

FLAWED

mafia wars

MAGGIE COLE

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MAFIA WARS NEW YORK - BOOK FIVE

MAGGIE COLE

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PROLOGUE



Chanel Moulin

14 Years Earlier

BRIGHT LIGHT HUMS FROM THE FLUORESCENT BULBS. DR. Depeckin glances at his folder then asks, “Ms. Moulin, what have you been using for birth control?”

My pulse pounds hard against my neck. Heat ignites on my cheeks. There’s only one man I’ve ever slept with, and it shouldn’t have happened.

It wasn’t even two months ago. He’s a lot older than me, and he stole my breath from the first moment I laid eyes on him. I knew he was a bad boy right down to the faint scar on his right cheek.

Yet I felt safe with him. And all I’ve done since that night is think about him.

Not once in my life have I not thought before I acted. I only had half a Cosmopolitan before he swept me away from my friends and onto the dance floor. By the end of the third song, he was leading me out of the nightclub and into his car. We spent the entire time lip-locked until we got to his place.

Every second of being with him felt right. My body fit with his like I was part of him. His touch lit up all my cells as if he were breathing life into me. Before him, I never thought I was

dead. Now, the more time that passes without him, the more numb I become.

My body craves a replay. His few attempts to see me again almost killed me. Sometimes I debate about caving, but I need to stay as far away from him as possible.

It's a mistake I wish I could take back. I didn't know who he was at the time. All I saw was how he looked at me with his dark, brooding eyes and dominant confidence.

God, I was so stupid.

Everything about Luca made me lose my judgment. I've cursed myself ever since. I should have been smarter than to fall prey to him. I'm around powerful, successful men all day. It's not the first time a man looked at me with desire or had a sexy Italian accent. Yet every look he threw my way made my heart skip a beat and pulse quicken.

I should have known better than to trust a stranger. My boss and his family are dangerous. My father works for them and is dangerous, too, I suppose. When I'm working, I'm under their protection. But the night out with my group of friends was far away from their guarding leers.

Luca has all the traits dangerous men possess, yet he was honey, and I was the fly. Not once did I stop to find out who he was or think he would hurt me.

He hasn't hurt me.

I can't put it past him though.

If my boss or his family knew what I did, I'm sure I'd get fired. It doesn't matter if I didn't know who Luca was or that I'm determined to stay away from him, even though he's mysteriously shown up at the coffee shop I visit or restaurants I eat at.

He's their biggest enemy.

That makes him my enemy.

My parents will disown me if I see him and they find out.

I'm sure his family would hurt me if they knew about us and who I was.

“Ms. Moulin, please answer my question. I’ll remind you everything is confidential,” Dr. Depeckin says.

I swallow hard, admitting, “I’m not sexually active.”

He arches his bushy eyebrows. In a stern voice, he states, “I’m your doctor, Ms. Moulin. There’s no need to lie.”

My heart thumps against my chest cavity. I blurt out, “I’m not! I don’t have a boyfriend, and I work all the time!”

Both of those statements are true. I’m Massimo Marino’s flight attendant. The day my father and I arrived in New York from Italy, Massimo’s papà suggested he hire me.

It was a little over two years ago, and I was only sixteen. I had already graduated high school. Giuseppe Berlusconi, the head of the Italian Mafia, had relocated my father to New York to work for the Marinos.

It wasn’t the first time I’d moved countries. My homeland is France. My parents and I moved to Italy when I was ten. When my father announced we were moving to the United States, I didn’t want to leave. All my friends were in Italy. I knew no one in New York, nor did I know what I wanted to do with my life. When Massimo offered me the flight attendant job, I didn’t feel I had a choice. My father would have been extremely disappointed in me if I hadn’t taken it.

Regardless of how my career started, I love what I do. I’ve seen more of the world than I ever imagined I could. Massimo treats me well, pays me more than I ever hoped for, and every day feels like a new adventure.

If only I’d never laid eyes on Luca.

Dr. Depeckin takes a few deep breaths, adding to my stress. “When’s the last time you had sex?”

The heat in my cheeks burns hotter. I exaggerate, stating, “It was months ago.”

“How long?”

Why is he pushing me about this?

I shrug, admitting, “Less than two months ago. But I’m not sexually active right now. And it was only once! I don’t sleep around!”

