed, Nic. And I’ve questioned for so long what it was that changed me, and why I cannot just simply accept this fate forced on me now.”

The candles flicker and vibrate the air around us, isolating us away from the world above. Hidden in our secret alcove of death and fear and fiery lust.

“What changed you.” My voice comes out a deep husk. The temptation to knot that rope around her wrist and trap her tears at my reason.

Her mouth parts, gaze penetrating me through the thick fringe of her lashes. “It was the sight of you killing that...excited me.” She swallows. “To end a life in a single moment all because you deemed it. How you took control and did exactly what you wanted and needed. That’s a power I’ve never experienced.”

I grab hold of the bar beside her head, gripping the cold iron to douse the flames licking my flesh. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re drunk—”

“I know more than you think,” she retorts.

“Hmm.” The dare to toy with the flame curls over my skin with a seductive caress. “And what would you do with that kind of power?”

Her free hand eases up my shirt, coasting over the droplets of rusty dried blood. Her trim, soft fingers seize the placket, the silky tips of her fingers slipping beneath to touch my skin. “I honestly have no idea,” she admits. “But I want so badly to find out.”

I'm a fucking dead man where I stand. And yet if the devil himself threatened to incinerate my soul, I couldn't pry myself away from her in this moment.

She clings to my shirt, preventing me from daring to break away. "Do you fuck the way you kill, Nic? Do you take what you want, when and how you want it?"

"Christ." Hell all but opens its gates wide to welcome me in.

The fierce temptation to bracket my hand around her wrists and pin her to the cage grips me with a furious assault. I could reach under her nightshirt right now—I could drop to my knees and shred those little pink panties with my teeth.

Gaining a measure of control, I clasp her wrist, stopping her hand from touching me. "What are you trying to do, Bria."

As she stares into my eyes, some of her alcohol-fueled bravado wanes. Her breath eases out on a broken gasp. "I can't do it." Panic flares behind her glassy eyes. "God, I can't be with that man. I can't lose my virginity to some disgusting man I don't even know."

Fury infests my muscles like a swarm of hornets. The images I've been trying to suppress crash through my mind, decimating the sliver of sanity I'm barely grasping. Salvatore taking Bria on her wedding night. Her tears, her cries, her blood...all belonging to him.

My whole body ignites. Fuel pours over the rampant inferno and threatens to combust my weakening restraint. The crazed urge to rage-fuck her up against the cage and claim her before any other man can touch her tears through me with vicious craving.

"You're drunk, Bria," I say through gritted teeth, more for myself than her, to remind myself she's inebriated and not in her right mind.

I mentally ease myself away from taking that leap right over the edge.

My grip on her wrist tightens a little too sternly as I remove her touch from my chest. I draw to my full, towering height over her and glare down. Then I methodically unwind the rope

from around her wrist. The sight of her abraded skin locks my jaw, but I gather the last of my willpower and lower her arm to her side.

“I’m taking you to bed,” I say. “Now. Let’s go.”

“You don’t think I’m pretty,” she says, rubbing her wrist. “No one does.” Then she seeks the strength of my arm as she catches hold of my forearm. She hangs there, her weight bearing down and keeping me trapped.

A muscle ticks in my jaw, my teeth gritted to the point of damn near cracking. “You’re just drunk—”

“I am *not* drunk,” she whines, nails spearing my skin. “That’s why my father is making me do this. No one wants me. No one will even look at me. God, I can’t stomach the thought of Salvatore being the first man to ever touch me.”

My own hands are fisted tightly, preventing me from touching her everywhere my gaze roams, giving in to her demand.

If she looks up at me with those large, mascara-streaked eyes and begs me to touch her, I won’t have any fight left. I’d sheathe my cock inside her virgin pussy and split her wide open, and I’d revel in every debasing second.

“Do you think I’m pretty, Nic?”

“No, I don’t,” I answer on impulse.

Her eyes blink rapidly to hold back her escaping emotion. Like the fiend I am, I crave the pain, and lift my hand to touch her face. I swipe my thumb over the dusting of freckles along her high cheekbone as my gaze ravenously absorbs her thick eyebrows and eyelashes, the slight tip of her nose, those wide, soulful amber eyes that drill down to my marrow.

“You’re not pretty,” I say, the words unleashed before I can’t stop them. “The fact that you’re so goddamn beautiful strangles the fucking air from my lungs.”

She releases a trembling breath. Her eyes flick over my face, searching.

Before I lose every shred of control, I lower my hand. “You’re going to bed.”

“Okay.” She nods, allowing me to lead her away from the cage. “Then maybe I can convince one of my bodyguards to fuck me before my wedding night.”

The demon within licks my spine with a malice-tipped tongue, and a riot of blinding fury covers my vision in a haze of red.

Rational thought bleeds from my mind as I capture her jaw between callused fingers. I have her back pressed against the cage within the same furious beat of my heart. The muscle bangs violently against my chest, my blood scorching my veins in blistering heat as it rushes through my system, a brushfire torching my control.

“If any man lays a fucking hand on you, there will be no end to the blood I will spill.”

Her chest heaves against my forearm, and the tantalizing brush of her nipple along my skin sets me ablaze.

Her eyes glisten under the flickering candlelight. “Because I’m your sister,” she says, only her statement is more questioning.

My forearm drags the front of her shirt down, just enough to expose the top of the silky white scar. The sight of it—the reminder of her pain, and my desire to never see her hurt—crashes through and drags me from the bowels of the darkest chasm.

“I’m not some heroic mafia prince,” I say. “Whatever you’ve painted me out to be in your head, I’m not that man, Bria.”

She wets her lips, and I’m captivated by the action, tempted to close the distance between us and trap her tongue.

“Then give me a reason, Nic,” she says, her demand whispered on a breathy exhale. “Why do you care at all?”

“I have my reasons.”

*Reason.*

I could take Bria right here, right now, and ruin her. I one act would stop any alliance with the *Cosa Nostra*. Would prevent just about any man from accepting her.

Would sign my death warrant.

And surrounded by the bones encased in these stone walls, the scent of violence and sex heady in the dank air, I'm all too tempted to embrace my death and bury myself in Bria.

"Because," I say instead, allowing my mouth to coast close enough to her lips to taste her fragile breath, "you're so goddamn perfect, *angioletta*, the thought of any one of those undeserving pieces of filth touching you is a torment I can't bear."

I could blame my weakness on the liquor. But I burned the bourbon from my bloodstream the moment I laid eyes on Bria bent over that table.

A frightened realization flashes behind her shiny jeweled eyes, and she shakily nods against my hand. "All right," she whispers. "Take me to bed, Nic."

The fear behind her wide gaze sparks my blood with an intoxicating rush of adrenaline, and I have to summon every ounce of control to restrain the beast. With forced effort, I release her and push away from the cage.

As she sways on her feet, the alcohol and her drained emotions having taken the last of her fight, I sweep her into my arms and carry her through the mansion.

Head resting on my chest, she's nearly asleep by the time I reach her bedroom door. Her bodyguard Dante makes a move to reach into the in-seam of his blazer until he realizes it's me. My glare stops his hand from gaining another inch and promises my reprimand at letting Bria sneak out of her room will be a painful one.

I send Vito a similar warning. "Step aside," I order him.

I should rip his spine out for not keeping a close enough watch over her, but the terrible truth is, I just want to kill him so there's no chance in hell Bria can make good on her threat to fuck her guards.

As I shut the door behind us, Bria clings to my unbuttoned shirt. "I don't want to be alone," she whispers.

I move toward her fluffy bed and toss back the goose down comforter before I settle her on the mattress. I drag the cool



sheet up over her waist, removing the temptation of her half-naked body from my sight, then turn to leave.

Her hand catches mine. “What if I asked you to kiss me?”

I grip her hand, unable to soften my reaction. “Brothers don’t kiss their sisters.”

Her scoff is a light huff of breath in the darkened room. “Nic, at the very least, I don’t want my wedding kiss to be my first.”

My thoughts turn a shade so dark, the devil himself would quiver.

The deranged thoughts tearing through my head would make Bria run.

I could seal my hand over her mouth right now and pin her against the bed. I could wrench her shirt up. Rip her panties down her thighs. I could be inside of her and tearing through the tender skin that maintains her virtue in less than three seconds, my cock coated in her virgin blood.

My dick grows hard at the deviant thought, and the Apadravya piercing that tips my cock rubs abrasively along my boxers, the arousing friction sending me careening too close to the edge.

Releasing her hand, I turn toward the bed and grasp the headboard to keep from touching her. My breathing ratchets as fire blazes through my adrenals and pumps an intoxicating mix of desire and her seductive scent of gardenias and vanilla through my bloodstream.

In one hand, I cup her cheek and rest my thumb to her chin. She brings her knees forward beneath the bedsheet, and the reckless urge to part her thighs and touch her barrels through me with such force, the hand gripped to the headboard damn near cracks the wood.

With her scent scorching my throat, I lean down and place a light kiss to her forehead. “Take this kiss upon the brow,” I say to her, reciting a line of a poem she won’t recall come morning. “And in parting from you now...” I inhale deeply. “That’s all I have to offer you, angel.”

The monster within me roars, furious over my weakness.

Her eyes flutter closed, the alcohol finally claiming her for sleep. I release the headboard and back away. I don't stop moving backward until I'm outside of her room, the thick slab of oak and her bodyguards between us.

It may have only been a soft peck to the forehead, and not what Bria will consider her first kiss—but it's absolutely mine. The kiss that tears my world in two and seals my fate.

She is my surf-tormented shore.

This wedding will not happen.

I will paint the world red with the blood of every last Carpella and Cassatto if that's what it takes to keep her.

If that means I have to become the devil himself, so be it.

I STAND AMID THE ROAR, OF A SURF-  
TORMENTED SHORE

BRIANNA

**T**he wedding planner my father hired holds a swatch of material up and cants her head, waiting for my approval.

“I love it,” I say, smiling through the agony of this whole session.

Sabine—who happens to be my mother’s niece and my cousin—sets the swatch aside in the approved pile and selects another. This one, an off-white linen. “For the napkins?”

I curl my fingers toward my palm, digging my nails into the soft flesh as I hold the smile. The acute pain is more bearable than looking at hundreds of samples for dresses and table linens and flower selections.

“It’s perfect.” I brighten my smile.

She releases a terse breath in disapproval, but places the swatch on the pile.

I check the time on my phone, not sure how much longer I can tolerate this charade. All through the wedding planning brunch, I was in a daze. It’s impossible to concentrate on flower arrangements and cake samples when my thoughts are so thoroughly consumed by last night.

There were moments where the lines blurred, and I wasn’t sure what was real, whether I was merely playing a role and pretending to be inebriated to lower Nic’s defenses, or if I’d actually had too much wine.

I touch my temple as a dizzying sensation sweeps over me. Unsteadily, I reach for the glass of water and take a sip, trying to clear my thoughts that want to keep tussling the details. The way Nic’s touch felt when he gripped my jaw, the fierce violent need banked behind his darkened eyes, the charged current snapping with sexual tension between us.

None of it felt orchestrated or platonic.

Despite my convictions, there's a pocket of guilt inside me. While I was thinking about killing him, he was reciting poetic verse and looking at me so...

I briefly shut my eyes to gather my bearings.

Regardless, I know it's naïve. He'll probably recite the same beautiful lines to me while he strangles the life from my body.

I need to get focused and strengthen my defenses, and that means not allowing Nic to access the part of me that still desires him.

Mentally overriding last night with the words he spoke to Luca, I erase last night's heated looks with the cold, callous stares I'm accustomed to from him.

Nic's seemingly jealous rage felt genuine, but only because as a made man. Claiming ownership over a woman is more about them and their egotism than their feelings toward the actual woman.

And Nic has far more experience in...everything. I'm not going to seduce him like some hard-up, drunken frat boy. He has a much higher tolerance for alcohol and women in general. He's too stringent and determined then to drink himself sloppy. I've never seen him lose control. Ever. So if I can't succeed in getting him to lower his guard with alcohol, then I need him mindless with lust.

A clatter sounds from the hallway as the cleanup for the ballroom from last night's masquerade commences. The whole mansion is teeming with people, and I've yet to see Nic.

Seated on the chaise in one of the spacious living rooms, I brush my fingers over my forehead, hit with his scent of clean ocean and the metallic trace of fired gunpowder all over again. It infuses my senses as Sabine clears her throat to gain my attention.

"Miss Cassatto, I need your input on this."

I blink and lower my hand to my lap as she holds up a lace and chenille swatch. I'm to wear my mother's wedding dress—the dress she married my father in—with a few updated customizations and size alterations.

“It’s fine,” I answer, the effort to hold a smile becoming too strenuous. “I love it, and you can call me Bria, Sabine.”

Her thinly lined mouth puckers into an annoyed purse, but she drops the swatch in the accepted pile and moves on.

I’m most likely in denial of my future, but I refuse to accept that this wedding will take place until I’ve failed utterly. Even as I wavered last night, I felt how close I was getting. There was an instant where Nic yielded to me, where I could have reached beneath my mattress and drawn my knife. I thought about it, even played the scene out in my head before his lips touched my forehead.

Dante and Vito saw Nic carry me unconscious into my room. No one would doubt the daughter of the boss if she claimed to be attacked by the crazed Dominic Erasto and had to defend herself.

Yet, the lack of privacy isn’t the reason I faltered. If not subdued, Nic has to be taken completely by surprise. I might have gotten as far as pressing the blade to his throat before he confiscated the weapon and used it on me.

A small voice, something like my conscience, challenges that as a poor excuse. Was I being cautious, or did I cave under the desire to feel Nic’s lips on mine? Believing that—just for a second—he’d give in to me completely, that he wanted me in that moment.

I’m flushed with heat as I imagine a scenario where Nic is deep inside me while I draw my weapon on him, and a dark desire stirs in my belly. A wet heat pools in the seam of my panties, and I cross my legs and shift positions, offsetting the ache and trying to refocus my thoughts on the satin sash Sabine holds up.

“I love it,” I tell her.

With a disgruntled sigh, she begins packing away her samples. “We only have two weeks, Bria.”

“Yes, and I was only just told of my engagement two days ago. Everything has already been planned, Sabine.” I raise an eyebrow. “They really don’t need our input.”

Her pointy features draw together at my dismissive tone. She knows her place, and how of little value her opinion is to the men of the Cassatto clan. Still, she has to have a reason to wake every day and try, and I should be more considerate of her.

However, I have been raised alongside Sabine and women like her, and she wouldn't hesitate to hand me over to the clan if it meant earning her approval from the family.

The clan is life. You're born into your role, and there is no out.

I rise from the chaise and smooth my hands over the black pencil skirt. "I trust that whatever selections you make will be perfect," I say, effectively ending the torturous wedding planning.

As I start toward the atrium, Vito follows, always my shadow. He said nothing about how I was carried into my room last night by my stepbrother. Which is wise for him. He would be punished more severely than me if my father discovered he allowed me to sneak out of my room.

The pool room is off to the right, and I know that's where Nic likes to conduct his business when he's in his home. I can hear the echo of his deep baritone against the marble of the hallway.

Before I can think the sudden idea completely through, I turn in the direction of the pool room and head inside.

The male voices drift off as I walk toward the dressing stalls lined along granite and stone rock formations. The sharp *clack* of my heels is the only sound other than the soothing splash of waterfalls from the spa into the Caribbean-blue pool.

I feel the press of their prowling eyes, but I ignore the two men seated at the glass table. As I grab hold of the stall door, Nic's voice momentarily halts me.

"Brianna." His tone is a biting reprimand. "What are you doing here."

It's not a question; he doesn't want an answer. He wants me to acknowledge the warning in his voice and follow his indirect command to leave.

Inhaling a fortifying breath, I look at him and smile. This one not forced. I'm met with the intensity of his coal eyes. His stare bores into me with a lethal undercurrent, as if he could flay my clothes from my body with just that sinister gaze.

"I'm going for a swim," I say, motioning to the pool. "This is the place where that usually happens."

The two men dressed in dark suits to his right chuckle at my sass, and Nic sends them each a deadly scowl to silence them.

His sharp gaze lowers, and I wonder if he's thinking about our almost kiss last night. Whether he regrets nearly giving in to my drunken pleas in the dark.

"I'm conducting business right now." His stern tone leaves no room for argument, an order dismissing me from the room.

I shrug, playing my part. "It's not like I'm going to even understand anything you talk about. I'm just a girl." My arched eyebrow calls him out on our conversation from last night, letting him know I remember everything.

He methodically rolls up the cuff of his dress shirt to reveal the sleeve of tattoos outlined against his defined forearm. The sculpted edge of his jaw tightens, and a muscle tics above his tense jawline like a warning.

Escaping, I disappear into the dressing room and hear their conversation resume. My hands shake. I clasp them together and breathe through the hitch in my lungs.

Needing a measure of reassurance, I pull out my phone and text Elana.

Me: *Tell me I can do this.*

I leave out the details, hoping she can trust that I just need a hit of comfort right now.

Elana: *You were born to do this.*

Damn, that's actually a good response. Inhaling a deep breath laced with the flavors of chlorine and Nic's ocean current, I send a reply: *That's what I needed to hear <3*



I hurriedly delete the texts and change into one of the swimsuits I keep here. I select the one I bought last year with Nic in mind, but never had the courage to wear.

Then I bolster my nerves by reminding myself there's nothing to fear.

If I fail, there is always the option to vanish. My Aunt Margo has made five women from the Calabrian Cassatto clans disappear, and she can do the same for me.

I'm not so naïve as to not realize the life I'd disappear into would be a hard one. Living in fear of discovery under an assumed identity means constant, precautionary measures. I'd always be on alert, never at ease.

That's why I first have to try to defeat my enemy on my turf.

I touch my collarbone, lightly trace the smooth scar with my fingertips, then I wrap my hair up in a bun and secure it with a hair tie. Lifting my chin, I exit the changing room.

An immediate hush falls over the suited men and hums with a charged awareness. The swimsuit I chose is not one of a little girl.

The white two-piece is barely two pieces of fabric at all. The top just covers my chest, leaving the curved swell of my under-breasts exposed. The bottoms descend into a low sliver that conceals less of my ass than it displays.

I know exactly what I'm doing as I pad in front of the table of men toward the zero-entry side of the pool.

Mafia men, whether you're romantically involved with them or not, *own* their women. They don't have to want us in order to want no other man to have us. It's a toxic head-fuck.

Nic is—for all intents and purposes—family. He's an enforcer of the Cassatto clan. Therefore, he is a man over me, in charge of me, and it doesn't matter that he plans to take my life to ascend to his throne, his pride won't allow for any other man to covet me like their possession.

In order to shift his viewpoint of me, I have to force him to see me in a new, enticing light. As more than just a girl to protect,

even if it's only for his own selfish gain. I have to rattle the cage of his dominant alpha beast; I have to threaten him. A wild animal is one that relinquishes its control.

If you're going to seduce a made man, it's not just about the physical temptation, the carnal desire. No, for a man like Nic—who can have that anytime, anywhere—it's about the seduction of the mind, the submission of will, his tightly reined control, that is necessary for the complete conquest.

With confidence I barely feel, I wade into the shallow walk-in of the pool. The heated water laps comfortably against my skin. I stop when the water reaches mid-thigh and scoop pool water into the cups of my hands. I trickle the water over my belly, letting it cascade all the way down over my thighs, as if I'm getting accustomed to the temperature before I wade farther.

I caress my hands along my upper thighs and bend over to spoon another handful, sensing the heavy press of eyes on my body.

“Leave.”

I look up at Nic's guttural command. The men at the table glance over at him, stunned.

“Out. *Now*,” Nic orders.

This time, they don't hesitate. Chairs scrape back against the marble, and one of the guys nods to me in departure. I issue a cute smile, stalling when Nic's dark glare pulls my attention fully on him.

“That was rude,” I say, then proceed to pan chlorinated water over my shoulders and breasts.

His silence thickens the air between us, his stare intently focused on me. Then: “What are you doing, Bria.”

Dribbling water onto my arm, I say, “I told you, taking a swim.”

He leans forward and props his elbows on his knees, covering his mouth with fisted hands. Those shadowed eyes bore into

me until I'm forced to submerge myself under the water to escape the heat of his glare.

As I reemerge, I wipe water from my face and catch sight of Nic stalking to the edge of the pool. I swim over and pull myself up, resting my arms on the stone coping. I stare up at him, blinking water from my eyelashes.

"You should take a dip," I tell him, licking beads of water from my lips. "Work out all the alcohol from your pores."

He sends Vito a brief glance before he lowers to his haunches. Placing his face mere inches from mine, he says, "You want to see blood, Bria. Is that what you want?"

A chill coasts my body, pebbling my skin beneath the tepid water. "I don't—"

"You want to make me gut those two guys right here? Bleed them all over the tiles? Or maybe you want to watch me carve your bodyguard's eyes from his skull for looking at your ass while you *traipsed* right in front of him." He hooks a finger under my chin and firmly tilts my face upward. "Because, that's exactly what I will do if you don't get your ass out of this pool and cover it with clothes."

The memory surfaces of him slitting a man's throat from above me, blood raining down to drench my shredded nightshirt. His threat should scare me enough to stop this game—but I have the sudden, defiant urge to test him by popping his finger into my mouth and biting it just to see his reaction.

Rather, I deliberately lick my lips and push up a little higher on the coping. The warm caress of his breath hits my wet skin, sending an arousing current right to my belly.

"I don't see how I can make you do anything, Nic," I say, looking up at him through my lashes and arching my back. His gaze drifts down, and my nipples harden under his intense perusal. "How can an innocent little girl make a grown man do anything he doesn't want?"

"Hmm." He hums, nodding his head slowly. "So this is how you're going to play it for the next couple of weeks. By being a brat and getting every man in your life brutally murdered."

A current of rage simmers through my blood. That I'm responsible for men and their choices is an infuriating notion to a girl born in this underworld dominated and ruled by men.

"You kill men every day," I say, raising my chin defiantly as I push off the coping. Treading water, I swim in a backward motion. "Your whole world is a man's war. I merely exist within it to be fucked by them. So if I can have any say at all over when and by whom..." I toss a purposeful glance toward my bodyguard. "Then I'm going to have that say."

To emphasize my point, I reach overhead and clasp the string of my bikini top at the back of my neck.

I hear Nic's audible inhale as his nostrils flare in warning. "Bria—"

But I've already pulled the string. The top comes down, and I boldly reach between my shoulder blades and tug the second string. Breasts submerged beneath the water, I smirk up at him and hold the white bikini top out, then toss it into the deeper end of the pool.

His beautiful features harden into a lethal expression, those coal eyes darkening to a pitch-black that sends a chilled ripple through the water lapping my skin. Suddenly, I regret my words and fear Vito's proximity to Nic, and almost ask him to leave—

"Get the fuck out." Nic directs the command at my bodyguard, but his dark eyes never leave my face.

Vito hesitates at the entrance to the pool room, unsure of leaving me alone with my stepbrother who, at the current moment, appears more than his usual unhinged.

"If you don't get the fuck out right now—" Nic turns the full force of his malice on Vito "—I will tear your goddamn eyes out of your skull."

With one last questioning look at me, Vito waits for my jerky nod of assent before he says, "If you need anything, Miss Cassatto, I'll be right outside with Dante." This last part he states with a narrowed glance at Nic, issuing his own form of warning. Then he exits the room.

Nic shows no evidence that he fears the two men hovering outside. He rises to his feet slowly, then proceeds to remove the sheathed knife from the waistband of his slacks.

Trepidation skitters down my spine in icy rivulets. I tread water in the deep end, pushing out farther, desperate to reach the shallow end where I can gain my footing.

Without withdrawing his laser-focused gaze from me, Nic sets the knife and its casing on the table. He then takes three abrupt steps forward while tearing the placket of his white dress shirt open, efficiently removing the shirt from his arms before he reaches the ledge.

My heart crashes against the wall of my chest as Nic dives into the pool.

“Oh shit.” I spin and reach overhead, kicking my feet as I swim off. Every stroke feels leaden, my arms trembling, my feet weighted down by the water.

He didn’t even bother removing his shoes, and yet he’s a missile slicing through the water as he homes in on me. As he breaks the surface close by, panic seizes my limbs. I yelp and drop below the water, swallowing a mouthful of chlorine.

His strong arm surrounds my waist, and I’m hauled to the surface. Bringing my back to his chest, he treads his feet and holds me above the water. He tows me toward an area where he can touch the bottom.

He doesn’t release me. His forearm is locked around my rib cage, and the feel of my breasts resting against his arm steals all rational thought from my mind.

“Hold still,” he demands, his tone a deep rumble against my back.

I inhale a shaky breath to fill my burning lungs and sputter, “I can’t...I can’t touch the bottom.”

“Stop squirming, Bria...goddamn it.” A growl works free around his gritted words, and I can feel the strain of his muscles.

He unleashes a furious groan and wrenches his other arm around my midsection. His soaked dress shirt wraps my chest in the process. He ties the back together, effectively covering me, his shirt wrapped around like a halter. It's bound so tightly, I don't know if it's the pressure of his shirt or my fear, but suddenly breathing becomes too difficult, and I lose my struggle and relax into his arms.

His weighty sigh fans the crown of my head, his heart a wild animal thrashing against my back. I should be terrified, and I am—but I'm more frightened of what I'll feel when he finally releases me.

“Are you done literally showing your ass?” he says.

I swallow past the knotted ache in my throat. “Again, it's my body.”

He chuckles, and the soft cadence of it flips inside my belly. “Dare to take your clothes off around any man again,” he says, the threat met with the tightening of his arm around my waist, “and I will leave handprints on both your ass cheeks.”

A thrill lights my blood. I feel his warning all the way down to my core, and my inner walls pulse with a deep ache in response.

He pushes off the pool floor and wades us over to the coping, where I'm able to latch on for leverage. I cough as I anchor an elbow over the stone lip, chancing a look over at him. “You threaten me like I have something left to lose.”

Now standing, Nic wipes his hands down his face. The surface of the water laps around his toned stomach, the ink darkened by the water. My gaze inadvertently travels over the tattoos that wrap his chest and arms. The wet sheen of his leanly cut body does something unholy to me.

I suddenly feel out of my depth—not just in the pool. Physically, I don't stand a chance against this man.

At least, not fighting fairly.

Stalking through the water to tower over me, he braces his hands on either side of the coping to trap me between his arms.

His dark eyes flit over my features, and I swear a spark of hunger ignites in their depths.

“You couldn’t be more wrong, *angioletta*,” he says, pushing in another inch closer. “Keep playing with fire, and you’ll find out how much more you have to lose.”

His gaze drifts lower, settling on the scar that slices my chest, and I’m desperate to know what thought strains his features into an almost pained expression.

I sense not only the challenge there, but the direct threat in his words.

My breathing ramps, my chest aching against the binding of his shirt. “What if I want the fire?”

A dark flame licks the center of his eyes, a menacing promise to give me exactly what I’m asking for.

As his heated gaze drags upward to clash with mine, his tongue travels in a deliberate path over his bottom lip before his mouth tips into a crooked smile. My whole body quakes under the beauty of it, my breath caught and bound in a remote pocket of my chest.

“Even the devil is burned by his own flame,” he says, some unreadable look passing over his face, “maybe he even feels the pain more acutely.”

Before I’m able to form a cohesive response, Nic dips down and places his mouth near my ear. “Have my shirt washed before you return it,” he says, the husk of his voice tightening my stomach. “It’s my favorite.”

As he pushes away from the ledge, he walks backward a few steps, keeping me ensnared, until he finally turns to wade out of the shallow end.

I’m given the full, striking view of Nic’s back...and the long scars that slash across the artwork tattooing his skin.

The scars are deep and severe, painful, crossing over each other as if he was whipped. Suddenly, I know exactly how he received the marks. I know, because my father has an affinity for punishing his enemies in “the old ways”.

A shaky breath expels with a shudder, and I have to dip beneath the warm water to cool my overheated skin.

Oh god, I'm too far in. I've been thrust so far into the deep end, and the water is closing in overhead.

It took the strength of two women in my life to essentially deprogram me, to help me see how Dominic was not my guardian angel—that he was never hovering over me as a protector, but the beast waiting in the tower for his moment to descend.

Despite knowing this truth, a vortex of conflicting emotions swirls around me like a maelstrom in the deep end where he left me...and I don't want to just simply end Nic, to eliminate him as a threat to my life—I want him to know the reason *why*.

I want him to feel a sample of what I've suffered, believing he cared for me, pining for a man I believed I could one day make fall in love with me, the way I thought I loved him—and then tear his bleeding heart from his chest before I stab it.

If stoking the fire is what summons his devil, then I'm going to make that fire roar. I have to see that devil in his eyes before I strike.



HIS VESTURE WAS DABBLED IN BLOOD

## DOMINIC

**I**n the grim tale of *The Masque of the Red Death*, a selfish prince tries to escape a plague sweeping his kingdom by fleeing with his knights and ladies to his eccentric palace where he bars the doors, locking all inside and the fear of death out.

Within this palace of his peculiar taste, the prince revels in drink and celebration by hosting a masquerade ball. He has escaped the Red Death. Until, that is, the plague himself shows up to the party adorned in a grotesquely realistic mask and slaughters them all.

*He came like a thief in the night. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.*

As a child, it was one of my father's favorite bedtime stories to read me. I suppose I should be grateful he took the time at all to do such a parental thing. But as I grew older, I realized it was done so more out of his paranoia than an act of fatherly love.

At the end of the story, he'd close the large volume of Poe, set it aside, and look me in the eyes. He never blinked.

"They can never fool us, *amato figlio*," he'd say. "We must be the thief in the night."

His paranoia had already started to erode many of his dealings and negotiations by then. Even in the underworld, you have to extend trust. It's how all operations are established.

Our world is built on that trust, and it's the reason why we hold grudges and reap revenge when that trust is broken. Freedom is at stake. Our loved ones are at stake.

The dark, briny water of the bay laps at the docking port in front of a gray warehouse. Dingy and faded multicolored storage units line the pier. This is where Lucian likes to conduct his business.

As the sky darkens with the onset of night, lampposts flick on. The low buzz of the florescent light above wears on my already strained patience.

One beautiful angel with wings as dark as a raven is all but breaking me.

My meeting earlier with the Lorelle brothers didn't go as planned. I need an alliance, and that comes with a business contract. For the Lorelle brothers to risk taking their wares away from Cassatto and bringing them to me instead, they have to trust me to distribute through my small channel. In order for that to happen, I have to prove I'm in control—and having an uncontrollable stepsister literally show her ass in front of these men didn't serve to establish any confidence in my ability.

And had one of them disrespected her, laid a hand on her, I absolutely would have gutted him.

If Bria would've removed her top while the brothers were still in the pool room, the carnage I'd have committed would've made the slaughter in my father's story look like a fucking bedtime story for real.

A whisper of unease coasts my flesh as I recall her thick silence as I turned my back to her. The only reason I could keep walking away. I didn't want to see the pity in her eyes. She'd never before seen the marks her father placed there.

I was out of my goddamn mind when I dove in to the pool—part rage to cover her, part overwhelming desire to take her right there in the water.

My fury won out, though my balls still ache from the rock-hard erection I sported all afternoon with no release. It took a herculean effort to walk away from her instead of throwing her over my shoulder and carting her defiant ass right up to her room where I'd give her what she's begging for and more.

My cock tents my slacks at just the thought, and I reach down and adjust myself with a harsh curse. If she keeps this game up, I'm not sure I'm strong enough to last.

That deviant thought thrills me, the monster licks his lips in anticipation.

Headlights flash along the side of the rusted building, and I look up to see Lucian's Bentley pulling up to the lot. He's alone. As he exits the vehicle and approaches, I nod once.

"I heard the Lorelle brothers had an entertaining afternoon," he says in way of greeting.

Anger singes my frayed nerves, and I fist my hands at my sides. "Is there anything that happens in this city that you don't hear about?"

He shrugs, unaffected by my gruff tone. "Very little." He stalks closer. "Salvatore has agreed to postpone the wedding," he says. "By a week."

Another flare of fury tenses my muscles. That's not even close to the outcome I wanted. "I thought Violet had more sway over her father."

His eyes flash. Any mention of his wife in the negative raises his defenses. "Cassatto is sick," he says, sinking his hands into his pockets. "He's dying."

I nod slowly. This information isn't as shocking as it should be. For a while now, I've noticed how frail Bria's father has become. Yet it does explain the big boss's impatience to marry his daughter off.

"Cassatto wants all his affairs settled quickly," Lucian continues. "He has no sons to place in charge. From what I can gather, he's arranged for Salvatore to take temporary leadership over his clan until Brianna produces a male heir. And promptly. That's their arrangement."

A toxic mix of disgust and crazed fury lashes at my patience. I have the violent urge to track down the Lorelle brothers and take out my rage on them anyway.

Bria's being forced to breed an heir.

If she's been made aware of this arrangement, it would explain her anger, and why she's desperately clawing at any escape. Mentally and physically.

Jaw set, I glance up at a moth fluttering around the light, my thoughts just as manic as the flap of its dusty wings. “And Salvatore can’t be swayed to break the marriage contract?”

“You know that’s not how it works,” Lucian says, then cocks his head. “Why don’t you just ask for Brianna’s hand, Nic? Make your own offer to Cassatto?”

I shake my head, dropping my gaze to the gravel. “Cassatto would never agree. His grudge held against my father carries over to me. The only reason I’m still breathing now is the fealty I swore to him.” I look up at Lucian, a twisted smile carved into my face. “The idea of dominating and tormenting The Poet’s son was more appealing to him than simply killing me off. Though now, just as his are, I’m sure my days are numbered.”

Understanding fills the creased planes of Lucian’s face. “You’re under my syndicate’s protection,” he says, reassuring me. “That means you and Elenore are protected by the *Cosa Nostra*. An alliance that precedes Cassatto’s marriage contract with Salvatore. Cassatto would be a fool to—”

“He’s all but dead,” I say, cutting my friend off. “He won’t be around to suffer any consequence. No, he’s leaving all that to fall on his daughter’s head. Besides, we both know how easy it is to make my death look like an accident.”

Our gazes stay locked in tense understanding. It would be poetically ironic that I should suffer the same fate as my father.

Lucian adjusts his stance. “There’s still time, Nic,” he says. “Don’t do anything crazy.”

He’s the only one who can say that to me and not receive a bullet in the head. As his Madman moniker suggests, Lucian Cross is certifiable. Once upon a time, his whole family was slaughtered by the *Cosa Nostra*, driving him right over the edge into a maddening mission of vengeance and retribution.

A title he once loathed, yet he now carries with honor, as he was able to destroy his demons and take his revenge.

I don't have that same kind of hope of escaping my father's legacy of ruin.

My demon is already in the ground.

Mine is a solo fight, a war waged daily with myself.

My phone buzzes with a notification, and I remove the device to light the screen. A message from one of Cassatto's lackeys displays, alerting me to go directly to his estate.

"Looks like I'm being summoned by the big boss now." As I step forward, I clasp Lucian on the shoulder. "Thank you for doing what you could," I say, then start toward my car. "Give Violet my blessings, and congratulations again."

"Nic..." His wary tone stalls my steps.

I turn toward him. "I promise, there will be no mess to clean up, my friend." I smile as I unlock my car door and slip behind the wheel.

His features draw together in suspicion, and a trace of worry gathers in the furrow of his brow.

But I'm giving him the truth. There will be no mess. Whereas my reputation is known for bodies and blood, this time, I will leave no evidence.

I will be like a thief in the night.

I don't need a masquerade party to dole out my revenge. I need no mask, as I've been wearing one already for too long. No, it's now time to remove the mask once and for all.

History always repeats itself.

Only this time, the imploring eyes of an angel won't stop my blade.

The day of Bria's wedding, I will become the Red Death.

...WHAT SWEET REST THERE MUST BE  
IN THE GRAVE

## DOMINIC

**T**he Cassatto estate is vast. As one of the largest and most heavily guarded compounds in Desolation, its fortress walls have never been breached. The interior of the main mansion is opulent and stylish, my mother having a hand in updating the late Mrs. Cassatto's eclectic taste to a more refined finish, whereas her own home is still haunted by my father's gothic and disturbing old-world charm.

As Elenore spends most of her time here with her husband, I took over the running of our house. I saw no reason to update the Erasto mansion; it's the only thing left of mine still standing in the underworld that still drives a molecule of fear into the hearts of opposing syndicates.

These thoughts swarm my mind as I stand central in Cassatto's study. With his senior clan members to my back, Cassatto stands over his giant oak desk, hands braced on the surface for support.

"Where are your men?" he asks me directly.

I lift my chin. "At the mansion keeping watch. I had a meeting with Lucian Cross at the docks," I tell him honestly. I have no doubt my movements are always being monitored.

He hums in acknowledgment, not looking surprised by this information. "Cross is dipping his toes into wares," he says, then chokes back a cough. "That the reason the Lorelle brothers were seen leaving my mansion today?"

I grit back the reflex to correct him. Technically, he does own my estate, and everything tied to the Erasto name. That is what my mother gave up in trade for the *Ndrangheta* protection and wiping my father's debt clean to all the organizations.

I lock my wrists behind my back, standing straight. "That's right," I say. "Another channel to move wares is needed to convince Cross to sign on. I'm negotiating it."



Not a complete lie, but not the entire truth. Always have a certain amount of veracity to fall back on; it's easier to manipulate. Building my own connection was part of the essential plan, but Lucian's update has killed that option dead.

But Cassatto isn't concerned with small-time weapon distribution. I've been called here for another reason.

That reason is made known when two of his soldiers wrangle in a thrashing and groaning man. A sack covers his head, and his wrists are bound with plastic cable ties. His suit jacket is torn from where I yanked it, yet fresh blood stains the tan shirt beneath.

They seat him in the chair before the desk and remove the threadbare bag from his head. Despite the gag wrapping the lower half of his face to keep him silent and the dark bruises swelling his face, I recognize him.

Without thought, I take a step forward, and Cassatto pins me with a severe glare. I stop when I hear the men behind me move forward.

"He's one of yours, yeah?" Cassatto demands to know.

Gino groans against the cloth gag as he attempts to turn his head.

"I was taking care of it," I say, hands clenched into aching fists behind my back. "I had him—"

"I know where you were *hiding* him, Dominic." Cassatto makes sure to stress his point, making it clear he's aware of the whole situation with the defunct wares. "That's not how we handle a traitor."

Cassatto snaps his fingers and points to an armoire along the wall. One of his guys hustles to do as commanded, which I know will result in either of us—or possibly both—suffering a painful punishment.

Cassatto moves from behind his desk, now utilizing a cane openly in the private confines of his own home. He stops short to stand and stare at me, the cheat between us.

“Back in Calabria, there was only one way to deal with a traitor who cheats and lies,” he says. He holds out a hand, his other bearing his weight on the cane, and a glass bottle filled with a clear substance is placed in his open palm. “A traitor’s filthy, lying mouth has to be cleaned. Just like cleaning a filthy toilet. Ah, the toilets where I grew up were vile, Dominic. We had to use a strong acid to clean the shit stains off.”

My gaze darts to the bottle in Cassatto’s hand. He then holds it outstretched to me. “Deal with your traitor.” He issues the command with a dark gleam behind his weathered eyes.

The defiant edge of a serrated blade slices across my will, to stand my ground and refuse Cassatto’s order. But it’s not for Gino’s sake.

As I accept the acid, Gino moans and tries to escape the chair, but the two giant men anchor meaty hands to his shoulders to pin him down. One of them tears the gag away, allowing Gino to get out a single syllable of his feeble plea before his mouth is being wrenched open.

I hear the noticeable *pop* of his jaw, and as I walk around to stand over him, this time, his pleas for mercy are real. Tears streak his dirty face, sweat beads across patches of his pallid skin that’s not marked with a bruise.

Glancing once at Cassatto, I set the bottle down on the edge of the desk so I can remove my suit jacket. I lay it across the desk, then roll my shirtsleeves up my forearms before I uncap the bottle and dig my free hand into Gino’s hair, holding his head in place as I shove the threaded bottle ring into his mouth.

As the acid funnels across his tongue and down his throat, the chemical stench of burning flesh rises up my nostrils. I turn my head to the side to avoid the fumes. Gino gurgles through the pain, blood and saliva coating his chin.

The splash back from his struggle sends a spray of acid to the backs of my hands.

The torture doesn’t last long. It’s not supposed to. When forcing a person to suffer an excruciating death, it’s done more

for the observers, to make sure every single one of them look at their own gruesome fate should they defy the clan.

And this right here, this is all for me. A not so subtle reminder—a warning—not to step out of line.

Cassatto nods his head, and one of his men takes the bottle from my hand.

“Now,” Cassatto muses aloud, “that’s how you deal with a traitor.”

Moving farther away from the fumes, I remove my ruined dress shirt and use it to wipe the saliva, blood, and acid from my hands.

“It’s a shame,” Cassatto continues, using his cane to maneuver back around his desk where he takes a seat, “when a perfectly good connection suddenly loses their mind and does something so fucking stupid.” He *tsks*, those beady, glazed-over eyes drilling into mine. “Such a useless waste.”

I toss my shirt into the wastebasket near the desk, then grab my suit jacket and shove my stinging hands into the sleeves, hardening my features to show no pain. “Are we done here?”

His smile is forced. “My daughter has grown into a beautiful woman,” he comments offhandedly.

He eyes me with a stern but curious glare, waiting for my reply.

I run my tongue over my teeth, then: “She has,” I say simply, agreeing.

“You’ve always been loyal to me, Dominic. In fact, you’ve been one of my most devoted soldiers.”

His *lackey*, he means. I’ve carried out the lowest, most demeaning undertakings. The enforcer. The fist and bullet of Ernesto Cassatto, his stepson minion.

“I hope I can trust Brianna in your care for the next few weeks,” he continues, shifting in his seat for comfort. “For whatever reason, my Brianna has chosen to remain at the mansion, and for the wedding to take place there.”

I know why Bria wants to spend this time at my mansion. So she can come and go without detection, using the secret corridor from her room to sneak out. A dark thought assaults me, that that's exactly what she's planning.

To run away.

The wedding date only being pushed back a week won't do anything but make her feel even more trapped.

The urgency to get back to her thunders through me.

"She's been having a difficult time...adjusting to the shotgun engagement," Cassatto says. "But she seems to fair better when her brother is around. She's looked up to you these past years. Convince her this is the right course for her, to show gratitude on her wedding day, and there could be a promotion for you soon after the alliance is sealed."

He wants me to obey and grovel, to claw at the scraps from his table with a smile and *gratitude*. Only, if this wedding goes down, I won't be wearing my blazer draped over my shoulders in clan display to denote my moving up the ranks.

I'll be wearing my death suit on my way six feet under.

And I'll be taking him and Salvatore and any others who stand in my way with me. Out of respect for his ways, just for Cassatto, I'll make sure to use acid.

The frantic urge to unsheathe the knife and drive the blade up through his skull pulls at my waning composure—but for Bria, I throttle my rage.

"I can do that," I say with a sincere nod. "Thank you, sir. I'd be honored to continue to prove my loyalty."

His narrowed gaze opens, having given him no reason to question my sincerity. A lie mixed with the truth. I always envision her face when dealing with her father.

"Good boy," he says, decidedly dismissing me. "Now, help dispose of this filthy piece of shit before he reeks up my office."

I nod respectfully before I obey the command.

The whole drive to the docks, I'm anxious to get to Bria.



DEEP IN THE EARTH MY LOVE IS  
LYING

BRIANNA

**M**y mother used to say: *a woman who rebels causes fear.*

I was young when she first told me this, whispered in her soft cadence. I didn't quite understand or fully comprehend her meaning at the time. I remember expecting the second half, as if there was another part to this saying that she was holding back, waiting for the right moment to impart on me.

I regret I never asked her before she died.

Although, with the help of my aunt's wisdom and deprogramming, I've been able to grasp what my mother might have been trying to convey.

I understand now that a woman amid the clan who rebels against her place is seen as uncontrollable, disobedient, and an embarrassment to her husband and the male members of her family, making the men appear weak in their inability to dominate her.

But more so, this deep-rooted fear stems from her very defiance. If a woman thinks and acts for herself, if she rebels and stands up to the clans and the archaic rules and structure, then the whole system starts to dismantle from the inside.

Because it's the women who make up the foundation to which these men have free reign to profit off of. As it's the woman's role to help and support the men, everything we do must be in the interest of the organization.