Why did I add that last part?

“Ms. Moulin, did you use any protection?” he questions.

More embarrassment floods me. Visuals of Luca’s muscular frame caged over my body, the warmth of his strong arms around me, and the pressure of his lips feels as real as that night. His thick Italian accent, stating dirty phrases in both English and Italian during our encounter, never quiet. I squeeze my legs together, trying to alleviate the ache I always feel whenever I think about him.

“Ms. Moulin?” Dr. Depeckin snaps me out of my thoughts.

“Ummm... I ummm...”

“I’ll take that as a no?” he asserts.

“I’m on the pill,” I blurt out, wanting to crawl into a hole and die.

This is so humiliating.

He runs his hand through his graying hair and motions to the desk chair. “Have a seat.” He takes the one across from mine.

I obey, preparing myself for the lecture about safe sex. I announce, “I promise I’ll be smarter next time and use a condom.”

An expression I can’t interpret fills his face. He clears his throat then states, “That would be a better choice. Now, please tell me if you’ve experienced any nausea?”

Why would I have that?

I answer, “No.”

“Tender breasts?”

I internally groan, wondering if he’s determined to continue shaming me, and reply, “No.”

He leans closer. “Your form said you don’t remember the last time you got your period.”

The smell of his Old Spice cologne makes my stomach churn.

Maybe I should tell him it’s time to get a new scent?

I shrug again. “I’ve never been regular. It’s in my chart.”

“Ms. Moulin, did you take all your birth control pills as prescribed?”

“Yes. Of course I did.”

A tense moment of silence passes. He studies me then announces, “Then your pill failed. You’re pregnant.”

A nervous laugh escapes me. “That’s not funny.”

His face turns sterner. “I’m not joking.”

Time seems to stand still. Goose bumps break out on my arms. I shudder, shaking my head.

No. No. No.

How did I let this happen?

“Are you okay?” he asks.

More shock fills me. “What do you mean I’m pregnant? That’s not possible.”

“You had unprotected sex,” he points out.

“Once!” I exclaim, understanding how ignorant it sounds.

He glances at the ceiling, takes a frustrated breath, then locks his disapproving eyes on me. “It doesn’t matter how many times you have sex. It only takes once. The pill isn’t one hundred percent reliable.”

Now you tell me?

My insides quiver. Tears fill my orbs and I blink hard, but they fall fast.

He softens his tone. “You said you don’t have a boyfriend. Do you know who the father is?”

Luca...

Oh my God.

I don't even know the last name of my baby's father.

It doesn't matter. He works for the Abruzzos.

No. No. No.

This is not happening!

I snap, "Of course I know who he is!"

Dr. Depeckin holds his hands in the air. "I wasn't insinuating —"

"I need to go," I state, jumping out of my chair and grabbing my clothes.

"Ms. Moulin, we need to discuss prenatal care," he asserts.

I toss my shirt over the paper gown and step into my skirt, not bothering with my bra or panties. I shove them into my oversized bag and move toward the door.

He calls out, "Ms. Moulin!"

I yank on the knob. "Thank you." I rush toward the exit sign, barely seeing it through my tears. I toss cash at the front desk girl. It's probably way more than what I owe, but another second in this office, and I'm going to lose it.

Somehow, I make it through the building. I wipe my face, toss my sunglasses on, and hail a cab. The entire ride is a blur.

Numbness sets in as I climb six flights of stairs, avoiding the elevator so I don't have to see anyone in my building. I get into my apartment, go into the bathroom, and strip.

For a long time, I study my body, cursing myself. My belly looks the same. My breasts, too.

Maybe he's wrong.

He's not.

How could I be so naive?

Why didn't I tell him to use a condom?

Why does it have to be Luca's?

I leave the bathroom, pull my bedding back, and slide under the covers. For hours I cry, unsure of what I'm going to do. I'm only eighteen. I'm unprepared to be a mother, and especially a single mother. This wasn't my plan for my life.

My parents are going to kill me.

Maybe I should find Luca and tell him.

What am I thinking?

If he's the father, it's his right to know.

Maybe we could be together and it'll all be okay.

What am I thinking? He's the enemy.

He's my baby's father.

My baby.

Oh my God! What am I going to do?

I will never subject my child to the Abruzzos.