We are the nurturers, and we make sure our men are cared for and tended to. Placing money on our sons' and husbands' jail commissaries while they're serving their sentence. Moving money between organizations unnoticed, through our small hobby businesses, so it's undetected by authorities. Even running drugs in our own vehicles with our children in the backseats.

I've heard claim to all and more.



And how does the clan repay our loyalty, our servitude?

I once heard my father say: “The bitch that can no longer look you in the eye must be killed, and killed quickly, or else she’ll bite you.”

You are either loyal to the *‘Ndrangheta*, or you are dead to them.

Contemplative, I circle my finger over the cool marble of the kitchen island, remembering that first conversation with my aunt where she revealed her secret operation. She’s risking her life to liberate women who want out of the *‘Ndrangheta*.

Should my father ever learn of the women in his family involved in a betrayal of this magnitude, he would punish his own sister in the most debasing and public way to make an example of her, to redirect that fear back into us.

And this is why, when Nic storms through the front doors of his home, covered in blood and pain and eyes blazing, I’m torn—torn between the nurturing side instilled in me, and the fearful but fierce inward voice intoning that I should run and leave him to suffer.

I push away from the island as he stalks through the arched doorway. His eyes rove over me in heated pursuit, and I’m unsure whether he’s taking stock of my person or deciding where to strike first.

“Nic...? What’s wrong?” I hate the way my voice trembles. His challenging, consuming presence absorbs the air in the room, leaving me near breathless.

“You’re here,” he says, then groans, catching the edge of the island to steady himself.

“Where else would I be?” I ask, my confusion forgotten as I notice he’s not wearing a shirt. His suit jacket parts to reveal his bare chest. I bite the corner of my lip as I avert my gaze away from the taut muscle definition of his abs and the well-defined V dipping beneath his slacks.

When I catch sight of his hand braced on the marble counter, I curse. “Jesus, Nic. What happened to your hand?”

“Nothing.”

He could be missing a limb right now and still maintain “nothing” was wrong.

Against my better judgement, the nurturer within me wins out. I mutter beneath my breath as I search the drawers and cabinets for antiseptic and bandages. One thing about a mob house, there are always first aid supplies at the ready.

Of course, let me tend to my enemy’s wounds and nurse him to full health before I put a blade in his heart to end his life.

Completely logical.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” I demand. “Where were you all night? How long have you been hurt?”

His attention directs to Vito, as if he’s wary of speaking in front of my bodyguard. Vito is always with me, has been since as far as I can remember, except the months I spend with my Calabrian family, and I often forget he’s even in the same room.

I turn toward my bodyguard. “I need you to leave the room.”

He crosses his thick arms and gives Nic a murderous look that states he still has words about their last encounter at the swimming pool yesterday. “I don’t think that’s wise, Miss Cassatto.”

“I’m not asking,” I say, stepping in front of Nic before he can make a move to end the matter himself.

At my serious tone and insistence, Vito concedes with a heavy, relenting breath. “I’ll be right around the corner,” he assures me, keeping his narrowed gaze aimed on Nic as he exits the kitchen.

I grab the bottle of antiseptic and a clean towel. “Remove your jacket,” I instruct Nic.

He hesitates a beat before cocking an eyebrow in a show of bravado and commencing to shuffle the black blazer off one shoulder. He bites back a wince as the coarse material glides over his hand.

A flush warms my cheeks as he stands before me, his heavily tattooed chest in my line of sight. His body heat presses against me with his close proximity, his skin radiating heat like a furnace.

It feels different than when we were in the pool, more intimate. Then, I at least had the water as a barrier between our skin. The air holds no barrier at all, and is charged with a powerful current drawing me toward him like steel to a magnet.

To escape his intensity, I turn toward the supplies on the island.

“You don’t have to do this,” he says, placing one of his injured hands on the counter.

“I know.” I inspect the inflamed red marks splotched along his wrist and hand. “Burns?” I ask, before I begin to treat the injury.

“Chemical,” he confirms. “Acid.”

Immediately, I know what transpired. My father has an appreciation for the old-school ways. I recap the bottle of antiseptic and set it aside, instead pointing Nic toward the island sink.

He places his hands in the basin, and I look up at him. “This will sting,” I warn.

He huffs a derisive breath. “More?”

“Don’t be a baby.” I lay the towel under his forearms and proceed to turn on the tap. I dispense a couple pumps of hand soap into my palm, then take a fortifying breath before I begin washing Nic’s hands.

He expels a hiss between gritted teeth, but otherwise doesn’t flinch. I gently massage the liquid soap over the backs of his hands, working it into a slippery lather, careful of the burns.

“He made you do it?” I ask as our palms slip together. I wash dried blood away and watch it swirl around the porcelain sink. I realize my words probably hurt his pride more than the acid to his skin.

Nic watches my hands cleansing his with an absorbed fascination, the pain apparently subsided. The feel of his rough palms, callused and strong, is abrasive against my silken skin, like flint striking smooth steel, making me wonder what his hands would feel like on my body.

And when Nic catches one of my hands in his large grip, my heart skips a beat. He turns my hand over, reverently inspecting my fingers and palm like a foreign object.

His gaze narrows on my ring, and I suppress the instinct to jerk out of his grasp.

“Your hands are so tiny,” he says, instead of answering my question. His thumb glides over the healed-over blisters on my palm, the ones I earned from months of training to wield a *canne*. “How does a mafia princess have calluses.”

I’m not sure if it’s a simple observation or an insult, but the flurry of sensations his touch incites is too much, and I push our hands under the running tap to rinse them.

“Let’s get you bandaged,” I say, deflecting.

Nic watches me pat the towel along his hands and wrists with a guarded look covering his expression. Once I’ve finished bandaging his right hand, I nod to his left, and he moves it before me on the counter.

We’re silent for a long stretch before I set the towel aside and, as I’m inspecting the surface level burns, I trace a nail over the design along his forearm, lost in thought.

I’ve never touched Nic so openly before, and I’m unable to resist the temptation to touch the tattoos I’ve all but memorized from afar, wondering what his skin felt like. Whether he was warm or cool to the touch, if the ink was raised or smooth.

“Who tended to your wounds...that night?”

His unexpected question makes me glance up, and I find his gaze settled on the deep scar slashed along my collarbone.

I swallow the sudden ache. “Your mother.”

This seems to surprise him, his eyebrows drawing together over those coal eyes, but he nods once in acceptance. He says nothing else as he backs away, finally releasing me from his tense hold.

Elenore has actually done a number of motherly things for me over the years. One being to sneak me to a doctor so I could get a birth control shot to help with cramps, a subject I would never be able to discuss with my *papà*.

With a full inhale, I begin folding the towel. Nic's newly bandaged hand circles my wrist. Before the jolt of alarm has time to travel to my heart, he shoves the sleeve of my shirt up my forearm.

A shadow falls over his face, and fury ignites dark flames behind his eyes. His thumb travels over the black-and-blue skin of my wrist, tracing the outline of the bruise.

His grip tightens behind the tender purple blotch as he moves in close to tower over me. "What happened?" he asks, his tone as coarse as his fingers pressing into my skin.

I shake my head, any rational reply momentarily startled from my thoughts. I'm usually better about not injuring myself while practicing with my *canne* to leave behind any evidence—but after the incident at the pool left me...bothered, I was careless today.

Nic brings my arm up between us, his gaze molten as he stares down at me. "Who did this to you?" he demands.

"It was an accident," is all I'm able to get out before he drops my arm and rushes from the room.

*Shit.* I yank my sleeve down and follow after him, his determined steps booming in the corridor ahead of me.

Nic finds Vito stationed outside the kitchen and has him backed against the wall in a matter of seconds.

Hands gripped to my bodyguard's collar, Nic drills him for answers, the two men struggling against each other. Panic flares in my veins, and I frantically look around for Dante.

*Where is he?*

*Shit. Shit.*

I bring out my phone, my hands shaking as I try to text Dante for help. The sound of flesh smacking flesh sounds over my chaotic breathing, and I give up on the phone and decide to grab the *canne* from my room—to show Nic how the injury happened. How I was stupid enough to strike my wrist while doing something as silly as teaching myself to fight with a weapon to better defend myself on my wedding night... *Anything* to make him stop his attack on Vito.

“He didn’t do anything, Nic.” The words rush out as I run toward him, trying to find a way between the two tussling men. Nic drives another punch into Vito’s battered face, and blood mists the air. I claw at my hair. “*Stop*. I can prove it—”

Dante enters the room and barrels toward the scuffle to intervene.

One breath where relief stills my racing heart, then I glimpse the shiny flash of steel.

The air stalls in my lungs. All sound is swallowed beneath the furious tempo of my heartbeat filling my ears as I watch Nic drive the blade into the back of Vito’s neck.

Nic twists the knife, severing Vito’s spinal cord, before he pulls it out in one clean move. My bodyguard slides to the floor. His arms dangle uselessly, his eyes open and unseeing as death quickly claims him.

Time speeds up, and Dante has Nic in his grasp, turning him to face forward and expertly evading the swipe of Nic’s hooked knife.

In the same beat, Nic has Dante’s gun knocked from his hand. I watch the piece skate across the marble floor.

Nic grabs Dante’s throat. “Did you hurt her?”

Dante latches on to Nic’s arm, groaning. “What the fuck? No —”

The blaze of Nic’s gaze touches me as he looks my way. “Did he fucking touch you?” he seethes.

I shake my head. “God, no. Nic...stop this—”

A growl tears free of Nic as he drives his fist into Dante's flank, then delivers another merciless punch to his face, sending Dante to the floor. He stands over him, chest heaving, bandaged hands balled into fists ready to beat life from his body.

I chance a step toward the gun, and am pinned in place when Nic's fiery eyes latch on to me. I stop moving. "Please, Nic... No one hurt me."

As his mind seems to clear of the murderous haze, he returns his attention to my bodyguard. "I don't care if you didn't lay a hand on her, you failed to protect her." He steps over him and stops before Vito's lifeless body. Digging out his weapon from his jacket, he stands and pushes the barrel of the gun to Dante's forehead. "Cassatto placed me in charge of you—" he looks at me before directing his aim back on Dante "—so your bodyguard's services are no longer required." He chambers a round, the sound echos through the house with haunting finality.

"Wait—" I manage, and step closer. I glance down at Vito, at the guard who has been with me since before I can remember. I swallow as I meet Nic's black eyes. "Okay. Okay. I'll admit the truth."

Nic lifts his chin, features bracketed in hard lines. "Tell me how you got that bruise, Bria."

Gaze shifting to the dead body of Vito, I make a choice to save Dante. "It was Vito," I say, finding Nic's gaze. "He didn't mean to, though. It was in the pool room. Embarrassed after what happened, I tripped." I shake my head, hoping like hell my story is remotely believable. "He just caught me, his grip a little too hard."

Dante says nothing. His head braced by the barrel of the gun, he looks directly at Nic. He knows I'm lying, but he says nothing.

The gun is removed, and I deflate, my body giving over to the trembling as adrenaline begins to ebb, leaving me shaking.

Nic tucks the gun into the waistband of his slacks before he steps around Dante and picks up the discarded revolver. “Get out of my house,” he orders Dante.

With one unsure glance my way, the bodyguard who has vowed to sacrifice his life for mine asks me now what I need. With one command, Dante would face off against Nic—but that’s not what I want.

“I’m okay,” I assure him.

Dante stands and takes out his phone. He gives me one last concerned look before he turns and heads out of the mansion, placing a call to my father.

Shock firing through my system and beating against every artery, I stare at Vito, the low roar of my blood drowning out all sounds.

“You killed him,” I hear myself say.

“Should have killed them both.”

“You’re a fucking monster.”

“Not sure why you’d ever doubt that.”

Indignation rises inside me. “Did my father really put you in charge of me?” I demand to know.

“Yes.” His one word, intoned in his deep baritone, hangs in the dense air as he fires off a text on his phone. I assume to order one of his guys to clean up the body, and that thought gnaws at my stomach with a sick queasiness as my gaze falls on Vito’s lifeless form once again.

Then Nic steps toward me and tics his chin toward the staircase. “Upstairs, Bria.”

I stare into his brutally beautiful face, getting as far as opening my mouth to retort, before he has my arm in his ruthless clutch and drags me to the stairs. He forces me to the top landing, where he then steers me toward my bedroom and plants me in front of the bookcase.

Yanking free, I wrap my arms around my midsection. My body is a trembling mess, my head even worse. Nothing feels



real in this moment. I haven't fully processed that Vito is dead, and as Nic moves toward the bookcase, a current of ice freezes my blood.

He stands in front of the locked door.

I fortify my resolve, standing my place. "You killed a man—"

"I kill many men."

"—for no reason at all."

Shirtless, all his inked skin on full, powerful display, Nic licks his lips. A devilish gleam lights behind his tapered eyes. "You tell me that you're going to have your bodyguards fuck you, Bria. You tell me this, and then you strip naked in front of one, and now you're shocked when he's dead." He nods slowly in mocking confirmation of his own statement, then turns toward my dressing mirror. "For that alone, I should have stained my mother's precious marble floor with Dante's entrails. I let him live, and Vito's lucky he got the quick death he did, angel."

The imagery settles over my vision in perfect, gruesome clarity. Nic would have done exactly that had I not lied to stop him. And all because I made a senselessly reckless comment about finding any man to take my virginity.

In true mafia Neanderthal form, Dominic Erasto laid claim to me the night he first shed blood—a claim that bound me to his blade only. No other man will touch me...not before he takes his revenge.

A man's toy is his alone to break.

Despite the churning adrenaline urging me to dart for the weapon under my bed, I fight the reflexive impulse and my fear, and I lift my chin. "It's my body—"

"Has anyone touched you?" he demands, cutting me off.

I swallow. "No."

He looks at the bookcase, then me. "It's fucking staying that way."

He picks up the slight wooden foot stool in front of my dressing mirror and snaps the leg off like a twig. He then

storms to the bookcase and shoves the panel aside to reveal the hidden door.

“One of my men will be outside your room all hours of the night,” he says, his tone strained as he thrusts the wooden leg into the seam of the door frame. The frame cracks, giving beneath the peg forcefully wedged to jamb the door closed.

Trapping me inside.

Fiery indignation simmers in my veins, and as he pulls toward me with forged steely resolve, I glance down at the blood speckling my white shirt. I didn't realize it at the time, but I'm wearing Vito's blood.

I grip the hem and rip the shirt over my head, letting the ruined garment drop to the floor between us.

A dare.

A challenge.

Cool air nips at my heated flesh. I'm not wearing a bra, and I stand before Nic in mirrored defiance, my naked skin a summons to his feral beast.

*Touch me. I dare you.*

He threatened to leave handprints on my ass cheeks if I dared to remove my clothes in front of any man again. So here I am, daring him.

He swallows audibly as his dark gaze drags over my exposed body. I grasp the button of my pants and, before I'm able to wrench the snap open, Nic eats the distance between us and has his large, bandaged hand anchored around mine.

“If you drop those pants and are wearing nothing underneath...” He trails off, his voice a guttural whisper. “Don't.”

His grip on my hand tightens, whether to stop me or himself I'm not sure, but the pain travels up my arm and blooms into an ache that ignites my whole body. I stand so still the only movement between us is the rapid pulse of his heartbeat in his neck, and the air we're exchanging with each desperate breath.

Jaw clenched, a war raging behind his pained features, he removes his hand from mine.

I take a solitary moment to study his face, peeling back the hardened layers in search of the truth behind his words. But just as suddenly, he closes off, a mask descending to shut me out.

The sharp sound of the snap coming undone detonates through the room.

I hold his gaze a fleeting second longer, testing him, before I turn around and start toward the bathroom. I push the waistband down my hips, stepping out of the pants as I reach the threshold, giving him a clear view of my ass.

“I’m taking a shower,” I announce, barely controlling the waver in my voice. I reach the sink counter and brace my hands on the edge for support. After inhaling a measured breath, I say, “See yourself out.”

A few torturous heartbeats pass where I wait, where I question if Nic will appear in the doorway to make good on his vow to punish me, every inch of my exposed skin aflame and aching in nerve-racking anticipation.

Then I jolt at the sound of the door slamming shut.

*Tonight.*

It has to be tonight.

Daring to look at myself, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I touch the scar on my chest and reverently trace my fingers over the raised, silken skin, lost in memory.

The longer I take, the more I lose myself and my purpose.

Vito should not have had to die because I’m playing a game with my deranged stepbrother.

This ends tonight.



FOR THE MOON NEVER BEAMS,  
WITHOUT BRINGING ME DREAMS

## DOMINIC

**T**he oscillating blades of the ceiling fan above chop the air. The *whomp whomp whomp* fills the otherwise dense silence of my room.

Bandaged hands braced behind my head, covers rucked down around my shins, I lie on the bed and stare up at the whipping blades, my thoughts a storm of pounding hail, my body wound too tight for sleep.

Like a red-hot branding iron, the sight of Bria standing before me half naked is seared into my mind. Her goddamn perfect body daring me to touch her, baring her vulnerability beneath a desperate defiance that had my cock damn near tearing through my pants.

I might have stopped breathing. Even now, my lungs are constricted in a furious vise that threatens to make my heart explode.

She showed her ass—literally—and it took all my willpower not to chase her down and bend her over and spank that sweet little ass until it was blistered red.

Any pain I'd sustain to my hands would be worth it. She'd burn more painfully than any acid.

I rake a hand down my face. The bandage wrapping my palm is an annoying barrier from stroking my cock that has been rock-hard since I forced myself out of her room.

When the monster is ravenous, I feed. Just as earlier today I drew blood in a futile attempt to sate the violence raging inside my skull that one innocent touch from Bria initiated.

Granted, Vito had it coming. Whether he bruised her or not, it didn't matter. The moment Bria looked at him from across the pool and removed her top he was a dead man.

Sinking my blade into her bodyguard's neck was the only way to keep me from pinning her to that fucking kitchen island and claiming her right there.

I expel a tense breath from my lungs and meet her smoldering gaze behind my shuttered eyes as she doctored my hands. Her soft and slender fingers spearing between mine, the feel of her soft skin slippery and wet...

“Fucking Christ.” I shift positions, tempted to either tear the dressing away or just beat my cock off with the coarse bandage right in place. I almost crave the abrasive rub to counter my craving.

Another, stronger temptation pulls at the weakened tether of my sanity, and if I don’t calm the fuck down, I’ll climb out of this bed and toss Luca on his ass before I break down her door and commit carnage that will send my damned soul straight to hell.

Taking Bria—right the fuck now—would put an end to this misery. She’d be ruined, the marriage contract voided. I’d suffer Cassatto’s wrath, most likely with an acid bath—but the torment would finally end.

No waiting until the wedding. No biding time in the shadows to kill Salvatore like a plague.

Because the torture of watching her with another man for the next how many ever years while I secretly crave her, want her, need her...to the point of sheer fucking madness...

That will kill me. Absolutely.

I have only two choices: a torturously slow death, or a quick one.

*Pick your poison.*

My turbulent thoughts churn into a vortex that has my head spinning, and I don’t register the gentle give of the mattress until I feel a light touch on my arm.

Before my eyes open, I have a slender throat clutched in my hand. My grip tightens and, as her pulse thumps against my fingers, Bria’s soft features come into focus in the moonlight.

Something primal stirs beneath my skin, its teeth bared. A rush of heat blisters my veins, like being raked over hot coals, and instead of releasing her, I squeeze tighter.

Her hands go to her neck, nails scraping at the seam of where my bandage-wrapped palm welds to her skin. “Nic, please—”

My name spoken on her breathy exhale drags me away from the edge. I loosen my grip just enough to free her breath, then I slip my hand around her neck and clasp her nape, drawing her face close.

“What are you doing here, Bria?”

Hair still wet from her shower and falling over the side of her face, she bites the corner of her lip, stalling. She’s wearing a silky night thing, all black. The fabric grazes my ribs. The smooth feel of her breast beneath that thin slip causes havoc to my nervous system.

Finally, she lays a hand to my bare chest with a sultry curl to her lips. “It actually wasn’t hard to get the bookcase door open,” she says. “You broke the door frame, so—”

“That’s not what I asked.”

This close, I can make out the dusting of freckles across her nose, and the beautiful sight crushes my trachea.

Biting down on that fucking lip again, further testing my self-control, she bears down on my chest and effortlessly hooks a leg over my body. Her soft weight settles on top of me and cracks my resolve. The warmth of her body sitting atop mine tightens my stomach muscles, and the sinew around my bones constricts painfully.

“Jesus...” I close my eyes, trying my damndest not to see Bria straddling me. But the feel of her...fucking hell. I grip the edge of the mattress to hold myself back, restraint nearly decimated as she lightly drags her nail over the dip of my jugular notch.

I release her neck and clasp her wrist, the one not bruised, stopping her from roaming farther down. She tilts her head, features etched in a seductive mix of want and uncertainty.

“I want you to be the one, Nic,” she whispers, the desperation leaking from her timid voice stalling the air in my lungs.



With a sudden, biting clarity, I realize what's held me back. Not her father, or the clan law. Not the fear of death. There's nothing in this fucking world that terrifies me enough to keep me from her.

I don't want Bria once. Once would never be enough.

"God, you killed Vito tonight," she says, "all because you thought he touched me, hurt me. How can you allow Salvatore to be the first man to have me?" She blinks back the wetness from her eyes and shakes her head. "I can't be with a man I don't know for my first time. I want to be touched—*really* touched—by someone who I know. Who knows *me*."

A dark groan works free of my constricted throat. "Fuck, you're trying to kill me."

Her face pales. Even in the dim lighting, the only source coming from the sliver of moonlight spilling through the balcony doors, I can see her sudden fear. "Why would you say that?"

"What do you think will happen when your husband realizes you're not a virgin on your wedding night?" I release her wrist so I can drive a hand through my hair. "Fuck, Bria. It doesn't matter who you choose to fuck, I'd be the one blamed for your ruin. Cassatto would have me killed on principle alone. Your father would make me suffer for tarnishing the clan, the family, so shamefully. You know this is true, and yet here you are, sitting on my cock, begging me to fuck you."

Instead of a raven perched above my door, she's a wicked vixen perched on my dick. And fucking hell, if she grinds her pussy against my cock ring one more time, I'll toss out every last conviction and willingly become a dead man walking.

"No one has to know," she says. She licks her lips, shifting on top of me so I can feel the imprint of her slit. She pushes the heels of her palms up my chest, settling her mouth near my ear. "No one ever has to know it was you. I can keep a secret really, really well and..." She presses her mouth over the shell of my ear. "I'm still not wearing any panties."

*Oh, goddamn.* My cock throbs at her sinful confession. My hips buck in an involuntary response, and I swear I feel her soak my boxers with her wet heat. “*Fuck,*” I growl.

Releasing my grip on the mattress, I clasp her waist. In a maddening desire to bring her closer, my hands rove up her back. I tunnel my fingers into her hair and pull her down. My breath is ragged, chewing at my lungs as I maintain the smallest measure of control.

“Things like this never stay secret,” I say to her, and my words feel like a concession. The tiny lift of her lips tells me she knows I’m close to surrender.

With a daring roll of her hips, she tears right through the sheer veil of my sanity, obliterating the last of my restraint. My fingers curl into her hair, gripping to hold her in place.

“Why are you torturing me, little raven?” It leaves my mouth in a desperate plea as she continues to undulate her hips in needy rolls, grinding her pussy against my hard shaft.

A fierce shiver travels through her, and she releases a broken breath against my mouth. “You tortured me for two years,” she says, her nails digging into my trapezius muscles between my neck and shoulder. “The fact I affect you at all makes me so fucking wet.”

“Jesus Christ.” The last thread of my control frays, and I snap it clean in two with a hard thrust up against her.

Her breathless moan curls inside me like a flame dancing too close to the fuse.

I’m not sure who moves first—her or me—but as my heart knocks in violent percussion, there’s a single heartbeat where either of us could stop this, then in the next I have her mouth crushed against mine.

The taste of Bria is pure, divine rapture. Like finally getting a drop of water after roaming a barren desert for weeks. It’s that goddamn satisfying. I can barely savor the moment, my hunger to consume her that feral, as I unleash two years’ worth of yearning and tear into the kiss with a starved depravity.

As her soft lips move over mine, her tongue slips out, hesitant at first, then with the release of the sweetest moan, meets mine—and I lead her with ferocious guidance. We clash in fiery pursuit to chase each other over the edge, setting fire to the line we're forbidden to cross.

Desperate to touch her everywhere and *feel* her, I rip the bandages off my hands, then grip the hem of her slip. I draw it up so my fingers can trail the smooth skin of her ass. Fuck, she wasn't lying; there's absolutely nothing preventing me from touching her, and I seek her hot center like a heat-seeking missile.

I drag my fingers over the delicate contour of her ass until I reach the warmth between her thighs and, as soon as I feel the wetness drenching her pussy, a curse rumbles through my frantic kiss. As I trace the slippery softness of her lips, I sink my other hand into the tangle of her damp hair and pull her harder to me.

I am a fucking liar. When I claimed either one of us could stop this—I never would've been able to stop. Even if she changed her mind and begged me right now, her tears would only fuel me on. I'd wipe those tears away just to gather them and stroke my cock before I fucked her raw.

We're past the point of no return.

I stole life tonight. I drew blood. And that act did nothing to sate the monster's bloodlust. Because once it scents Bria, there is nothing else in this world that will satisfy its need—not when the blood it craves is right here between her sweet, beckoning thighs.

The beast within goes feral in response, salivating for a taste of her.

I let her rock on top a few moments longer as I trace the seam of her pussy, feeling her get wetter, before I flip her onto her back and cage my body over hers. Taking control, I spread her legs wide as I seat my hips between her thighs. She watches me with carnal lust filling her gaze as I draw the thin strap of her slip down around her shoulder to expose one beautiful breast.

It's taking every bit of my willpower to go slow...to be gentle...as the desire to brutally ravish her rips through me with vicious need.

But I've been patient for so long, I can give her this. I can bring her pleasure first to ease the pain. My *angioletta* deserves that. Not a wedding night with a man who could never appreciate what's been gifted to him.

Her first time will be with a man who worships her.

For her, I'm leashing every feral instinct. I'll hold myself back, even though it goes against my very nature as hellfire roils my blood and the monster roars inside my head, demanding I swallow her screams and lap her tears.

I can trace every curve of her body and know what lies beneath her silken flesh. What tendon will inflict the most pain. What zone will crest the height of pleasure. What bone to snap to incapacitate her. And all this gnaws inside my mind while I restrain every single deviant urge to shatter my beautiful doll.

What she's giving me is something angelic, something pure—but she's taking something in return also. She's stealing the anguish and fire to gift me that moment of peace I only ever find when lost in her eyes. That's where I am now as I gaze into her, my fingers exploring her sensitive folds, learning what makes her breath break and her eyes close half-mast in bliss.

"I need to taste you." I lower myself between her legs and hook an arm around her thigh, locking her to me as I breathe over her glistening pussy, and loving the way she shivers. As her body trembles, her breathing comes faster, and as I take my first taste in a long and slow lick up her seam, I fucking come undone.

My tongue delves deeper, sliding between her lips and curling upward to flick over her clit.

I lack the ability to describe how goddamn delectable she tastes. The only word running through my head is *mine*.

“Oh god, Nic...” Bria’s hands go to her hair as her hips roll in little urgent bucks.

She’s sin and sanctity and pure, unbridled passion. It kills me that she’s only giving herself to me because she doesn’t want to give herself to him. But right in this moment, I’m a glutton, I’m a heathen, and I’m going to fuck her so goddamn right I’ll ruin her so she’ll never look at another man again.

I pull back and say, “Look at me.” Her gaze captures mine on command. “I want your eyes on me while I devour your sweet pussy, angel.”

Her thighs clench against me in response, and then she shoves her fingers into my hair. Her chest heaves and her limbs are racked with tremors as I prod inside her with my tongue. My thumb pins her clit, and I rub over the bundle of nerves to send a shockwave coursing through her.

I slip a finger inside the slick warmth of her channel. A low growl climbs free at the feel of her tight flesh gripped around my finger. The burning sensation on the back of my hand is a welcomed pain, a needed measure to keep me grounded, to keep me from tearing into her.

I want her loose enough to take me, because once I’m inside her, I’m not sure I’ll be able to hold back any longer. I push another finger against her folds, seeking entrance as she undulates beneath me.

I groan against her thigh, nipping my teeth at her tender skin. “Goddamn, you’re so fucking tight, Bria, you’re fucking killing me.”

I’m like a horny-ass teen, humping the bed as I lap at her swollen clit and finger her tight pussy, so eager to be inside her that my cock threatens to blow inside the confines of my boxers.

Her fingers grip at my hair, nails deliciously scraping over my scalp. “Fuck me, Nic. Now. Don’t hold back. I want to feel all of you.”

“Christ, Bria. Don’t say things like that to me.”

I look up to see a pained expression straining her features, and god, she stirs the embers beneath my skin into a roaring fire. The monster within claws at my skin from the inside, demanding to take her rough and fast.

A beautiful sheen of sweat coats her forehead as she holds my gaze. "I lied, Nic."

My body tenses, the bars of my rib cage contract around the muscle locked within as I wait for her next words.

"I lied down there in the wine cellar," she continues around a sudden intake of air, "when I said I wanted just any man to fuck me. You killed Vito tonight because of what I said...and it was a lie. You're the only one I want...have ever wanted."

A low, dark growl resounds from inside the cavity of my chest as I remove my fingers and taste her arousal. I'm all fleshly, carnal need as primal lust strokes a maddening flame over my skin. Then I'm tunneling under the bloodlust.

I lift up and prowl over her like a caged beast finally set free. "Do you want *this*, Bria?"

I push the head of my cock against her pussy, letting her feel the thick, steel ring, and dying at the feel of her wetness as it drenches the material of my boxers.

I need her consent one more time.

Because, before this night is over, I am going to ruin this girl in the most debasing, vile way, and I won't stop until she says the word.

She licks her lips, eyes glistening with lust and yearning. "Yes. I want this. I want your cock. I want you, Nic."

*Goddamn.* I'm fucking done.

My angel is wet and needy, watching me lower my boxers with a lust-filled haze shining in her whiskey eyes, and I'm drunk on her in their depths.

My cock unrestrained, I grab myself at the base and stroke slowly toward the crown. I nudge the cock ring, and a hiss slips past my gritted teeth at the sight of Bria wriggling beneath me in need.

I seat myself between the summit of her thighs and notch the head of my cock at her soaked entrance. Her nails scrape my back in anticipation, her chest rising and falling beneath me, and I dip down to take her perfect nipple into my mouth.

Her breath clips short when her fingers skim over the smooth scars on my back. She halts and, it's only a moment of hesitation, one second stretched out for eternity, but I hold my breath until she resumes.

Releasing her nipple, I rise up and capture her eyes. Muscles flexed, I push the crown of my cock against her smooth folds, goddamn shaking as I control myself from entering her too fast, and I feel a pinch in my shoulder blade.

The sudden pain is small and sharp and centered. A strained nerve, maybe—but the piercing sensation biting into my flesh is distracting enough to stop my progression, and I halt before fully entering her.

Within seconds, the pain travels to my head. Pressure builds, and a sense of dizziness tilts me off kilter. Blood rams my arteries with a rush of adrenaline. My pulse quickens in my veins, rousing a dreamy feel of soft gauze around my brain.

I give my head a quick shake, blinking back the unease before I latch on to Bria's gaze again, using her to ground myself in the moment.

She doesn't move. She doesn't breathe. She doesn't question what's wrong, and my chest tightens painfully at her oddly calm expression.

My senses go on high alert as Bria drops her hand over the side of the bed.

I see it first—the flash of glinting steel—before I catch the blurred trail of her hand in my peripheral. She moves quickly. Thinking impaired, I barely block the attack as she drives a short dagger toward my chest.

“What the fuck—?” Using my forearm to knock her wrist aside, I aim for her bruised wrist. I strike her injury to make her next attempt more difficult.

She grits her teeth and, with a groan of effort, brings the weapon up again, the tip of the three-inch blade aimed at my carotid. Not a wild, sloppy slash at my neck. She's precise. She aims for her target as if she knows the amount of force needed to crack cartilage and puncture the artery.

It's one of the most lethal places to strike to take out your enemy.

She knows what she's doing.

But even in a confused state of mind, so do I.

The blade nicks my forearm as I rear back on my knees and drive my arm upward, sending her strike wide. My hand collars her neck, and I squeeze. I anticipate the clink of the blade striking the marble floor, only to feel steel tearing into my flesh.

As seconds suspend, my gaze lowers to wear Bria's hand grasps the hilt of the dagger, the blade sunk into my stomach.

*She fucking stabbed me.*

Numbness slithers beneath my skin.

The stab wound isn't lethal, but my fury is—and I look down at her beneath me, so beautiful, so sacred, and I want to destroy all that sacred beauty.

Right hand sealed around her throat, I feel her pulse fire against my fingers. Her gaze flits in manic motion from my eyes to the dagger jutting from my lower quadrant. I touch the wound before I use my left hand to trap her wrist, removing her hand from the hilt.

I leave the dagger in place.

The real wound tears through my sternum, ripping through muscle to reach my proverbial heart, causing more damage and pain than any physical wound she could inflict.

And the monster wants to wound back.

On a dark growl, I pin her wrist above her head and thrust inside her in one ruthless stab of my cock, decimating the sliver of flesh.



Her cry cracks the air and ripples over me in euphoric waves as I bury myself deep inside her, fueled by rage and the goddamn perfect feel of Bria wrapped around me.

I'm a damned demon but I won't stop, unrestrained and feral.

I tighten my hold around her wrist. Blood from my wound seeps past the slats of my fingers and smears her skin as I savagely fuck her.

She fights against me, her body bucking and squirming, her scream choked off by my hand collared around her throat. Those wide amber eyes ensnare me, and it's like steel striking flint, the fire sparks and roars in an instant.

The desire to ravish her violently and completely is my only course.

I drive into her again, harder, shredding my sanity and fucking dying at the feel of her. I bear down harder on top of her, spreading her thighs with my hips, spearing her with my cock and sinfully basking in every salacious, depraved jolt of pleasure that comes from her fight.

I peer down into her pained face—that beautiful, angelic face I've worshiped—and breathe in her fear, reveling in every unholy thing I'm going to do to her.

I want her tears.

Through the carnal bloodlust, I say, "Cassatto sent his own flesh and blood." My accusation seethes from the pit of my black soul.

Admittedly, it was smart on his part. Bria was able to get closer to me than anyone else.

For that, I'll send his daughter back to him ruined.

For her betrayal, I'll break her. Body and mind.

I thrust into her again, stealing her fight. I choke her as I fuck her. Ruining her. Though even in my drug induced stupor, I know she's the one who's ruined me beyond repair.

There's no coming back from this.

The blade is still sheathed in my stomach, and I'm sheathed inside her—some brutal form of poetry unfolding between us. For this, there's no doubt my demonic soul is cursed to hell, but I'm taking my angel with me.

Arousal and blood coats my cock, powering each thrust deeper, the insatiable need to fill her tearing a wild, destructive path through my brain.

I'm fucking lost.

Her pussy clenches around my cock so tight, the cock ring digs against her walls, and I mutter a string of foul profanities and loosen my grip on her neck. She pulls in a breath past the constriction of her throat and her inner walls pulse, making me come undone with the next round of her fight.

“Ah...fuck. Oh, goddamn it...” I growl as I sink so deep inside her, my soul is flayed from my body.

The pain carves a path of sadistic pleasure all the way to my groin, and it takes the will of the fucking gods to leash me before I tear right through her.

As I find her gaze past the haze of bloodlust, a distant whisper of her sweet voice breaks through the madness: *Little death*.

And for a fleeting moment, I crave to see that serene beauty painted on her face.

I fight the monster back into the cage. I pull out of her and hold myself above her thrashing body, my chest heaving. Trembling, I shake the dazed sensation from my head.

Bria becomes motionless beneath me, and I glimpse the glistening trickle of tears leaking down the side of her temples.

She looks like a fallen angel in the darkened shadow of the bed. With a heated curse, I fumble off the edge, hands braced around the hilt of the dagger, then I yank the blade from my stomach.

I take labored breaths to collect my bearings, whatever drug she used potent enough to disorient me, but not knock me out. It also dulls the pain.

I hear the bed creak, and my gaze darts to Bria. Her black slip is torn and hangs off one shoulder. A thin rivulet of blood trails down one of her thighs. Keeping her gaze on me, she lowers herself to the floor and retrieves the weapon.

I face her and block the room door. Blood drips from my stomach wound, her blood coats my cock, and the sinew threading flesh to my bones cords tight. Just beneath, a feral demon is trying to tear through my muscle.

She holds the dagger outstretched, and the beast within snarls, scenting the blood and craving more of her.

*“Run.”*



THERE WAS AN ICINESS, A SINKING, A  
SICKENING OF THE HEART

BRIANNA

“**R**un,” he growls.

I drop the knife, knowing when he catches me, it won't stop him.

I run.

Fear is a living force propelling me through the balcony doors. My bare feet slap the pavers as I head for the winding stairs that lead to the garden. A surge of adrenaline numbs my body, staving off some of the fresh pain from my virginity being violently torn away.

As I hit the lush grounds darkened by night, I dart toward the grove of Italian Cypress trees.

I had *one* chance. One single, vital moment where my aim couldn't be off. And I was way off.

The intensity of Nic's touch, the overwhelming feel of his rough hands—hands I've witnessed brutally kill—caressing me and tenderly touching...

He kissed me.

Even now, as I'm racing across the spongy grass, my bare feet picking up the dew, panic tearing through my chest with each blistering intake of air, I can feel his mouth on mine. My lips burn from that kiss.

I wanted him.

I wanted him inside me.

I wanted to pretend there was no marriage contract and no dying fathers and no power-hungry men who will descend on me the moment I lay him to rest six feet under. But most of all, I wanted to pretend that Nic wasn't one of those men.

For one delusional second, when he was above me, his powerful and beautiful body covering mine, so close to entering me...I thought giving myself to him would change the outcome.

That he could love me.

But the truth is, in our dark underworld, love doesn't win. It doesn't transform the beast into a prince.

Especially when the beast is dominated by greed and the lust for power.

My aim was off.

And now I'm running toward the grove like an animal being chased by a wild predator. Half-naked and without a phone. When he catches me—because he *will* catch me—he will kill me.

He got rid of my protection from him. I let him do it; I let him order Dante away from the mansion. My only chance now is to find one of the guards and pray like hell my desperate state convinces them to help me. At least long enough for me to escape.

As I round a tall cypress, I enter the garden. Pebbles dig into the soles of my feet. A sharp pain tears at my side. But I don't stop. I hear his heavy footfalls beating the earth not far behind.

A wall of manicured shrubbery rises up to block me in. Stumbling to a stop, I curse and turn right, my new destination the dark shadows of the dense cypress trees. The garden becomes a maze, and panic claws at my mind.

Why isn't the sedative slowing him down? The knife wound only enraged him. It's not lethal. To a man like Nic, who has been carved and stabbed and shot, it was my biggest mistake.

I squeeze my eyes closed, just long enough to clear the sting of sweat blurring my vision.

I should have let the drug take full effect before I made a move. But planning the event and actually living it, being in the moment with him... I knew right then if I went through with having sex with Nic, if I gave him all of me, I wouldn't be able to take his life.

I had no choice but to fight him.

Fire winds up my calves. A burn deep in my belly flares. My lungs plead for air past the constriction of my throat. I push

harder, despite the fact he's so close. One second could be the difference between Nic crushing my throat and the sedative weakening him enough for me to escape.

His fierce growl sounds above the crunch of rocks, and I hate the way my body responds.

Desperation leaks into my muscles as adrenaline pours through my veins. I'm running when every cell in my body wants to fall to the dewy earth and let him take me all over again.

I strive for the shadow up ahead, the tree line just within reach on the other side of the garden, only to have the fading hope snatched away as I'm banded in Nic's ruthless embrace.

He takes us down to the earth. His arms bracket my body as he pulls my back to his chest. My nighty rides up around my waist as I uselessly kick open air. Chest heaving, Nic tightens his hold, draining the fight from my aching muscles.

His heated breath coasts across the back of my neck, and I can hear the hard clench of his jaw as he says, "You didn't run fast enough."

Dread kicks my rib cage as my heart pounds a furious tempo. He groans and places me on my back. Arms pinned to the sodden earth, the pungent scent of grass mingling with the intoxicating scent of Nic's cologne, I stare into his shadowed face.

"It was pointless...anyway." My words are clipped short between gasps for air. I strive to conceal all traces of fear from my features.

The coal of his eyes burns through me, the blackest tar set aflame. He says nothing else as he removes one hand from my wrists. He waits for me to wrestle, to try to strike out on impulse. The searing vengeance behind those dark orbs craves a fight.

I'm weaponless and he's at an advantage. I have no choice but to wait for him to either kill me, or provide an opening.

His hand clamps around my throat, and tears prick my eyes. Emotion wells where I desperately wish he would slice it out



of me with his knife.

Because even as he ravished me, tearing into me with punishing thrusts, my body consented. To him. To the pain. To the pleasure that was just on the other side of his rage.

I betrayed him, and that anguish was there on the hardened planes of his face, a seam torn wide as he tore right through my virginity.

“Do it,” I say. The dark note of my tone drips with disdain.

His tongue travels over his bottom lip, a snake scenting its prey. “It’s not going to be that quick for you, angel.” His eyes lower to my chest, then farther down. “How badly do you hurt?”

His question knits my brows together. I swallow the ache knotting my throat. “Why? What was your plan?” I breathe heavily around each word. “To fuck me to death?”

He grunts as he bears down on me, his hips spreading my thighs. I gasp at the salacious feel of his cock pressed against my sensitive clit. He’s naked and hard and enraged, and blood from the injury I inflicted pools wet and hot between our skin.

“It still might be,” he warns. A devious smile slants his mouth, and an intrusive flare of desire licks my insides.

“You should’ve killed me, Bria,” he says, gaze roving over my features. “You should’ve went for the heart.”

I suck in a breath, his weight crushing my lungs. “My aim was off.”

A solemn expression steals the fire from his glare. “In some regard, your aim was true.” He moves his mouth next to my ear. The deep cadence of his voice rumbles over me, eliciting a spark of shivers across my skin as he says, “What did you inject into me?”

“Midazolam,” I stammer out.

He chuckles. “Jesus. Your father should have known better than to give you something so weak to use on me.”

My features draw together in confusion. But before I'm able to deny his allegation, lights flicker from the balcony to draw his attention.

The distant sound of shouting, then a gunshot cracks the night.

My body ices with dread.

"What's happening?" I ask, my voice a weak croak.

Nic's grip on my throat loosens, but he doesn't free me completely. His gaze returns to my face, his expression hardened in an unreadable mask. "You failed," he says. "So now I'd wager Cassatto is sending a legion after me."

Nic thinks this was a conspiracy by my father. He believes I'm a pawn sent to murder him.

I start to deny it—but stop. How else will I explain what I've done or why? I can't tell him about the *'Ndrangheta* women in Calabria. I can't endanger their lives, no matter what Nic does to me.

As the lights go on inside the mansion, and more shouts erupt, Nic pushes to his feet and snatches me up. He bands one arm around my waist, his other hand covers my mouth. Then he's hauling me out of the garden and to the garage on the side of the mansion.

It's not until he has the door rolled aside and he grabs a set of keys from the wall rack that I realize what's happening.

I come alive with fight.

I bite down on his hand, and he releases my mouth. "Help!" I shout. "He's taking me—"

With a fierce groan, Nic shoves me into the passenger seat of a Mercedes sports car. He clutches my wrist and wrenches my arm out, pressing his thumb to a pressure point near my elbow. I immediately go lax in the seat, my will to fight stolen.

"That's cheating," I say.

He removes the gold ring from my finger and looks it over briefly, pushing the crest aside to reveal the microneedle. His

dark eyes meet mine with malice as he brings the ring to my wrist.

“Nic, no... What are you doing?”

“Always have a contingency plan in the event your stepsister tries to seduce and kill you.”

The needle punctures my wrist, and it’s not long before I feel the drowsy effect take hold.

“See you soon, *angioletta*.”



—THE MADNESS OF A MEMORY WHICH  
BUSIES ITSELF AMONG FORBIDDEN  
THINGS

## DOMINIC

I should have let Bria kill me.