The debate over how I'll manage a baby, my career, and still keep Luca a secret never stops. When morning comes, I still don't have any answers, but there's only one thing I vow to do.

I'll figure out how to be a good mom and protect my child from Luca at all costs.



Luca Marino

Two Weeks Later

ANGELO MARINO, MY UNCLE AND HEAD OF THE REAL ITALIAN Mafia in New York, shoots me daggers and crosses his arms. I say the “real one” because Jacopo Abruzzo will claim the same, yet he defected from Giuseppe Berlusconi, who heads up all of Italy’s top families. And the Marinos are still loyal to Giuseppe and under his leadership.

Years ago, I came to the States from Italy. Since no one knew who I was, Angelo utilized me as his spy. So I have two passports. One has my real name, Luca Alessandro Marino; the other is for Luca Alessandro Bianchi.

Angelo and his four sons are the only people who know I’m a Marino. Other than that, the crime family world thinks I’m loyal to the Abruzzos. Jacopo believes I’m a spy for him against the Marinos. It’s one of the most dangerous positions in the Marino family, and I thrive at it.

Plus, my vendetta against the Abruzzos is personal.

Angelo demands, “Tell me what you found out.”

I take out a joint and light it up. One thing I can’t seem to quit is weed. It keeps me calm. Without it, I’d have a harder time keeping my cool.

The things the Abruzzos do make me ill. Nothing is off-limits. Human trafficking, both women and children, is their main source of income. They also have their hand in most other activities crime families are known for, such as smuggling, drugs, and gambling, but it doesn't even touch the income from human trafficking.

Lately, I've been put in more positions to do things against my moral code. I've had to buy women at their auctions, go into their whorehouses and select an innocent victim for the night, and other things.

My only saving grace is I insist on my sexual activities being private. So no one knows I never engage with the women. The women and children I buy, I pretend to sell and arrange for them to get to safety. The ones I have to "rent" for the night, I barely touch and pretend to fall asleep as soon as the door closes.

If I could save all of them, I would. But the Abruzzo operation extends throughout the world. So I do everything my uncle instructs me in order to someday take them down.

I inhale my joint deeply, hold it for a few seconds in my lungs, then release a cloud of smoke. I shift on my feet and relay, "A new shipment is arriving tomorrow night. They're using the O'Leary's docks."

Angelo freezes. "Why the O'Leary's instead of their own?"

I scratch my chin, admitting, "I don't know. Jacopo didn't explain. He just said to be ready."

"Where's the auction this time?" Angelo questions.

My gut churns. "His warehouse in Chelsea."

Angelo goes to the window and gazes out at the backyard. Green stretches over several football field lengths, and a pool glistens to the side. A thick tree line borders the yard. Several moments pass before he asks, "What role did Jacopo give you this time?"

I take another deep inhale, wishing I weren't so affected by my job. It's only been the last few months where the ability to

stomach it seems to be worsening. I answer, “Same as last time. Organizing the operation.”

Angelo spins. He pins his dark eyes on mine, stating, “You have to get a different position with Jacopo.”

I seethe, “And how do you suppose I do that? Do you think he asks anyone what they want to do?”

Angelo studies me.

I cross my arms, reminding myself to stay cool. Angelo’s the boss, and I would never disrespect him. I soften my tone but add, “Do you think I enjoy doing his sleazy work?”

Angelo shakes his head. “No. Of course you don’t. But without you in your role, we can’t keep tabs on the Abruzzos.”

I crack my neck, releasing some of the tension but not enough. When I agreed to infiltrate the Abruzzos, the job sounded exciting. It fed my inner adrenaline junkie. Now I’d love nothing more than to go back in time and tell Angelo to give me a different job.

Then I’ll remind myself that Jacopo isn’t dead. I haven’t made him pay for his sins yet.

Angelo steps closer. “Luca, you have one of our family’s toughest yet most important roles. You understand my gratitude, correct?”

I sigh, nodding. “Yes, Uncle.”

He assesses me further. “Has this become too much for you?”

My chest tightens. I reply, “No. Of course not. I won’t let you or the family down.”

Angelo glances at my joint. The smoke rises between us. He lowers his voice. “You’re using too much of that stuff.”