Technically, I'm already a dead man. I was dead the moment she sank her blade into me. Her strike wasn't lethal, but it was still deadly. A slow bleed that will leave a trail for Cassatto's men to follow and finish the job.

Every hour I breathe is stolen time.

Cassatto won't stop just because his daughter failed. Point proven when he sent his men to my room to finish me off.

I hear the gunshot all over again, and my grip on the steering wheel tightens as rage seizes my muscles. I put Luca outside Bria's door. He was the only one of my men in the mansion, so I have no doubt Luca was on the receiving end of that bullet.

I glance over at the sedated girl sleeping peacefully in the passenger seat. Her head resting against the tinted window, her dark hair a tangled mess. The tattered night slip falls off one shoulder, her thighs bare. Beautiful skin covered with dirt and bruises.

The sight of her guts me all over again.

She might have only been a pawn used to get to me, but she's still part of Luca's death.

One hand pressed to my hastily bandaged abdomen to staunch the blood flow, my other hand clenched around the steering wheel, I watch her chest rise and fall with even breaths, this girl I don't know at all.

A sharp jolt of pain spasms around the physical injury. Now that the adrenaline has worn off, I'm left with the pain and weakness claiming my body.

I've lost some blood and need to better assess the damage.

I have a few different escape plans in place around the mansion. The Mercedes was the closest in proximity. Change

of clothes. Medical supplies. Water and a cell phone. All in the trunk, otherwise I would've put Bria there.

Her nearness to me now is a fucking distraction.

Before my mind can start replaying the events, I see the iron gates come into view. My father invested in the dated gothic revival home as a safe-house. The one piece of property Cassatto doesn't know about. It's not a long-term solution—it's a place to regroup.

Which is what I need to do right now.

As I coast up to the wrapped gravel driveway, I glance over at Bria and drive a hand down my face. "Fuck."

I just kidnapped her.

I leave her in the car as I scope out the house my father called the Catacombs. I make it a point to come here at least once a month. Update provisions. This house isn't near as massive as his mansion, but it's just as eclectic in his taste.

Gothic architecture frames and infuses every room. I flip the light switch in the first room, mutter a curse when they don't come on. I meant to change out the breaker panel last time I was here.

I dig out a lighter from the kitchen and light candles as I clear the main rooms of the house and check the security footage. Once I've secured the house, I return to the car and scoop Bria's sleeping form into my arms. I groan at the pain in my stomach and feel the bandage soak with a fresh stream of blood.

Selecting the room nearest the entrance, I place her in a chair and bind her wrists with cable ties. My gaze is drawn to her parted legs, to the dried blood smeared on the inside of her thighs.

Even the monster within me realizes there should be some twinge of guilt, some morsel of remorse. I should feel some level of shame.

I wasn't in my right mind. But that's no excuse. I'm never in my right mind, drugged or not. Wounded or not. Betrayed or

not. I'm a fiend, and for her, a crazed one.

The object of my affection, of my goddamn *obsession*, had just tried to kill me—and I took her because I wanted her. I caused her pain because she caused me pain, because she ripped my fucking heart from my chest.

I'll be damned if I repent for taking what I want.

A monster knows its nature, and it can be nothing but.

As Poe once said: “The scariest monsters are the ones that lurk within our souls.”

It's a sick and deviant creature that lurks in my shadows, twisted and gnarled like the roots of my family tree. My vow to protect her ended the moment she became the enemy, and the monster roared to life, a fiendish glutton to take all of her.

If not for Cassatto's men making themselves known, I would have taken her again and again. I would have split her open and fed on her until there was nothing left but two empty vessels, both of us used husks.

I back away from the chair and pull out the burner phone. Stepping into the hallway, I close the door and make a call to Lucian.

As I wait for him to pick up, I head to the bathroom and line up medical supplies.

“I told you not to do anything stupid.” Lucian skips the useless pleasantries.

“To be fair,” I say, grunting as I remove the blood-soaked bandage from around my waist. “I'm not the one who struck first. That was Bria.”

He mutters some Irish curse through the line, then says, “So you thought it was a good idea to kidnap her?”

“It's never a bad idea to have a bargaining chip.” Although I have no intention of using her as such. “Elenore called you,” I say, stating the obvious.

“Yes,” he confirms. “Luca is dead. I'm sorry. Cassatto didn't even bother trying to glean information from him.”



I stare down into the porcelain sink, watch a ribbon of bright-red race toward the drain. As I already suspected, the fired gunshot at the mansion was Luca's death. Cassatto's men were already in place and primed. This isn't about taking Bria. I've just given Cassatto a better excuse to serve his purpose.

"He used Bria." The words are wrenched from the bowels of what soul I have left.

I witnessed him use his daughter once before, so I should've known. This is my fault. The moment she crawled into my bed, I should have known why she was there.

The moment I sank into her, I was a dead man.

Regardless of the fact she was a pawn, there will be no forgiveness; I can't offer Bria mercy for her betrayal.

Thinking back, it's obvious now. Cassatto put me in charge over watching Bria. He wanted me close to her. *Mother fucker*. He moved his pawn right into place and it was right there in my goddamn face—and all I could see was her.

My *cielo*.

Blinded by my *sole*.

"You should give her to Salvatore, Nic," Lucian says, breaking into my self-deprecating thoughts. "Then you should get out of the city. Give it a cool down period. Elenore is good at damage control. Then after the wedding, it will be forgotten."

He offers this advice because he and my mother have no knowledge that I'd be delivering a ruined girl to Salvatore's doorstep. His advice would be very different, otherwise.

"Keep watch over my mother, Lucian," I ask him. "The first sign Cassatto gives that he intends to harm her—"

"I won't let that happen. You have my word. But you heard what I said, right?"

I stare at myself in the mirror. "Yeah, I heard."

"Good. Violet and I will talk to Salvatore. We'll try to negotiate something. You'll likely still have to disappear from the east coast for a while, but we'll try to put some protection

in place. But, Nic—” his tone goes steely “—you need to give Brianna back.”

After I end the call, I clean and tend the wound. I inspect the best I can for any internal damage, then stitch the two-inch laceration. I start a round of antibiotics, just in case she nicked my intestine. I want to believe she missed vital organs on purpose—but that’s only further delusion on my part.

Cassatto’s daughter just has bad aim.

I wrap a fresh bandage in place, leaving my shirt off. By the time I make it back to the room, Bria is starting to rouse. I light more cream candles, cloaking the room in soft candlelight, before I lay her ring on the marble end table with an audible *clink*. She looks up at me.

“It’s clever,” I say, crossing my arms over my bare chest. “Where did you get it?”

I can’t help thinking the custom ring with a hidden weapon is something my mother would wear. And use.

She blinks slowly, still disoriented from her own sedative. “I need to use the bathroom.”

I nod, running my tongue over my teeth. “Bathroom privileges are given to little murderers after they answer my questions.”

She tugs her wrists at the plastic bindings, testing the restraints. “You plan to kill me.”

It’s not really a question.

“After I torture the information from you.” My confirmation sits like acid on my tongue.

She says nothing to this. No pleading. No tears or sobs. No bribes. I can at least respect that she’s not making this more difficult.

Her gaze darts to the clean white bandage. “You need a doctor.”

A humorous sound leaves my mouth. “I’d think you’d rather see me keel over from sepsis.” I move closer and pull up a

stool across from her. “I have more medical knowledge than the doctor Cassatto keeps staffed for the clan.”

Some internal thought passes over her face, and I cock my head, watching her microexpressions intently. As she starts to become fully cognizant, she inspects her torn slip. The shoulder strap hangs loosely, leaving half her breast exposed. The seam has been torn all the way to her ribs and barely covers the tops of her thighs.

Her gaze lingers on the dried blood between those thighs, and my chest catches fire.

The silence is charged with what’s not being said.

“Your father had Luca killed,” I say, gritting back the fury that statement provokes.

She swallows hard. “I’m sorry.”

My chuckle is dark and bounces against the shadowed walls of the room. “So what was the plan? Seduce me? Drug me? Kill me and my crew? That about cover it?”

Lifting her face, she shakes the matted tangle of waves out of her eyes. “There was never any plan, Nic.”

“Don’t use my name. We are no longer Nic and Bria to each other.” I lean forward, and immediately regret it when a spasm of pain grips my abdomen. I groan and sit back. “No plan. Right. So your father had the clan storm my room tonight by complete coincidence.”

“I don’t know why, or what happened—”

“Don’t *lie* to me.”

Anger pinches her mouth. “My father had nothing to do with why I was in your bed tonight. Being the one to kill you wasn’t his idea. It was *mine*.” The fury in her tone matches mine, and for a startling moment, I almost believe her.

However, despite the eye-opening realization that the girl I thought I knew has a much darker side, I don’t believe she’d opt to kill a man without a reason.

I’ve given her no reason.

I've kept my distance, controlled my deviant urges. Protected her against any and every threat. The depth of her betrayal lashes my frail resolve and my next word is forced between clenched teeth.

"*Why?*" I demand.

Her heated gaze holds mine a moment longer before she turns her head away. "You killed Vito," she says, her voice softer. "Did you think that I or my father wouldn't take you killing my personal guard as a threat?"

I cover my mouth with my hand and watch her, letting the details roll around my head. Cassatto doesn't give a fuck about a guard. I've killed other men in his clan for far lesser offenses than bruising his daughter.

He might not give a fuck about his daughter, either, but she's his blood. An offense to her is an offense to him. He'd have snapped Vito's spinal cord if I hadn't.

However, for Bria... For matters of the heart, it's logical. She cries to her father about her dead bodyguard and he decides he's had enough of my crazed outbursts that reflect too much of my father, a man he never fails to remind me he still carries a grudge for.

Beyond that, it's the shiny glimmer I see in her amber eyes that burns away the oxygen in my lungs, creating a pressure I can't tolerate.

"You loved Vito." My accusation drops between us like a bomb.

She stares at me through her thick lashes, the silence building. "He was my family," she finally says.

Rage grips my sternum and crushes the rest of the air from my lungs. She doesn't deny it, and not even the pain I register in her eyes can subdue the monster. My only regret is that I can't kill Vito twice.

I force my body to move closer to her, welcoming the pain. I close in just inches from her face, where I can taste the lingering sweetness of her kiss. The memory of it now a bitter

lie that tears a seam through my chest. There's not enough thread to stitch that wound.

"You're just like your father," I say, disgust curling my top lip. "You deserve the same damned fate as him."

She bares her little teeth, body quivering. "Then go ahead. Let's get it over," she challenges, a mocking laugh tumbles past her swollen lips. "Hell, you should have let your men kill me two years ago. But I was just a little girl then, right? Well, I'm eighteen now. Not even a virgin any longer. No reason to keep me alive one more second."

Our gazes clash like fire meeting ice with the impact of her statement. The room vibrates with a heated, electric current, the tension crackling in anticipation for the strike.

I ease back on the stool and lick my lips, savoring the delectable taste of her righteous fury. The monster rippling beneath my skin claws at my sanity with razor-sharp talons, eager to break her defiant will.

"There's a story my father used to tell me," I say, and the low, deep cadence of my tone draws her full attention. "It was never my favorite, and that's a bit ironic now." My smile feels hollow.

Fingers curled toward her palm on the chair arm, she wriggles in the seat. I try not to think about her discomfort, the pain she must be suffering, and instead stand and move around the room.

"*The Fall of the House of Usher* was a tragic story about a brother and sister. They lived in this family mansion that had been in their line for ages. Only then, it was just the two of them left. Their powerful, grand family was all but extinct."

She's become still. Her eyes track my movements around the dimly lit room. Like prey holding deathly still, trying not to make any movements to capture the notice of the predator.

"The house was sickly," I continue, "decaying, dying, just like their family tree. See—" I unfasten the buckle of my leather belt and pull it free of the loops "—the brother loved his sister so much...and yes, there have been some suggested

undertones of incest...but the point is, his sick, dying sister was his entire world. When she finally gave up the ghost, he couldn't bear to look at her in a lifeless state.”

As I walk behind the chair, I wrap the belt around my fist. Leaning over her from behind, I drop the leather end of the belt over her shoulder. She flinches, her breathing ramped as I let the belt dip over her clavicle, past the scar, then lower, slipping between the smooth valley of her breasts.

“He had her entombed in their family home,” I say, watching the black leather slither down her chest. Her thighs flex, and I clench my jaw. “Then, as the days wore on, and the brother suffered in agony over her loss, he began to hear these sounds. Loud bangs. Haunting moans.”

Resting my other hand on her shoulder, I first stare at the acid burns she treated, the pain flaring to life all over again with renewed misery, before I shift my focus to Bria right beneath me. The dark impulse grips me before I can question my own mind.

I slip my hand down her soft chest and take hold of the leather belt, bringing it up in the same breath and cinching it around her throat.

Her body jerks against the chair. Panic fires through her strained muscles, her fingers flared out in fight. Her silent struggle comes as muted gags and choked gasps for air.

“It tormented him,” I say through gritted teeth as I choke up on the belt. “He realized only too late that he'd buried his beloved sister alive. But instead of facing the awful thing he'd done, he left her there in her casket, praying the sounds would stop.”

As I watch the tears pierce the corners of her eyes, I beat back the thrashing beast inside my chest. I lift a finger, then another, willing myself to release the end of the belt completely.

The belt falls away, and Bria's head flops backward. She drags in an unobstructed breath. Chest heaving, she coughs, her mingled moans of agony and relief dig into my bones with a satisfying itch.

I place my palms to her cheeks and stare down into her reddened face. “I could kill you quickly,” I tell her, rubbing my thumb over the wetness staining dirt-smeared skin to reveal a soft patch of freckles “A quick, painless death. But the truth is, neither one of us deserves such a gift.”

I lower my mouth close to hers, inhaling the desperate breaths she expels, and drink in the flavor of her terror. My misery at her pain is acute.

I’m every bit as deserving of a slow, agonizing death. Maybe more so. My depraved obsession with this angel is why we’re here, in this level of purgatory. Had I simply been able to let her go, we wouldn’t be here right now.

Any punishment to her is a punishment to myself.

As I gain enough composure to release her, I step away from the chair and head to the kitchen. I return with a bottled water in hand and a knife. I lay the knife on the end table and reseal myself on the stool. I uncap the bottle, then tip the rim to her mouth.

The water dribbles down her chin until her thirst awakens, then she gulps greedily. She moans into the bottle between desperate swallows, and my dick jumps at the erotic sound, growing instantly hard.

I pull the bottle from her mouth and tear my gaze away from her wet, glistening lips. The urge to lower my zipper, shove my cock in her hot mouth, and thrust it to the back of her throat until she’s gagging on the ring-tipped crown and spilling fresh tears is a demon whispering in my ear.

Her lashes are still wet from her tears as she swallows painfully, her throat raw, the red abrasions from the belt striping her neck. She’s not wearing any makeup to smudge. She’s beautiful without it—she’s beautiful in her ruined state.

Jaw clenched, I push the diverging thoughts aside as I grip the bottle.

Suddenly, she asks, “How did the story end?”

A flame unfurls in my stomach at her insolence, at her absolute audacity not to break. I have to wipe a hand over my

mouth to keep from smiling. “She took her brother with her in death.”

Her chin notches a fraction higher, her nostrils flaring as her whiskey eyes blaze with renewed obstinacy. “So what’s the moral of your story, Nic?”

I stand and move to the table, where I grab the knife. I stare at the serrated edge as I approach her, flicking my thumb over the sharp tip.

“The moral is,” I say as I stop right before her, “he was punished for loving his sister too much.”

I avoid her eyes as I slide the slender blade along her outer wrist and swipe, cutting away the cable tie. After I’ve done the same to the other, she pulls her hands together on her lap and rubs the red welts wrapping her wrists.

“Sometimes,” she says, her voice a weak rasp, “our love hurts.”

Her words flay me, the truth of that simple statement carving my sinew from my bones in painfully slow strokes.

I slip the knife into my back pocket and lower myself over her, hands gripped to the arms of the chair. I tilt my head, my eyes roving over her dirt-covered face and tangled hair. Her wide amber eyes boring through me expectantly.

“Oh, you think you understand.” My smile is callous.

Loving someone too much can absolutely be its own form of punishment. I rest my palm on the soft junction between her neck and shoulder. I stroke her throat with my thumb as I move my hand to the nape of her neck, then sink my fingers into her hair.

I grip hard and yank her head back, then wrench her upward from the chair.

Panic comes alive in her weakened body. Her hands latch on to my arm. “Where are you taking me?”

I stalk toward the oak door and kick it open. “To teach you the moral of the fucking story.”





THERE ARE CHORDS IN THE HEARTS  
OF THE MOST RECKLESS WHICH  
CANNOT BE TOUCHED WITHOUT  
EMOTION

BRIANNA

**T**he door cracks open beneath the force of Nic's kick. He tightens his grip around a thick length of my hair and hauls me into a dark bathroom.

My heart careens against my chest wall in painful, frantic thumps. He doesn't release me as he reaches into the glass-encased shower and turns the nozzle. The bronze shower head sputters before water rains down to drench the dry marble.

Terror grips my insides. Breath labored, my throat aflame, I close my eyes and send up a plea that this isn't how he plans to kill me. I'd rather be shot, beaten, *strangled*...than drowned.

His grip loosens, and I jerk away to cover myself with my arms and conceal my trembling.

"Strip," he commands. Then he exits the bathroom, leaving me reeling.

I drive my fingers into my hair. "Shit." My scalp is on fire, my muscles scream, and if I don't sit down right now I'm going to pass out.

I find a cushioned stool under the vanity and pull it out. I sit and hang my head between my knees, forcing my constricted lungs to accept three deep breaths, then shakily release them along with the tremors.

The soothing sound of the shower raining down on the marble settles over me, and I focus on that, letting the steam chase away the chill in my bones.

The only certainty I know is, you do not stab Dominic Erasto and simply walk away. I fucked up. I fucked up so badly...he doesn't just want to kill me, he wants to kill me torturously slow.

And the only reason he hasn't ended my life is because he believes I was under my father's orders, and he can glean

some pertinent information from me—no, *torture* information from me. Then kill me painfully.

A small voice struggles to be heard over the shower and my racing thoughts, and it's saying to *fight*.

What do I have to lose?

Before I delve too far down that terrifying thought, Nic returns carrying a lit candle from the other room. The flame flickers as he places it on the counter.

“Strip, Bria,” he says. “Or I’ll do it for you.”

I pull on a mask of bravado and rise to my feet. “Why aren’t you using the lights?”

Impatience rolls over his strong physique like a riptide, carrying off any measure of his control with the undertow. He barrels toward me and grasps the tattered hem of my night slip. He grunts as he tears the seam the rest of the way up my torso.

I stumble back as the silky material falls open and hangs weakly onto one shoulder.

Face flaming, I refrain from covering myself. Instead, I tamp down the unease roiling my stomach and stand straighter. His gaze darkens as it roves over my exposed body. I feel the heated press of it like a starved predator seeking a weak place to strike its victim.

Gingerly, he slips his pinky beneath the thin strap, then tows the ruined slip down my arm. The black nighty drops to the floor around my feet. My breasts feel heavy and tight under the intensity of his stare.

Pulling his bottom lip between his teeth, Nic leans back against the vanity and crosses his arms over his inked chest. “The circuit breakers are faulty,” he says, his tone a shade more delicate now that I’m standing completely naked and vulnerable before him. “I need to reset the breakers but—” he glances down at his bandaged midsection “—there’s a lot of steps.”

“I could go—”

“You can get your ass in the shower,” he cuts me off.

The edge in his voice is delivered in warning. I don't wait for him to use physical force. I step toward the glass and insert my hand beneath the spray of water to test the temperature, then I step into the shower.

Pain lights up my flesh. Every scrape and abrasion burns beneath the warm stream of water. I hiss out a breath as I turn my back to the shower wall and slide my hands over my wet hair.

Eyes closed, I allow my aching body to become accustomed to the water, trying not to think about the blood on my thighs rinsing down the drain and taking a piece of me with it.

I startle at the shocking feel of hands on my hips. My eyes fly open to see Nic towering over me—all six-foot-two of his massive and toned, lethal body.

“What the hell?” On instinct, I place my hands to his chest and push, but it's like pushing against a steel wall.

His jaw tightens as he drops his gaze to my hands. I remove them instantly. But he doesn't remove his from me. I stare at the inked designs on his neck so I'm not tempted to look elsewhere, and let my wrists dangle loosely over the backs of his hands that, I know, have to be smarting with the acid burns just as much as the injuries on my flesh. It gives me smug satisfaction.

“Your bandage will get wet,” I say, my voice a weak rasp.

He makes an amused sound in the back of his throat. “I'll change it again. Hold still.” Then he proceeds to remove his hands from my waist and place them on either side of my face, where he gently traces his thumbs over my forehead, then temples, and cheeks.

A shocked breath lodges at the top of my lungs, held there so long the ache builds until I'm forced to expel the breath and immediately draw in a heavy one through my nose.

“Relax.”

“What are you doing?”

He moves down to my neck, sliding his thumb beneath the hollow of my chin and tilting my head back. “Assessing your injuries.”

When he’s done with my neck, his hands glide down to my shoulders, on to my arms and wrists, where he inspects the ligature marks and bruising from the cable ties.

Nervous energy gathers in my chest, my heart fluttering. “You’re concerned about my injuries...before you kill me?” I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth, especially when his coal eyes ensnare me with a calculating look.

“It’s no fun torturing someone who passes out from the pain,” he says.

I swallow. “So this is fun for you, then.”

His severe gaze drags over my body with wicked intent. “I’ve had less fun before.”

The way his features change, his expression unstable, shifting from the slight curl of his lips to a hard mask, there’s some internal fight. There has to be a desire to care for me warring with his desire to hurt me.

After two years of looking after me like a protector, there has to be some residual feeling left over—one I can exploit.

And soon, because his hands on my body is sending my nervous system into havoc.

He traces the backs of his fingers up the inside of my arm, his thumb grazing the outer swell of my breast, and my pulse screams inside my veins. My breathing shallows, my head goes light, and I’m thankful for the faulty breaker, for the soft glow of the candlelight that keeps my heated expression shrouded by mostly dim lighting.

When he drops to his haunches, putting his face right at my belly, my nerves threaten to go supernova. At the feel of his callused palms wandering over the side of my breasts, the desperation for air burns until I suck in a lungful of air, then his fingers drag over my nipples, sending a weak spell to the back of my knees.

Fire sears my viscera, my blood roaring through my arteries as his assessment moves lower—so painstakingly slow—over my rib cage.

“You have a couple of bruised ribs,” he says, his tone sterile. “Maybe hairline fractures, but not broken.”

He traces the rough pads of his fingers across every bruise and scrape, then pushes against my pelvis. A flood of heat zips right to my core, and mortification envelops as I feel the heated pool of wetness coat my folds warmer than the water washing over me.

As he massages the tender cushion of my pelvis, a hot, empty ache pulses so tight in my core I feel a pinch deep inside, but the sharp pain is almost gratifying.

Then his thumb presses right over the soft mound of my pussy to nearly shatter me.

I wince, and he says, “Does that hurt?”

I shake my head. “No...not really. Nic, what are—?”

“I’m checking for internal injuries.” His gaze flicks upward, and I’m trapped by the molten blaze beneath those dark eyes. “Place your foot on the bench.”

My eyes shutter closed at his command, and I’m tempted to fight him right now—but I’m at a disadvantage in more ways than one. I swallow down the fiery ache in my throat and, with a quiver raking my body, lift my foot until my heel finds purchase on the ledge of the shower bench.

“Part your knees, Bria. Spread your thighs,” he orders, and the guttural cadence of his voice rubs over me so abrasively, the anticipation to feel the friction of his hands on my thighs is pure torment.

Only he doesn’t start with my legs. My body jerks at the sudden intrusion of his middle finger sliding through my wet folds and spearing inside my channel. I buck against him on impulse, and a tiny whimper escapes. I bite down on my bottom lip to stifle any further sounds.

“Relax,” he coaxes again, and I cannot relax as his finger explores with rhythmic insertions along my swollen flesh.

What’s more torturous is knowing he feels how wet I am—that he knows I’m turned on, that he’s affecting me in this way, and I have no control over my bodily responses to him.

It’s like giving him a power over me. But all thoughts cease as he pushes another finger inside, and my inner walls clamp around him, throbbing with needy pulses and making my thighs shake.

I slap a hand against the shower wall to steady myself and to stop my body from rocking into him.

He thrusts his fingers in deeper, rubbing right up against the engorged flesh, and his thumb scrapes over my clit, sending a shockwave of arousal through my bloodstream.

I bite back my urge to moan, and then suddenly his fingers are gone.

Warily, I open my eyes and look down to see him withdrawing his fingers and the glistening wetness coating them.

His gaze is still hard on me; it never left my face. “You didn’t come before,” he says. It’s not asked in a questioning tone, yet it’s a statement that demands an honest response as he says, “Answer me.”

“No,” I say truthfully.

“But you were close,” he says. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Yes.” The reply is torn from my center, my body aching with need and the memory of him inside me still a dominating force.

Even while he was violently taking my virginity, the pain splitting me in two, it was the closest I’ve ever felt to anyone, to *him*. He filled me fully, he tore through every barrier to decimate my body and mind equally, and I had no control over my body’s response.

I wanted him to destroy me in the way only he can.



And when the pressure and pain gave way to pleasure, I was so close to falling right over the edge.

Nic arrests my attention as he pushes the fingers he just had inside me into his mouth and tastes me, his eyes pitch-black with unmistakable desire.

A roar fills my ears at the carnal sight, and I clench deep inside my core.

He slowly pops his fingers out of his mouth. “You’re not the only one who deserves to be punished,” he says, and my gaze flits down lower, to where his cock is erect and hard between his thighs. The sight of the thick silver ring makes my legs quiver, remembering the hard, unyielding feel of it inside me.

I summon the strength to speak. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m the fool here,” he says, placing a hand to my thigh. “I’m the weak one who couldn’t bury his sister, so here’s the moral of the story, Bria. I’m going to let your tortured moans be my punishment. Just like in the story, I’m going to let them haunt me, to destroy me, until I don’t have a shred of fucking sanity left.” His grip on my thigh tightens, fingers bruising. “Then I can’t be held responsible for the damage I do.”

His other hand latches on to the flare of my hip and he pulls me forward, and his mouth surrounds me. The feel of Nic’s hot mouth touching me so intimately, I almost come undone. His tongue traces the seam of my pussy before he sucks my clit. Flames engulf me.

“Oh god...”

“Louder,” he growls, the rumble of his guttural command sends a fierce shiver up the column of my back.

My hand goes to his wet hair, my fingers sinking into the soft tresses to grip and find balance. Water rains down over the both of us as I stand amid the torrential downpour, my emotions caving my chest. I can’t help the tiny whimpers that escape at the feel of his expert mouth working me into a desperate state.

He doesn’t hold back; Nic tortures me with his tongue, forcing uninhibited moans from me until I’m languid and undulating

my hips against his mouth in shamelessly needy thrusts. When he's satisfied I'm a pliant, willing mess, he releases me and draws to his feet.

The feral blaze amid his eyes sends a shock of adrenaline coursing my body. His hands are on me just as fast as he cups the back of my neck and spins me, pinning my chest to the shower wall. The cool marble contrasts the fire brimming beneath my skin, and I suck in a shuttering breath.

Mouth pressed hard to the curve of my ear, he says, "I want to hear you scream, angel."

The crown of his cock slips between the seam of my pussy and nudges against my swollen entrance right before he pushes inside, driving in all the way to the base.

The pressure racks my muscles. I clench around him as the rough penetration coaxes out a soft cry. The pain is sharp and consuming, but so satisfying, I push back against him.

His low growl traps my breath in my lungs as he holds himself there, filling me, unmoving. "Beg me to fuck you," he demands, his voice gravel bit between gritted teeth.

Hands flattened to the marble wall, I drag in a steamy breath as my hips roll reflexively. His grip in my hair tightens, his hard chest presses against my back, and that's all it takes for my body to submit beneath the surging desire.

I seal my eyes shut as the words slip past trembling lips: "Fuck me, Nic. Please, fuck me—"

He slams inside me, deep, hard, my words cut short as my plea turns into a moan.

The elicited sound spurs him on, urging his thrusts to come harder, his pelvis slapping against my ass with a lewd, wet smacking noise that triggers a carnal response inside me. I claw at the marble, no longer concerned about the animalistic sounds escaping my mouth.

Nic unleashes a dark groan as he rams deeper. "Your dirty cunt likes this," he says. "Even when you stuck a blade in me, your perfect pussy was begging me to fuck it. Say it."

The combination of his degrading words and praise fuels an emotional mix of humiliation and satisfaction that levels me, where all I want is to make him just as needy for me. I want to see his eyes—to know he's being affected, that I'm not the only one lost to this overwhelming feeling.

With his next brutal thrust, he slips a hand between my pelvis and the wall. His fingers seek the sensitive nub so greedy for his touch. I arch my back as he swirls his fingers, the friction hitting the right spot so perfectly, my inner walls throb.

His hot breath on the back of my neck causes a riot of stimuli, and I crave his touch everywhere, all at once, desperate for the building pressure to break.

As I'm cresting, my moans bouncing off the marble over the sound of the raining shower, he pulls out, leaving me empty and pulsing. His fingers stall over my clit, and I shamelessly grind against him, but he clamps his large hand over my pussy to cease my movements.

"How bad does it hurt?" he asks.

A deep spasm pangs inside my core in answer. I bite the corner of my lip to repress a desperate sound. "How bad do *you* hurt?" I fire back.

His deep groan slinks over my achy skin before he frees his grip from my hair and collars my throat from behind. He rocks into me, sliding in seamless. He fits inside me so perfectly it's torture; nothing should feel this good.

His rhythm increases steadily as he thrusts, building, working into a fierce pace that has my chest slipping against the marble. Nic fucks me like he hates me, like every plunge inside me is meant to break me.

And he nearly does.

My inner walls hug him, encouraging him to keep going, my body so close to pleasure, yet I bite back the moans, refusing to give him any cue to stop.

His hand moves to my jaw and he wrenches my head back, forcing me to look up into his face. He slams inside me, and I release a shaky moan that gives way to a sharp cry.

“That’s it,” he says, voice grating over my flesh as he pulls out and thrusts inside me again. “Let me hear your screams while you take my cock like a good fucking girl.”

On command, my body responds, pleasure lighting my nerves ablaze and I scream out. Nic clamps his hand hard to my jaw and places his mouth near mine, then he spits into my mouth.

The vile act is so dirty and debasing—but the feel of his tongue licking over my lips drives all rational thought from my mind, and I’m falling right over the edge.

There’s something wild and lost and absent in his eyes, a crazed madness. Having Nic inside me, this close, touching everywhere, so deep he’s inside my skin...even this ruthless love delivered in pain from him, I accept.

His hand gathers around my throat, restricting air from my lungs and forcing the pressure in my core to peak as he grips his other hand to my hip, contorting my body and bowing me in the perfect position to take his enraged thrusts.

I feel vulgar and lewd, and never more alive. Lust fires through my veins, and my legs shake as I spread my thighs wider, needing him deeper. My head goes light and my back tingles with the pending release...

Then all too suddenly, he pulls out again. A cry of frustration escapes, and a sob racks my chest. He moves his hand up and pinches my nipple hard, drawing another salacious sound from me—and he’s loving every depraved moment of my torture.

He does this over and over, each time more painful as he leaves my body shaking and pulsating with unsatisfied need.

The only satisfaction he grants me is when I hear his groans of pain, knowing his torture session is causing him just as much agony due to his wound.

As the thought hits, the haze of lust encasing me starts to lift, and adrenaline spikes my blood. With the shot of clarity, I realize this might be my only chance.

One moment of hesitation as he plunges inside me, ravishing my body, my mind, destroying what little control I have left,

then I listen to the small voice of reason trying to be heard over the toxic pleasure tearing through me.

*When he's done with me, he will kill me.*

So when he pulls out to deny me my orgasm, I reach behind my back and find his bandaged abdomen. I shove my thumb into the tender wound, tearing through the strip of drenched cotton and finding the stitches.

His growl lashes across my shoulder as he releases his hold on my neck. Pitched backward, I stumble to my knees, hitting the shower floor hard, then scramble out of the stall.

Soaking wet, I'm able to claw my way toward the broken door before his hand latches on to my ankle and drags me back.



AND EVIL WAS THE HOUR WHEN SHE  
SAW, AND LOVED

## DOMINIC

**F**ury is a demon rampaging through my skull. The raw ache in my stomach feels like I've been stitched together with barbed wire, and yet that pain pales compared to the ruthless need driving me to crawl after Bria, grab hold of her ankle, and drag her beneath me.

Her tiny, wet body slips along mine effortlessly. I use my knee to pin her thigh to the rug as I secure her flailing arms and shove them over her head. Teeth bared, I bracket her body with mine, feeling the warm trickle of blood leaking past the bandage.

I was hellbent on making her screams serve as a prelude to her penance, but with every unguarded thrust inside her, my resolve weakened and I lost myself. My loathing solely became focused on fucking her so hard she wouldn't even recall her bodyguard's name.

I'm that sick, that fucking twisted over this girl, that even though I'm a dead man when I leave the Catacombs, she's still all that consumes my thoughts. My body and soul is tethered to her now in a way I'll never be able to sever.

Her damp hair tangles around her neck as she bucks beneath me, grunting with useless struggle. Her eyes finally focus on mine, catching the flicker of the candlelight in her amber depths. "Kill me already," she says, chest heaving. "I have nothing left for you to take."

I lick my lips, savoring the sweet taste of her still clinging to my tongue. "Oh, that's not true."

With a painful shift upward, I roll her onto her stomach. Then I tuck my hand beneath her belly and prop her ass up. Keeping my forearm braced over her shoulder blades, I roam my hand down the sexy divots in the small of her back, gravitating toward the seam of her ass.

"This tight little hole right here—" I slip my thumb between her wet cheeks "—is still very much virgin. When I'm done



with this hole—” I slap her pussy lips before pushing the pad of my thumb against the puckered entrance of her ass “—I’m going to take this one.”

She bites back a moan of pleasure, and it goddamn spears my balls. I’m just as desperate to fill her cunt as she is to come. I unleash a growl and sink my teeth into the soft flesh of her ass cheek, earning a shrill cry.

As I smooth my palm over the bite mark, she chokes out a shaky breath, and I push back to stare at the glistening wetness coating her pussy. Fucking hell, she’s breaking me.

“You like to draw blood, Bria,” I say as I run my fingers through her soaking folds. “But not as much as I do. I’m going to fuck this tight little asshole raw. I’m going to fuck it over and over, tear it wide, until your blood stains my cock.”

I rub her juices over the puckered rim, fixated on how fucking perfect her ass is going to feel hugging my cock, and don’t realize she’s wiggled her wrist free until she sends her elbow into the bridge of my nose.

The bone doesn’t crack, but she hits with enough force my eyes tear up to momentarily blind me, giving her the advantage.

She falls to her side and drives the heel of her foot into my rib cage. Right above the fucking stab wound. I grab my side and slap the floor to keep from landing on my face. Bria scrambles to her feet and dashes into the other room.

“Shit,” I breathe out. She kicked the hell out of me. Pushing to my feet, I tear the ruined bandage off and quickly inspect the torn stitches. I did most of the damage while fucking her up against the shower wall. And yet, I couldn’t stop. I was determined to fuck us both to death if that’s what it came to.

By the time I collect myself and enter the room, I expect Bria to be gone. I didn’t bother locking the main door. Remiss on my part, considering how well she’s been able to dupe me tonight.

Instead, surprisingly, I find her standing near the leather ottoman, her chest heaving and soft tits bouncing in the faint

candlelight, some kind of rod held outstretched in her hands.

I direct a glance at the overturned lamp in the corner, realizing the rod is from the metal lamppost. The sight of her standing there ready to fight me is so damn tantalizing, I laugh.

This pulls her features into an angry scowl. “Don’t underestimate me,” she warns.

“Oh, I won’t.” My cock jumps at the prospect. I grip the thick base and squeeze, stroking myself to the tip in aching anticipation. “I’m going to make this fun.”

Her wide gaze lowers to where I’m stroking my cock still covered in her arousal, and a savage hunger flares. The monster within goes feral.

I lunge.

Going for her midsection, I aim to take out any advantage she has with a weapon and throw her over my shoulder. Before my arms band around her waist, she grasps the rod at both ends and extends it, using the bar to catch me in the throat.

Taken off-guard, I stumble back. I touch my neck and look at her, narrowing my gaze as I scrutinize her posture. The way she’s holding the rod. Her defensive stance.

“You’ve had training,” I say.

She shakes a wet lock of hair from her face. “*Canne de combat*,” she says, “among other things. I had a lot of free time in Italy while you weren’t around to hover over me.”

The way her mouth twists into a sinful smile, goddamn. I’ve never wanted to be beaten so badly, I almost let her use that rod on me.

Before I initiate another attack, I catch sight of the bruise on her wrist. The very one that set me off and resulted in a knife severing Vito’s brain stem. Bria was telling the truth. Vito didn’t hurt her. I watch her windmill the lamppost with confidence, her movements revealing exactly how that bruise happened.

My gaze coasts over her beautiful, naked body. Yeah, that fact changes nothing. I have absolutely no regrets.

With a wicked smile slanting my face, I step into her space and sweep my arm. She uses the post to deflect my grab, striking the shit out of my forearm. A roar unleashes and, enraged, I don't hold back.

I come at her with wild frenzy clawing beneath my skin to have her in my arms. She spins and expertly drops to one knee, evading me and sweeping the weapon out to catch my ankle. She follows up with a strike to my kneecap.

I growl and make a move to seize the rod, and she mercilessly takes aim on my stomach, delivering a direct blow to the wound.

Pain lights up my abdomen. I take a step back and grab my side. "Fucking hell," I say, my blood seething as queasy pain webs my insides.

The beautiful flash of pride on Bria's face almost makes me regret what I'm about to do next.

*Almost.*

You don't get to be the most lethal enforcer in the *'Ndrangheta* by fighting fair. As such, I harness the fire gripping my sternum and push forward, throwing a jab toward her face and forcing her to use the weapon to block. Then I capture her trim waist with my other hand.

I band an arm around her torso and draw her back against my chest. She uses the weapon to try to strike me overhead and I catch the post mid-strike.

"Let go—" she screams, yanking on the weapon.

I fasten my arm around her tighter. "Not happening."

Her groan of frustration surrounds us as she sends her heel into my foot. Then her body goes slack. She slithers from my grasp, turning to face me with the bar raised and fury igniting her eyes. "You fucking deserve this, Nic."

As she charges forward, I barely catch the end of the rod before it meets its mark across my face.

Infuriated shock courses my bloodstream as I keep hold of the post. "I deserve this? You fucking *stabbed* me and ripped my

goddamn heart out, Bria.”

She grits her teeth and, with an irritated groan, releases the weapon. She shoves her hands into her hair. “You did the same to me when you told Luca you were only waiting until ‘the little bitch’ was old enough to be *removed*.”

I blink. The floor beneath me all but vanishes. The truth hangs between us, heavy with the gravity of her confession. A myriad of memories surface and attack all at once, countless moments I’ve made my stepsister into a burden. The daughter of my enemy and, therefore, mine as well.

I recall when I spoke those words and the hole it carved in my chest wall.

And she heard them.

She believed I would come after her—would kill her—but this isn’t only about Bria fearing for her life; she lives that dark reality daily.

I stare into her soft tawny eyes, the candlelight playing over her stressed features and the hurt she’s burying beneath her seething anger.

I *hurt* her.

I deserve another dagger to the gut.

“Fuck.” I wipe a hand over my mouth.

*What the fuck now?*

Standing before her, I do the only thing I can in this moment to put an end to this madness.

I toss the stupid lamppost to the floor and eat the distance between us. When she throws her arms to block, I seize her wrists and stare down at her, then I grab the back of her neck and crush my mouth to hers.

She resists, her teeth gnashing against my lips. I drink in the pain tinged in coppery blood and feel the second she fades under my relentless demand. She moans into the kiss, her frantic desire to fight and submit captured in the same urgent breath as it steals across my lips.

I cup her face, holding her still so I can unleash the storm of emotions tearing through me, desperate to sate the fiery ache burning me to ash.

Lost to the sensual feel of her tongue sliding over mine, her little moans slipping over my skin in tantalizing shivers, I barely register the cool press of steel to my throat until the edge is notched above my Adam's apple.

She breaks the kiss, her gaze flashing up to lock with mine as she holds the knife firmly to my neck. "You let your guard down."

From my peripheral, I glimpse the marble table where I put the knife. Meeting her eyes again, I suppress a smile. "I must have," I say, letting her guide me with the press of the blade toward the other side of the room.

"Right here. Don't move," she commands when she gets me backed against the circular stairs. The order is so delectable coming from her naked and untamed, I don't even try to fight.

"Sit." She keeps the weapon trained on me, urging me toward the base of the staircase. In her other hand, she grips a bundle of cable ties she also swiped while I was kissing her madly, letting myself willingly fall victim to her.

I allow her to secure my wrists to the iron spindles on either side of me.

When she's satisfied I'm restrained, she finally lowers the knife. The edge of the blade is tipped in red.

I don't even feel the cut as I make a show of testing the restraints and pull at the plastic ties. "You plan to leave me here like this?"

Hair in beautiful disarray and draped over her breasts, she drops down and straddles my thighs. Grabbing the base of my cock in a firm grip, she hooks the tip of the knife in the silver ring, her narrowed gaze holding mine in a dare.

I ease out a hiss between gritted teeth at the feel of her soft hand clutching my cock. I should fear she'll rip the piercing out—but I'm more concerned she'll leave me with this raging hard-on and the worst case of blue balls for hours on end.

“Better yet...” She eases the blade away and instead angles the serrated edge near the shaft of my dick.

That captures my full fucking attention. My muscles thread tight, ready to rip the damn vertical spindles out. “Bria—”

“I wonder if *your* hole is a virgin, Nic. Maybe we should use your cock to fuck your tight little hole bloody.”

God. Damn.

I don’t know what sets my blood on fire more: the dark threats coming out of her sweet mouth, or how filthy she sounds when she says *cock*. I’m so fucking tempted to shred these cables and fill her dirty mouth with my cock right now.

“Damn, angel. That last bit of edging has you really unhinged.” My smile is knowing.

“Fuck you.”

“Oh, *angioletta*. Please don’t tease.”

With a disgusted groan, she releases me and pushes to her feet. Tossing the knife on the table, she spins around and drags a hand over her face. She’s battered, scraped, bruised, hair wild and eyes even wilder. She’s beautiful.

She grabs the beige throw from the leather sofa and tosses it over my groin. My erect cock tents the blanket.

She stares at the offending, rock-hard member of my body. “When will that...go away?”

I lick my lips, my starved gaze tracing her body in obvious answer.

Crossing her arms over her breasts, she demands, “Where’s your bedroom?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Top floor. Second largest room.”

She shakes her head and takes off up the stairs. I hear doors opening and closing, and a muffled curse as she runs into something in the darkened house. When she descends the stairs, she rounds me draped in one of my white T-shirts.

If she's trying to turn me off, that's a poor choice. She looks even sexier wearing my shirt and nothing else. "That your getaway outfit?"

She ignores my remark as she peeks through the window shades. I'm not sure whether she's hopeful or worried that someone will find her.

There's still the very pressing issue of what happened tonight to contend with. I believe now that Cassatto didn't use his daughter to get to me, that Bria acted on her own fear and hurt, but he did in fact command an attack on me, one where Luca lost his life.

By taking Bria, I've given Cassatto a justified reason to call for my head. But what happened between Gino's acid drink and the moment Bria slipped into my bed that gave Cassatto enough reason to think he could take me out now?

She stalks to the table and picks up my burner phone. "What's your code?"

"Who are you calling?"

"What is your fucking code?" she demands.

"So you can call your father?"

She meets my eyes. "My cousin. I don't want her to worry."

I watch her closely, gauging the truth. "It's three in the morning. Do you normally check in with your cousin at this time?"

Losing the fight too quickly, she sets the phone down. "Never mind."

"Where are you going to run to, Bria?" My tone lowers to a serious octave, and she pulls her damp, tangled hair over one shoulder as she turns my way.

"I'm not running," she says, then a mocking laugh slips past her lips. "I mean, where do I have to run to? My father? My fiancé? To a life I don't want...that terrifies me? No, I had one chance to change all that, and now it's ruined."