I sniff hard and stand taller. In a deadpan tone, I reveal, “It’s the only thing that keeps me calm.”

Several tense moments pass. Angelo finally pats my cheek, asserting, “You’re your own man. I won’t tell you what to do.”

“Since when?” I tease.

He smiles, adding, “If this becomes too much, you need to tell me, Luca.”

I turn serious again, insisting, “It’s not. I’m fine. All I want to do is take those bastards down.”

Angelo steps back. “Okay. We must figure out how to get you into another role with Jacopo. I can’t derail his plans if you’re in charge of them.”

The guilt over doing Jacopo’s dirty work fills me. It doesn’t matter how many women or children I’ve saved, there are always more than I can liberate.

Angelo thinks for several moments then says, “I’ll send info on a new semi route for you to tell Jacopo about. I’ll make sure the driver is in a hotel overnight so he’s safe. There will be over a million dollars in it. That should make you more important in his eyes.”

I nod. It’s not the first time the Marinos took a hit to move me up the ranks. Still, I hate Jacopo taking anything away from my family. I ask, “Anything else before I go?”

Angelo sighs. “No. That’s it. But, Luca...”

I arch my eyebrows.

He declares, “You can’t feel guilty about anything you’re doing. You’ve saved dozens of his victims. Don’t go down the dark hole. It won’t accomplish anything. Stay the course. One day, we’ll stop his entire operation.”

I say nothing.

Angelo continues, “The end justifies the means.”

I take the last inhale of my joint, stub it out in the ashtray, and leave. I want to be able to feel nothing over my role in the Abruzzo family, but it’s impossible. I get into my red Dodge Viper and refrain from peeling out of Angelo’s driveway and blasting my music. The last time I did that, I heard about it for months.

As soon as I reach the main road, I turn up “Paradise City” by Guns N’ Roses. I gun the Viper, weaving through traffic. Horns blare all around me as I cut off too many vehicles to

count. I veer onto the road that leads into the city. I have to pick up my dry cleaning before it closes.

By the time I get there, it's almost six. I park in a no-parking zone half a block away, knowing it's going to be hell trying to find an empty spot. I get out and race toward the building. Two steps away, the door opens, and a red-haired, green-eyed, younger woman runs into me.

"Whoa!" I grab her around the waist so she doesn't fall.

She drops her dry cleaning. Her pouty red lips tremble. Tears erupt in her eyes.

My hand moves to her cheek. A few months ago, I met her at a hot new club. We didn't last long on the dance floor before I took her to my place. The next morning, I thought I'd see her again, but when I woke up, she was gone.

By chance, I ran into her at a coffee shop. Without her knowing, I followed her home, even though she said she wasn't interested in seeing me again. None of it made sense. We had chemistry you can't fake. Everything seemed perfect before I fell asleep that night. And I've racked my brain too many times to try and figure out where I went wrong.

I inquire, "Chanel. What's wrong?"

She bends down to get her dry cleaning.

I crouch with her, grab it, then pull her back up. I repeat, "What's wrong?"

Her French accent pops out. "N-nothing." She tears her gaze off mine and then tries to step away. "I have to go."

I circle my arm around her waist. I move her out of the path of pedestrians on the crowded sidewalk.

"Luca, I have to go," she reiterates.

I cage her between the brick building and myself. I slide my palms back over her cheeks, forcing her to look at me. "Why are you crying, stellina?"

She squeezes her eyes shut and takes short breaths, as if I'm causing her pain.

I run my thumb over her bottom lip, stepping as close as possible. She's even more beautiful than I remember. It's like she's glowing, yet she also looks tired. Her cheeks are hot, but I'm unsure if it's because of me or if she's coming down with something.

She turns her head and sneezes.

"Bless you," I say, pulling out my handkerchief.

She sniffs hard and quickly wipes her nose. "Sorry."

"It's okay." I move my palm to her forehead. "Chanel, you're burning up. Are you sick?"

She swallows and winces. Her voice cracks. "No. I'm fine."

"Come on," I order, then spin her, guiding her quickly to my car.

"Luca, let me go."

"You're sick. Get in. I'll take you home," I state, open the passenger door, then grab her dry cleaning.

"No. I'm more than capable of making it home."

"Get in, stellina."

"Stop calling me your little star!" she angrily blurts out.