Expelling an audible breath, she slides to the floor and presses her back to the wall. Looking defeated even though she's essentially beaten the villain. She draws her legs up and links her arms around her knees, giving me the perfect, provocative view between her thighs.

At some point, I'm going to have to beat my cock off to make this bastard go limp, because as it is right now, every time she moves, breathes, looks at me...my cock jumps, making the blanket snag the ring to keep me stimulated.

I'm going to be worked into a goddamn uncontrollable frenzy real soon.

"It doesn't matter," she mutters, mostly to herself. She rubs the back of her neck, releasing a tense breath. Her injuries are mostly superficial, but I can tell she's starting to feel the aches.

And I'm ready to help her work them out.

Arms outstretched and bound, I tilt my head and study her. "You had one chance, huh," I say. "And that was killing me?"

The little seduction game she'd been playing with me, the drunk teasing in the cellar, testing me in the pool, slipping into my bed. The dagger to my gut that she first aimed at my heart.

This was her strategy, one she's been devising since she overheard the threat I made against her. She learned to fight. She developed skills to take me on. And looking at her now, a sultry seductress hellbent on enticing me into my grave, she really took offense to my referring to her as a little girl.

But what I don't understand is how she thought ending my life would earn her any freedom.

When she finally meets my eyes, she says, "Don't sound so offended, Nic. I was just using the same plan you had for me. All's fair in love and war, right?"

God, but I want to tear free of these ties and bend her over my lap and show her how *unfair* I can be.

"Right," I say. "So you thought killing me would, what? Get you out of a marriage contract?" I laugh, patronizing. I refuse to let her fire wane.



Her features purse in annoyance. “Yes, it would have,” she claims. “But now I can’t go back.”

I chuckle. “I’m the one who can’t go back. I ruined the big boss’s daughter. You didn’t have to go through all that trouble, you didn’t have to pull a weapon, Bria. You had already killed me in the most personal, treacherous way.”

A worry line dents the soft skin between her brows before she masks it, shaking her head. “Men in our world don’t really suffer,” she says. “So don’t pretend I actually hurt you.”

I nod slowly. “There’s still time, angel. Pick up my knife again. Only this time, don’t miss.”

She holds my gaze in serious deliberation, looking so sweet with her light freckles and my shirt hanging off one tan shoulder. So damn sweet, even when her nostrils flare.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” I say, groaning as I shift positions. The torn stitches inflame the wound, and now that my adrenaline is tapering off, I’m feeling some pain. “Cassatto would thank you for taking my life, then marry you off for his own gain in the same damn breath.”

“You don’t know that,” she counters. “You don’t know anything that’s going on. My father is—”

“Dying,” I say, cutting her off.

Pulling her bottom lip between her teeth, she looks away.

“It’s obvious that Cassatto is sick,” I say, keeping us talking. “But you think he contracted the marriage so quickly because he’s dying, that he arranged it for you, for your safety and so you’re taken care of. And somehow, you figured if you eliminated your biggest threat—” I nod to myself “—then you’d somehow prove to your father that there’s no need for an alliance with the *Cosa Nostra*. Do I have that right?”

“You’re so fucking smart, Nic. You have it all figured out.”

“Here’s the flaw with your math, angel. This marriage contract has nothing to do with making sure you’re protected after the big boss is gone.” This may wound her even deeper, but it’s time the princess sees her world and the people in it for the

devils they truly are. “Your father wants an heir, Bria. A grandson. He wants an alliance with the second most powerful organization, so he can form a powerhouse monopoly on drugs and wares before he retires permanently, because his pride won’t let him go out sick and weak.” I lift my chin. “Cassatto can’t be a disgrace to the clan if he wants to be a legend.”

She holds my gaze as my words burrow in deep. She didn’t know about the heir, I can see that by the candlelight shimmering in her wide eyes. That fact makes her plan pointless.

“You’re a woman,” I continue, pouring salt in the open wound. “Soon as Cassatto has what he wants and announces an heir to his bloodline, you’re of no more consequence to him. That’s clan law.”

She swallows, her slender throat working. “And Salvatore agreed to these terms,” she says, the question implied.

I nod once. “The marriage was contracted with the stipulation that Salvatore get you pregnant right away.”

She shakes her head and directs her attention to the cream candle on the table. “Why should I believe anything you say? You want me dead more than any other organization. An heir, that only I can provide, means you’ll never have claim to your empire.”

“Look at me, Bria.”

The compelling draw of my voice forces her eyes on me. She swallows again, her features pinched in discomfort, the bruises wrapping her throat apparent even in the subdued light.

“You know the truth,” I tell her. “Any father that knowingly puts his daughter in danger for his own selfish means of protection is a man who will do all what I’ve said and more.” My gaze drops to her exposed shoulder, to the white scar marring her collarbone.

Her expression softens. She knows exactly what I’m talking about; she’s too smart to have not thought about why her father put her in that room the night before his wedding. The

vile reality is her father willingly used her, unconcerned whether she lived or died.

“We both have scars from that night,” I say, not letting her escape my stare. “Those scars go deeper than what we see on the surface.”

She touches the scar along her clavicle, her fingers probing the proof of her father’s disregard with a tender touch that spears me. I lost myself, damned my soul to the fucking devil, the moment I took my men’s lives for her. So I should’ve just ended it all right then and sliced Cassatto’s throat from ear to ear.

I’m looking at the only reason that stopped me from doing so.

“The scars on your back,” she says, musing aloud. “My father knew your men were really there to attack him, and he punished you for it.”

“He’s been punishing me for the past two years, angel.” She looks away, and I ease into a different position, my stomach starting to flame. “When you heard what I said, why didn’t you just go to your father?”

She says nothing, but she doesn’t have to. I nod in understanding.

Even if she didn’t fully comprehend it at the time, she feared Cassatto would do nothing to protect her. A hard truth to face. His grudge against my family outweighs his love for his only daughter.

She returns her focus to the candle, then slowly rises and walks to the table. Staring at the melted wax dripping down the sides, she swipes a finger through the flame. “None of that changes why we’re here, Nic. The fact is, we can’t exist in the same underworld together. One of us has to go.”

Picking up the candle, she casts a long shadow across the marble floor. She turns and pads toward me, her steps soft. As she reaches the edge of the blanket, she stands above me, candle held close to her face where it illuminates her gentle features like the angel she is.

“Burning me alive in the Catacombs would be an easy out for you,” I say. “No mess. No cleanup. An accident that can easily be explained away.” I curl my fingers toward my palm, the plastic tie straining against my tensed wrist.

Despite being the reason for my throbbing gut, I hope Bria doesn’t really have it in her to kill me. That puts a major damper on my future plans.

“I wanted to kill you, Nic. I should for what you did to Vito, but...we’ve both lost so much. You’ve lost Luca.” She looks at the small flame and tilts the cream pillar, sending the pool of melted wax over the lip. It trails the body of the candle, hardening as it cools. “So I’m going to be the one to disappear. Now”—her eyes capture mine—“you’re going to give me what I want.”

I lick my lips, anticipation thrumming in my veins. “What’s that?”

“You said you have a contingency plan. That’s why you brought us here. This is your safe-house, where you keep your means to escape if necessary. I want you to tell me where you keep your hidden cash. I want your car, and anything else I’ll need to get the fuck out of Desolation.”

I won’t let her slip away like that. Besides, she’d never escape the *Ndrangheta*’s reach.

“I don’t think so, princess. You had a better chance at escaping when you planned to kill me.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Fine then. Have it your way.”

Extending the candle, she tips the edge, sending a melted stream of wax over my chest. I hiss out a sharp breath between clenched teeth at the slight pain, which brings a beautifully devious smile to her face.

Oh, this is going to be fun.



I KNEW THAT SHE HAD LOVED ME  
LONG, AND, IN AN EVIL MOMENT, I  
SPOKE TO HER

## DOMINIC

**B**ria sets the candle on the floor next to my parted legs and retrieves the water bottle. Taking a swig, she eyes me over the base, looking devastatingly diabolical.

She then steps over my legs and seats herself on my thighs. I despise the infuriating blanket between us.

Placing the rim of the bottle to my lips, she orders, “Drink. You’re going to need it.”

I do as commanded, letting her pour water into my mouth. As she places the bottle aside, she picks up the candle and holds it over me like a threat.

“You think a little wax play is going to hurt me?” I smile, loving the way her features draw together into determined focus.

Unfazed, she dribbles wax over my inked pectoral, and I gift her a little flinch, muscles flexing at the stinging sensation.

“No, I don’t think hot wax is enough torture for a monster like you, Dominic Erasto.” But, unrelenting, she continues to spill wax over my sternum, her eyes devouring the trail of smooth wax as it drips down my chest and cools. “It just feels right to cause you a little pain. Want me to stop?”

I buck beneath her, forcing her to slip forward on my thighs where she can get a good feel of my erect cock. “Does it feel like I want you to stop?”

The subtle blush that creeps over her cheeks rouses the deviant monster, and I’m not sure how much longer I can hold back.

“I see.” Mouth puckered angrily, she dumps the puddle of wax on my stomach.

“Fuck, Bria—” My stomach muscles contract, straining the few stitches that remain intact to seal the wound.

Satisfied with my reaction, she sets the candle on the floor and proceeds to examine my injury by the light. “You really should

see a doctor,” she says, her soft fingers tracing the enflamed skin around the torn stitches.

I release a dark chuckle. “Usually, the tormentor isn’t too concerned for their captive’s wellbeing.” When her eyes flick up to find mine, I hike my eyebrows in question.

She shoves her hair away from her face. “I’m not sadistic like some, and you’re not my captive.”

I tug on the cable ties. “My position states otherwise.” I drag my gaze over her, hungrily absorbing her bare thighs. “Are you done yet? Cause I’m ready to bury myself in that sweet pussy and see how many times I can make you come for me.”

A hint of incensed irritation tightens her jaw. She sits straight up on top of me. “Something is wrong with you. How can you say that—?”

I thrust upward against her, making her drop forward. Her hands splay over my chest and the hard wax, putting her face close to mine. “Because I know something you don’t, angel.”

Her short breaths fan my mouth. “All I want to know is where you keep your cash, then I’m gone. You’ll never see me again.”

“And how are you planning to make that happen?”

She draws back, lowering her gaze to my chest. “I have a way.”

I don’t like how sure she says this, the chilling honesty I hear in her tone. My thoughts stay fixated on teasing apart that statement as she grabs the pillar candle and slides down my thighs, towing the blanket with her.

She holds my eyes a second longer before she glances down at my hard cock. It jumps beneath her gaze, and she raises the candle above my stomach. “I should feel worse about this... but you’re going to tell me what I need to know.”

*Jesus Christ.* The hot wax dribbles over my stomach on a downward descent toward my dick.

This game is officially over.



Muscles tensed, I groan and snap the cable ties. My large hands clamp down on the soft flare of her hips. Shock briefly registers on her face before I have the candle knocked out of her hand, sending it rolling along the marble.

The meager light is doused from the room.

“Fuck, Nic...”

I rise up and brace an arm behind the small of her back. Then I have her pinned to the blanket in the next move. Cooled wax peels away from my chest as I anchor my body on top of hers.

“When did your mouth get so filthy,” I say, grabbing the hem of my shirt and easing it up over her hip so there is nothing between us as I bear down between the apex of her thighs.

She releases a soft moan, the sound vibrating all the way down to my aching cock. “I learned from my brother well,” she fires back.

“Goddamn, girl, I want to punish that mouth.” I nip her bottom lip, eliciting a tiny cry that sends her hands to my shoulders.

She digs her nails into the fleshy junction between my shoulder and neck “Stop—”

“No.”

“Get off—”

“I plan to get you off first.”

“Listen to me—”

“I have. Now it’s my turn.” I cup her face and stare into the fiery amber of her eyes. “You stuck a blade in me because you believed I was a threat to you. I’ll forgive you that.”

Her breath shallows. Her gaze remains unblinking and hard on me.

“I killed Vito,” I continue. “I won’t apologize for that. Not when I’ve killed my own men for you, and I’ll kill any man who so much as looks at you if I don’t like what I see in his eyes.” I brush my thumb over her cheek, gearing up to bare my soul. “*Angioletta*, do you understand that I killed two of

my most trusted men the night you were attacked. Do you understand what that means in our world?”

She hesitates a beat, then finally nods against my hand.

“Good. Because I should’ve been put to death for that betrayal. So you should understand then that when Luca raised the allegation that I had done so solely for you, that my feelings for Cassatto’s daughter were making me weak, I couldn’t let him or anyone else see my true feelings for you. They would use that to punish me by hurting you. Making Luca and the crew believe I had a plan to end your life had to be done. They couldn’t know that I’d fallen in love with you, that I’d sacrifice—that I *had* sacrificed—everything to be near you, to protect you, and that if it came down to it, I would do it all over again.”

The confession pours from the depth of my tainted soul—a profession of pain and sickness. My unrequited, unbearable love for my enemy’s daughter, who I fell to my knees for when she was forbidden twice over, flays my viscera to expose her as my ultimate weakness.

I search her eyes through the darkness engulfing us, desperate for one word from her to free me from this tormenting hell I’ve been trapped inside for the past two years.

Her hands slip from my shoulders, her palms descending over my back and mercilessly caressing the raised scars from the beating I took.

“You made me believe you hated me,” she says, her voice shaking, “that I was just a silly, naïve girl for how I felt about you. That you would never look at me like—” She turns her head away, and I rest my finger along her jaw, forcing her face back toward mine.

“Tell me the truth now,” I demand, almost a plea.

“Dammit.” She blinks rapidly, her breathy sigh coasts across my lips and sparks fresh hunger. “I had to stab you,” she says. “I had to, because I knew if I let you inside me, I’d never be able to get you out—I’d never *want* you out. I’d just...lose myself to you completely, Dominic Erasto.”

Fire sears my chest. The bones caging my heart feel as if they're cracking under the agonizing pressure. It's a pain that's both torment and relief, and demands I touch her everywhere, consume her until I'm inside her as much as she's dug inside me.

I raise up and drag my shirt up her body, towing it over her head, leaving nothing but the unvarnished truth between us. Skin to skin.

I kiss her chin, savoring the way her breath catches. "...from the king I served, there came a maiden to whose beauty my whole recreant heart yielded at once," I say, reciting a verse and making it hers, "at whose footstool I bowed down without a struggle, in the most ardent, in the most abject worship of love..."

Her hard swallow rolls along my wrist. "What does that mean?"

I ghost my lips across her jaw, brush the backs of my fingers over the rioting pulse point of her neck, and whisper near her ear, "Being so near and yet so far from your object of affection for so long is enough to drive any man mad." I lift up to stare into her eyes. "That means, angel, I love you with fervent devotion, with my whole goddamn soul. I will worship you, will do anything for you, all you have to do is ask."

I take her mouth in a brutal kiss, swallowing her gasping moan and devouring the dregs of her lust. I rock my hips against her, sliding the shaft of my cock between her wet lips, making sure she's ready to take me—because I'm not holding back.

Breaking away for a second, I ask her, "Have you ever made yourself come?" At her hesitant expression, I add, "If you tell me some guy touched you...I'll have to kill—"

"There's been no one," she says quickly, though it does little to curb the urgency inside me. "I have. Before." She bites the corner of her lip, so fucking adorable I want to bite it myself. "In bed, at night. While thinking about you."

*Goddamn.* The thought of her lying in bed just a few doors down from me, touching herself... I'm going to make her

come so hard she'll see stars.

I'm going to make love to her, give her a piece of myself I've never given to anyone.

Then I'm going to fuck her filthy.

"Good girl," I say, then capture her sweet mouth again, tasting her, reveling in the feel of her thighs pressed against my hips, the soft give of her flesh melded to my hard muscle.

I thrust inside her, plunging deeply, the steel ring seeking the swollen, needy flesh inside her tight channel, and earning a sexy moan from her mouth. I rock inside and out, hitting that spot over and over, my pelvis giving her clit the friction it desires as I feel her inner walls hug my cock.

"That's it, baby," I whisper over her lips, "come nice and long for me." Then I kiss her throat as she arches her back, baring her neck to me so I can suck her salty skin between my teeth. I rub my thumb over her perfect nipple, tweaking the bud, then nip at her neck and suck, loving how she shivers in my arms as her body braces, her muscles contracting.

Her breath stops, and I thrust inside deep and hard, taking her over the edge. She grips my cock so tight—*fuck*—I almost lose control. I grip the blanket and rock into her, releasing a growl as she undulates her hips, her tight pussy milking my cock with her orgasm.

"Oh god...Nic...fuck me..."

*Christ.* My name pleaded between her desperate whimpers is all it takes. I feel her break, her walls pulsing around me, and my cock grows rock-hard as I speed my thrusts, hips slapping against hers, and release inside her.

I dig my fingers into her hair and arch her beneath me before I sink my teeth into the soft flesh of her shoulder, bucking wildly to draw out the last dregs of ecstasy as my cock throbs in pleasurable shockwaves.

Chest covering hers, I breathe hard against her neck, savoring the little pulses from her pussy.

Catching my breath, I lift up and lock eyes with her. I take in the blush of her cheeks that highlights her freckles, the shimmer in her eyes. Every part of her I've worshiped from afar.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I say, lowering my mouth to her chest where I place a delicate kiss to her scar. "I thought I was ruined the night I first looked into your eyes. Nothing could ruin me more than being inside you, *angioletta*."

She grasps the back of my neck and brings my mouth to hers. "Same," she whispers before kissing me tenderly.

I'm already growing hard inside her again. "Now bend your beautiful ass over so I can take it and give you your little death."

Her eyes shine with mischief, but she's not scared. Oh, but maybe she should be. The monster within is a greedy bastard, and I've held him off too long. Her body sated and ready, I'm about to make her scream until she comes so hard, she'll wish she never told me that story in the wine cellar.

"Are you going to hurt me?" she asks, but there's no fear banked behind her wide gaze.

"You trust me," I say, the question implied, but I hope I never have to ask again.

She nods. "I do. Always."



MY SORROW—I COULD NOT AWAKEN

BRIANNA

**T**he savage glint in Nic's eyes should terrify me. And it does, but not in the way I was fearful of him earlier tonight.

Stabbing the man you love because you thought he was going to kill you is intense foreplay, I admit. Our world is just different, however. We're not made with the same fibers as others; our darkness threads our souls the deepest shade, where a hunger to annihilate the things we love burns with violent passion, until we're forced to consume in order to satiate our desire.

Or else it will destroy us.

That's why when Nic runs his hand over the length of my back and grips a handful of my hair, I'm already wet and aching for him, desperate for him to claim every inch of my body as his.

He lowers his body over my back, and I feel the needy, hard press of his cock at my ass. He whispers into the shell of my ear, his guttural tone a mix of lust and cruelty. "You know I love you, angel. Say it."

I nod against his tight hold. "Yes. You love me."

"Good girl," he says, stroking his other hand over my ass cheek. "Remember that. Because I'm going to fuck you like I don't."

A fierce shiver races over my skin, and I seal my eyes closed at the feel of his fingers probing my sex. He slips a finger between my slick folds, gathering the juices there—a combination of my arousal and his cum—and smears it over the puckered hole I fear is far too small to take him.

Then his thighs ease up against the backs of mine as he notches the crown of his ring-tipped cock to my pussy, giving me only a second to draw in a full breath before he plunges inside.



I moan out a breathy plea as he fills me fully, driving all the way to the base of his cock. My inner walls are swollen, and he pumps in and out in slow, measured thrusts, getting his dick wet as he rubs the pad of his thumb over my asshole.

“Oh, my god...” I bear our weight on my hands, trembling beneath the tantalizing feel of him working that erogenous zone in a way I never realized could feel so good.

I can sense his restraint waning. His cock rams harder, his grip in my hair tightens, and as he yanks me upright, my back hits the solid wall of his chest. “Push up,” he instructs, his teeth gritted around each word.

I do, allowing him to remove himself from me before he cups one large hand over my sex.

“Don’t hold your breath,” he says. “I want to hear every scream.”

That’s the last warning Nic gives before he repositions the head of his cock to the tight hole, then pushes down on my pelvis, guiding me over the tip of his cock.

The muscles in my thighs lock as pressure builds in my anus until white-hot pain splinters through me. It’s so consuming, I forget to breathe—I’m scared to move—but his hand pushes down on my sex as he slowly drives inside, stretching me to take him.

“Goddamn...fuck...” He releases a thread of curses, his body trembling like mine, until he fills me completely. “I can’t be gentle,” he says, “I’m going to destroy this sweet hole.”

He rubs his fingers over the sensitive nub of my clit, working a moan free as he gives me the needed friction, and my hips buck involuntarily.

“That’s it...take my cock, angel.” He backs out just enough to thrust upward, driving even deeper to elicit the first cry from my mouth, and it’s like a summons to his demon. Nic releases my hair and collars my throat. “You’re so goddamn beautiful taking my cock.”

He works my clit harder as he rocks into me, holding me upright against him. I feel the abrasive rub of his cock ring,

and it does devious things to my pussy; I grow wetter with the pulsing ache.

Desperate for something to cling to, I dig my nails into his thighs, anchoring myself to him as if I'm scared he'll let go.

He fucks me at a steady pace, fueled by the sexy undulation of my hips as I give in to his frenzied rhythm. The pain has eased, and now something other—something carnal—consumes me as an empty ache throbs deep in my core.

As if he can sense my body's desperation to fill the hollow ache, Nic pushes two fingers inside my pussy and hits the neediest spot. The callus heel of his hand rubs over my clit, igniting a flame that sends liquid fire coursing through my veins. Every nerve ending in my body flares, and I clamp down around him.

A deep growl reverberates from his chest, and I feel the vibration in my back. A primal rhythm takes over him, his penetrating thrusts coming wilder and spearing inside me until I'm no longer in control of my senses. I manage to scream his name before his hand seals tighter around my throat to restrict my airway.

A fiery sensation webs over my skin, dragging me down with him as he rocks out, and heightening each thrust to a new level as he drives upward, bouncing me on his cock.

“God-fucking-dammit, I'm going to tear this little hole wide open if you don't come soon...” His filthy words are grit between feral growls, becoming muffled in my ears as heat blazes from my belly to consume me from the inside.

Making good on his threat, he pushes my chest down against the floor. The blanket slides beneath my palms as I try to brace for the impact. He rams against my ass, and I moan out long and hard, my voice as much of a shaky mess as my body.

As my inner walls push back against him, he tightens his hold around my throat once more, then pistons inside my ass, the slapping sound so erotic and dirty that when he roars, his cock stiffening even harder, it's like I have no choice; my whole

body contracts, the need to push unbearable—but the pleasure is electric.

“Oh, *goddamn*. You’re so fucking tight, *angioletta*, you’re going to break me. Ah...fuck...” He growls and slaps my ass cheek, then slams his pelvis against me in depraved, ruthless need.

His lusty, throaty growls coast over my flesh, a command to spread my thighs wider as he grips my throat to arch my back.

God, I feel so filthy and vulgar, but it’s so fucking hot. The heat attacks all at once. He releases my neck and grabs hold of my shoulder as he buries himself deeply. I feel the muscles in his thighs tense, his cock grows rock-hard and then pulses inside my tight channel.

As he releases inside me, he reaches around and flicks his finger over my clit, and the intensity of his growl spurs my orgasm on, heightening my climax and drawing it out—and I come with shameless abandon, feeling the wet splash against my thighs.

“That’s it, baby...come all over me... Fucking hell, you’re soaking my balls.”

I pant against the floor, my chest aching. Aftershocks spark and pulse through my body. As I come down, Nic settles his chest along my back, placing a tender kiss to the nape of my neck.

“Oh, my god,” I say, my heart syncing to the erratic rhythm of his. “That was intense.”

His deep chuckle flips inside my belly, and when he eases out of my ass, the relief of pressure feels so good, I release a deep moan.

“Damn. Give me a minute,” he says.

“Are you serious?” I ask.

“Deadly.” He kisses the tender ache between my shoulder blades, as if he knows I’m sore there, and says, “I will always want you. Every second of every day.”

Nic wraps an arm around my stomach and pulls me to his chest, turning me so I'm cradled in his arms. Then he gets to his feet, carting me off like he didn't just expend all his energy. I'm a languid mess as I drape an arm around his neck.

He enters a darker part of the house, where I can barely make out the gothic furniture. The walls are painted black, absorbing any light filtering from the other rooms.

Placing my feet to the cold tile, he says, "Wait here," then leaves.

I try not to fear the dark. It's ridiculous, after just sleeping with the enemy, coming so close to death, at least, mentally preparing for it, that I should fear something so childish as the dark.

But we fear the unknown. That's all the dark is. A room of black walls. Where light is absorbed, where we can't see what comes next.

This is the first time in my life I've ever faced uncertainty, the unknown—where I don't know what my tomorrow will be.

There's another word for the feeling encased around the fear of the unknown.

Thrilled.

Nic returns with two lit candles and places one on the vanity, the other on the tile near the soaking tub. He's naked and I should be used to seeing him in this state, but I'm not sure I'll ever get accustomed to how damn beautiful his body is, how sexy.

He lifts the bronze lever on the faucet. Then he circles back around me, where he places a kiss to the top of my head before he gathers my dark hair into his hand and twists the length into a bun, pinning it to my crown.

The action is so sensual and nurturing, my sinuses flare at the rush of emotion. I blink away the mist in my eyes. "God, I'm a wreck."

"You're beautiful," he says, finding my gaze in the mirror. "Now, I'm taking care of you, angel."

He checks the temperature of the water before he lifts me into his arms and places me in the tub. Then he uses the hand shower to rinse my legs, cleansing away the traces of our night together. He runs his palm over my thighs, unconcerned about the acid burns on the back of his hand.

When he's satisfied I'm clean, he rinses down the tub and then pushes in the stopper to start filling the tub.

I settle down in the shallow water and watch in reverent silence as he selects different bath oils and soaking salts, peppering the water with a concoction that gives off the relaxing aroma of lavender and eucalyptus.

As he submerges a sponge beneath the water, I ask, "Aren't you coming in?"

He glances down at the wound, which he now has dressed with a new bandage. The white cotton is already tinged with blood. "This is for you. You're going to be sore," he says, but there's no hint of shame in his tone. "I'll restitch myself later."

Nic washes my back as I soak in the tub, feeling every ache and pain claim my body.

The first hint of exhaustion sets in, my eyes becoming heavy with sleep as I recline against the bath pillow.

"Where were you planning to go," he asks as he rests his forearms on the edge of the tub. "If I'd have given you my stash of cash and car. What was your plan, Bria?"

The question does more than just drag me from the brink of sleep, it reminds me with a renewed sense of dread that there is absolutely no plan for tomorrow—that I have no idea what will happen to me, to him, or us.

I shake my head against the tub. "I don't know," I say honestly. Then, because at some point I have to decide to trust this man wholly, I turn my face toward his. "Probably to my aunt and cousin. Before I hatched a plan to take out my stepbrother, there was a plan to run away."

His gaze darkens, the shadows casting the planes of his face in conflicting emotions. "Tell me everything."

So I do.

I bare the most vulnerable side of myself to Nic, about how selfish I was at first over my heartache, even though it confirms how he first saw me, as a naïve little girl. But then I tell him about the stories I heard in Reggio Calabria, about the women of the *'Ndrangheta*, how centuries of clan law in the criminal underworld has shaped their world into an unescapable prison.

Nic listens with rapt attention as I confess how, over the months where I learned to fight, it changed me, and I no longer wanted revenge but a chance to help women who truly couldn't escape their circumstance, and I thought—I foolishly believed—I could do that by making my stand in Desolation.

“That’s why I came back here,” I say, bringing my knees to my chest, “instead of running, like my aunt had arranged. I told her I needed to say goodbye to my father, to make my peace first.”

I wait, breath bated in my aching chest, for him to say something. Instead, he cups his hand around the back of my neck and leans forward, placing a searingly sensual kiss to my lips.

As he pulls away, he says, “I’m taking you to bed.”



BUT WE LOVED WITH A LOVE THAT  
WAS MORE THAN LOVE



BRIANNA

**T**he incessant chime of a ringtone drags me out of a deep sleep.

My eyes flip open, and it takes the length of two alarmed heartbeats while staring at a strange ceiling before last night comes flooding into my conscious.

The heavy feel of Nic's arm drapes my stomach. I touch my forehead, unsure if I'm hungover or ill. The sparse morning light bleeds from the edges of the lowered shades and claws at my skull in rhythmic pulses, letting me know I'm at the very least dehydrated.

I don't want to move, but I need to use the bathroom and eliminate one uncomfortable situation. The rest of my body feels like I've been rammed against a wall all night. Which, I guess, is pretty close to accurate.

I start to ease off the side of the bed, and Nic's arm tenses. His hand cups my waist. "Don't be long," he says, then places a kiss to my shoulder.

A flutter seizes my belly. "You won't die," I tell him, and love the way his chuckle sounds in his groggy state.

I head to the ensuite bathroom, and after I've finished relieving myself, I investigate the smattering of bruises and scrapes marking my body. Nic's phone rings again and, this time, I hear him answer. My chest constricts at the urgent sound of his voice.

I'm still processing everything that happened and that was revealed. I'm not sure what to do now, or how I'm going to face my father, or get out of the marriage contract...and I'm tempted to just tell Nic we should run.

But that doesn't feel right. Eliminating the threat of my stepbrother wasn't the only reason I did what I did; I wanted to issue change from the inside. I wanted to help women without

a voice. However, I don't see how I'll do any of that knowing that I've failed. Absolutely.

And the most shameful truth is, I never even had a chance.

As I'm running my fingers over the finger-shaped bruises on my neck, a knock sounds at the door. "Bria, open up."

His solemn tone strikes my nerves like steel to flint. I know when I open the door, I'll have to face whatever harsh reality awaits me on the other side.

Dread coiling my spine, I pull on Nic's shirt and touch the doorknob. Filling my lungs, I pull the door open. Nic's serious expression slices through whatever delusions I was harboring of us escaping together.

Phone held at his side, he says, "It's Cassatto."

I press my lips together, then: "What about my father?"

"He's been admitted to the hospital," he explains, no empathy in his tone. "He's in a coma."

The world tilts, my equilibrium shifts, and I feel Nic's hand steadying me.

"I need to feed you." His voice is so certain this is the issue, a slight smile works past the ache building to swallow me.

Downstairs in the massive copper kitchen, I push down dry toast and coffee. At his urging to eat more, I say, "I'm fine. What are we—?"

"I'm waiting for a call."

I nod slowly. Another strained minute passes where I tear at a piece of toast, and Nic sits on the stool beside me and turns me to face him.

"You're mine, Bria," he says. His gaze bores into me with so much conviction, my chest caves under the swell of emotions. "There will be no wedding. I'll face whatever punishment I have coming, but from this moment on, you're free of the marriage contract. I'll make sure of it."

I swallow hard. "Nic... You didn't do anything wrong. I can handle this."

A devious smile curls his lips, and my fucking heart stops. “I did plenty of wrong things last night, and I regret none of them.” He grasps the nape of my neck and pulls me closer, placing a kiss to my forehead. “But I do have to answer for them.”

Before I can counter, his phone rings and he accepts a call from Lucian Cross, moving into the next room to talk.

I overhear negotiations about contracts and wares, and even a mention of Salvatore, before Nic returns.

“Come on,” he says. At my hiked eyebrows, he adds, “I’m taking you to see your father.”

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Weapons can’t be taken into the hospital. That’s a small comfort I remind myself as we near the emergency room where my father is being kept.

Two of his main guards are stationed out front, one intimidating mountain of muscle on either side of the shiny wood door. I spot three more senior members of the clan walking up the hallway.

My heart knocks against my breastbone in painful percussion as my feet bring me closer to the room. The sharp antiseptic scent of the third floor stings my nostrils, and I force my hands to stay at my side instead of hugging my midsection.

As Nic and I come up to the guards, I lift my chin higher. “Step aside,” I order them.

There’s an uncertain glance between the two men before they eye Nic with narrowed gazes and clenched jaws. The tension threading the air vibrates and winds tighter around us, until the men part, allowing me to open the door.

On the way here, Nic stopped by a women’s clothing store and bought me slacks and a silk blouse. I didn’t feel comfortable going home, and I didn’t want to waste time, either. I’m not sure how much my father has left, or what even happened that he slipped into a coma overnight.

All the questions congesting my head cease the moment my eyes land on the frail man on the hospital bed. A tube has been inserted into his trachea to intubate him. The mechanical suction sound of the machine used to breathe for him fills the bright room.

Elenore is seated in one of the chairs across the room, and she lowers her phone and looks up at me. “I’m so sorry, Brianna.”

I nod automatically. “What happened?”

She trades a look with her son, then stands and moves closer to my father’s bedside. “The doctors don’t know anything yet.” She sighs, tilting her head as she stares down at my father’s near lifeless form.

She’s dressed in all black, her slick-straight blond hair resting just above her shoulders. She’s dressed as if she’s already in mourning. But that’s not what disturbs me; it’s the scarf around her neck that slips just enough to reveal dark-purple bruises—the kind that look nothing like mine, that look like someone was trying to strangle her to death.

“Ellie,” I say, calling her by the name those closest to her use, “please. You can tell me.”

She looks at her son again, as if asking permission, and Nic nods once.

Gripping the bedrail, Ellie looks back down at my father. Her expression has lost the softness of concern. Her severe features are carved in ice, her glacier-blue eyes unfeeling.

“A woman in our world has to be strong,” she says. “We’re built differently. We can withstand almost anything thrown at us, we have no choice. But...” She reaches down and strokes my father’s gray hair. “There is a limit to how much shit we’ll take.”

When she looks up, it’s Nic she centers her focus on. “I would have continued to take his abuse. That was the arrangement I agreed to in our contract. For your father’s sins, for the grudge Ernesto held, I willingly bore it all. However, the moment he broke that deal, all bets were off.”

The floor beneath me shifts, and I'm not sure it's my place to say anything. I know my father's cruelty could extend far beyond what I've witnessed; I know he's capable of the most vile atrocities—but somehow I was still very much sheltered, still believing in the mask he wore.

Ellie tugs the scarf higher around her neck as she looks at me. "There is no antidote to the poison I used," she says. "For you, Brianna, I wish I could save you this suffering. But I am not sorry."

The woman who's been my stepmother for the past two years has just confessed to putting my father in a coma—one he most likely won't wake from. She's all but murdered him.

I turn to gauge Nic's response.

His neutral expression chills my blood. "Why?"

His one word hits the room with resounding impact.

Ellie's eyes shimmer with unshed tears. "Did you think I'd let him kill my son?" Her gaze flits to me, an urgent appeal banked behind her tears. "Miss Cassatto, I willingly hand myself over. I have made my confession. I'll be judged by clan law and will suffer my consequences. My son's actions last night have consequences, I'm sure, and I'll take those as well. Have mercy on him, and you can have my head."

Trepidation rises up in me like a swelling tide, a roar filling my ears. "Why are you talking to me like this?"

A confused glint passes over Ellie's eyes as she first looks at Nic, then says to me, "You're now the mistress of the *Ndrangheta*."

I turn toward Nic, seeking some other explanation. "What is she talking about?"

His mother walks toward him, stopping close to touch his cheek. "I had promised you an empire, *amato figlio*."

"One of death and ruin," he says.

Her mouth presses into a firm line. "So you've made your choice, then."

Nic nods once. “I have.”

As the two of them share secrets in guarded looks, I turn to face my father’s bed, staring down at the man who has caused so much pain and suffering all in the name of his corrupt power. “I need a moment with my father,” I say.

I feel Nic’s strong presence nearing. “Are you sure?”

I inhale a fortifying breath and face Ellie. “Take your son to see a doctor,” I tell her.

Her lined brow wings up. “For any particular reason?”

“I stabbed him.”

She holds my gaze a beat longer, and I glimpse the hardened soldier beneath her polished façade, a woman, a mother, who would and *has* done unspeakable things for the love of a child. I’m envious of that love, and a bit frightened, as the thought crosses my mind that one day I might have to deal with my stepmother.

Then her mouth tips into a sly smile. A hint of approval slips past the mask of her fierce armor. She says nothing more as she nods and then exits the room.

Nic hovers by my side, I assume to make sure I’m all right, but when I step toward my father, I hear the hospital room door click closed.

Standing at his bedside, I stare at my father’s hand. His skin looked so different just yesterday. Now it’s paper-thin, as if what made him alive has already fled his body.

He’s still my *papà*. It’s a brutal world we’re born into, and maybe we don’t even have a choice for who we become. His father before him handed down a legacy of greed and cruelty, and if Ernesto Cassatto would’ve had a son, he would’ve handed down that same legacy to him.

I touch my father’s cold hand and follow the breathing tube up to his pallid face. “It’s clan law,” I say, my voice catching, “that when a member of the family disgraces themselves, an honor killing is required to purify our blood.”

I reach over and push the button on the ventilator. There's a long beep, a few pulses as air expels, then silence. For good measure, I remove the tube, letting my father die with a small bit of dignity.

If there's to be a new reign, one where change can truly happen, then it has to start here. With the death of the old ways.

The door opens, and as a nurse rushes in, I take a step back. I watch him pick up the tube and try to insert it, then fuss over the machine, but it's already too late. The machine monitoring his heartbeat shows a flat line.

"What happened?" he demands.

I stare into his eyes, and say, "The men outside will provide you with enough money to put your kids or any future kids through college. Otherwise, you won't live long enough to see them go to college. Do we have an understanding?"

His fearful eyes linger on me a few seconds before he nods, his movements shaky.

"Good." I turn toward the door, but pause before walking through. "I really hope you don't make me regret my decision to let you live."

I leave the room, a heavy weight bearing down on my shoulders.

The two guards on either side of the door have their heads bowed in a show of grieving respect for the late *Ndrangheta* boss. After a moment of respectful silence, they lift their heads to acknowledge me and nod.

As I take off down the hallway, they follow.

I have the uncomfortable urge to look behind me, but I keep my head faced forward as I search for Nic in the curtain-lined rooms. The whole while, my mind is spinning, contemplating what measures I need to take, what needs to be put in order, for Nic and I to leave Desolation.

I find Nic standing in a hospital room, the bed untouched. I smile at him as the nurse finishes tying off the stitch. I can see

him refusing to sit on the bed, making it difficult for the poor nurse.

“Where’s Ellie?” I ask.

“She had some things to take care of,” he says, lowering his shirt. He nods and thanks the nurse, then steps toward me. “Are you okay?”

I nod, although I’m not sure how I feel. Distanced, removed. All I know is I don’t want to be here anymore.

I release a laden breath as I meet his eyes. “I’m better now that you’re finally properly stitched up.”

His smile is unguarded, beautiful. As I knew it would, it nearly sets me ablaze.

I touch the button on his dress shirt, needing to be connected to some part of him. “Take me home.”

On the ride to the Erasto mansion, Nic fills me in on the many behind-the-scenes dealings that took place this morning while my father lie in a hospital bed. When the boss of the most powerful crime organization slips into a coma, a dark current of activity ripples through the underworld.

As it was the last contract put in place, by regulation, the *Cosa Nostra* issued a claim over the *Ndrangheta* territory. Yet it was only a formality, and was quickly overturned during a meeting with Lucian Cross and Salvatore Carpella.

“The marriage contract was revoked,” Nic says as he turns into the gates of his home. “As Cassatto was the power behind the contract pushing for an heir, and there is no male heir, his death means it can be voided on either side.”

I nod slowly, digesting the fact that, something so dire and unescapable just twenty-four hours ago is so easily dismissed in the world of men. Power is absolute, until it’s not.

“But what about Elenore?” I grip the car door handle, hesitating before I step out. “Technically, she’s the rightful mistress as the widow.”

Nic shakes his head, releasing a gruff chuckle. “No. Ellie already had her turn in the seat of power. That won’t happen.”



He turns coal eyes on me. “My mother knows it’s her time to step aside.”

I hold his penetrating gaze as the silence of what’s not being said builds between us. Nic has claim to the Veneta territory now. One well-planned attack on the Cassatto clan and he could rightfully seat himself on that throne of power.

“Nic, what about—?”

“Come on,” he says, opening his door.

I watch him exit the car, and a trickle of unease slips down my back.

Shakily, my hand fidgets with the handle, unwilling to open the door.

I seal my eyes closed. Before I leave the safe confines of this car, I have to make a choice—the choice to trust Nic, wholly, completely. I can’t go out there and enter a life with a hidden pocket within me that’s fearful of whether he could one day end my life to reclaim his legacy.

If I choose to move forward with him, then I choose to believe he will never harm me. There is no life together otherwise.

I have loved Dominic Erasto since the first moment he tore into my sheltered world, all fury and wrath and beautiful, unhinged carnage. There was no choice then when I fell for him. I loved him unequivocally.

I have no choice now.

Inhaling a deep breath, I open my eyes and pull the handle, and my breath stalls in my lungs at the sight before the mansion.

The members of the *‘Ndrangheta* Cassatto clan line the front grounds, their attention on me as I finally step out of the car.

A shiver races over me, my skin prickling at being the focal point of so many eyes, but it’s Nic’s gaze I search for amid the faces. Standing center, he takes a step forward to meet me halfway.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

He takes my hand in his and I look up into his face. “Brianna Cassatto, you have a worthy cause, a purpose. It’s time for change. The *Cosa Nostra* want this change. I want this change.”

My heart knocks violently in my chest, and I swallow the ache forming in my throat.

“I will follow your command,” Nic continues. “I’ve already pledged my life to you.” He then lowers himself to kneel before me. “I will pledge my life again, every day, while serving you, protecting you. Worshiping you. Loving you.”

He removes his hand from mine, then my ring with the crest—the replica—appears, and he slips it onto my finger. “I offer to be your *consigliere*, if you’ll have me, mistress.”

“You’d give up your empire for me?”

“*Angioletta*, you *are* my empire.” Nic places a gentle kiss to the crest, then kisses my hand, before his gaze flicks up and seeks mine, waiting for my answer.

This isn’t how it’s done in our world. We have traditions. We’re breaking the rules, and before an entire clan to witness.

But we are lawless by nature.

Rules are meant to be broken, and some rules have waited far too long to be broken.

Fuck traditions. It’s time for that archaic structure to fall.

Instead of giving Nic a verbal answer of confirmation, I grab his collar and bring him toward me, crushing my mouth against his in a kiss to unite us together.

If I’m going to bring change, I’m starting right now.

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Thank you, lovely reader, for reading my work and taking this journey with me. It means the world to me to be able to share my words with you. I hope you’ve enjoyed Nic and Bria’s

story. This book was a challenge for me for different reasons, and I couldn't do what I love without you.

You are why I write.

Keep flipping the pages to meet Lucian and Violet, the first couple in my dark mafia romance series of standalones.

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*We weren't born the day we took our first breath. We were born the moment we stole it.*

~Grayson Peirce Sullivan, *Born, Darkly*

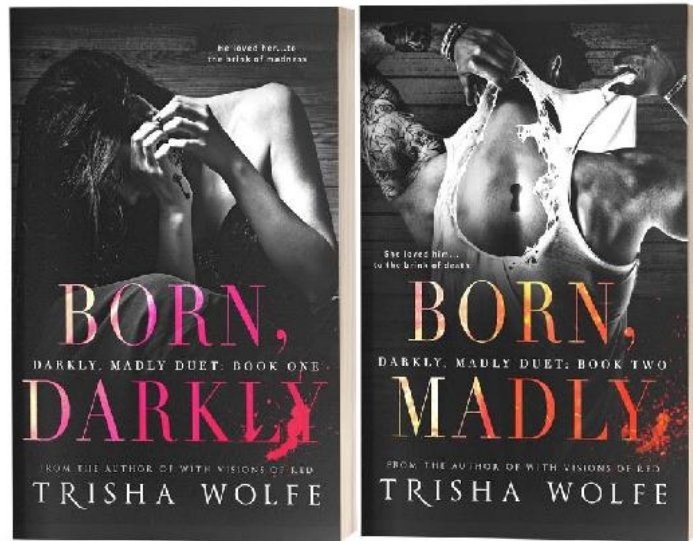


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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From an early age, Trisha Wolfe dreamed up fictional worlds and characters and was accused of talking to herself. Today, she lives in South Carolina with her family and writes full time, using her fictional worlds as an excuse to continue talking to herself. Get updates on future releases at [TrishaWolfe.com](https://TrishaWolfe.com)

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