I freeze. "You know Italian?"

Her face heats hotter. She glares at me.

I put her dry cleaning in the backseat then motion for her to get in. "I'm taking you home. There's no point fighting me about this."

She shakes her head.

"Do I need to force you into the car?" I ask.

She seethes, "Is that how you operate? I shouldn't be surprised!" She sneezes again then coughs.

I don't know why she's so angry with me, but I plan on figuring it out. I tug her head into my chest and kiss her hair. Lowering my voice, I assert, "You're ill. Let me take you home."

Her body melts against mine. It's just like the night we met. Every part of me wants to keep her against me forever.

A bolt of lightning streaks through the sky and thunder booms in the air. She jumps, and rain pours over us.

"Get in!" I demand.

She obeys.

I shut the door and race around the car.

"It's not right to kidnap women," she hurls.

I grunt, reach for her seat belt, and keep my face in front of hers. She inhales sharply, and green flames ignite in her gaze. My dick turns hard. It's the same look I fell for the night I met her, even though she's way too young for me.

I'm thirty-two, and she's eighteen. It was the first time I had ever slept with anyone so young. I assumed she was twenty-two or so. When I found out, I cursed myself. She's of age, but what if she had been younger? It made me wonder if the Abruzzos were somehow subconsciously influencing my decisions.

Still, even though I now know her age, it's not stopped me from thinking about her any chance I get. The fact she won't let me see her anymore hasn't helped. Maybe if I knew why, I could let her go. But all I do is wonder where I went wrong. All she ever says is that she's not interested.

Everything about our night together tells me it can't be the truth. Unless I've lost touch with reality, every moment, every kiss, every touch was unlike any woman I'd ever experienced. Surely, if I felt it, then she did, too?

I refrain from kissing her and secure her seat belt. Then I drive toward her apartment.

"How do you know where I live?" she asks when I pull up to her building.

I glance at her. "I'm a man who gets what he wants, Chanel. You're who I want. It's my business to know where you live."

She gapes at me. I can't tell if it's fear or anger.

“I’d never hurt you,” I claim, surprised I feel the need to make such a bold statement.

She shuts her mouth then reaches for the door handle. “Thanks for the ride.”

I grab her dry cleaning, hop out, then meet her near the entrance. I hold the door for her.

She steps inside and turns. “Can I have my dry cleaning?” She sneezes three times.

I maneuver her through the people in the lobby and into the crowded elevator. I hit the button for the eighth floor and tug her close to me.

Her body stiffens, but by the time we get to her floor, she’s leaning against me as if too weak to stand on her own. The elevator opens, and I lead her down the hallway. Then I take the key out of her hand.

“What are you doing?” she mumbles.

“You’re sick. You need a hot shower, good food, and rest.”

“Who said I was sick?” she says, then goes into a coughing fit.

“Go,” I order, opening her door and pointing for her to go inside.

“How do you know which unit is mine?” she questions.

I answer, “It’s on the outside of the building. Now, go inside.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Fighting me isn’t going to get you anywhere,” I state.

She closes her eyes and leans against the doorframe. “I’m fine. You can go now. Thanks for the ride.”

“You aren’t fine,” I reply, then pick her up.

“What are you doing? Put me down!” she shrieks.

I carry her through the apartment, find the bathroom, then set her on the counter.

“Luca—”

“I’m not leaving you like this. Now, you can get undressed on your own, or I’ll remove your clothes for you,” I warn.

She scrunches her face, and tears fall from her green eyes.

I sigh and tug her into my chest. “Shh. Why are you crying?”

She manages to get out, “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why?” I question.

“You just shouldn’t,” she mutters.

“Want to tell me why you can’t stand me?” I inquire.

She tilts her head up, locking her eyes with mine. She quietly answers, “I never said that.”

I tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear. “Then why have you pushed me away every time I’ve seen you since the night we were together?”

She scrunches her forehead, squeezing her eyes shut again. “I-I’m sorry.”

I kiss her on the lips. It’s brief, and I want more, but she’s sick, and I don’t want her pushing me away again. I step back, turn on the shower, and then state, “I’m going to make you some food.”

“Not neces—”

I put my fingers over her lips. “I won’t take no for an answer. And you feel like you have a fever. Don’t stay too long in the hot shower.” I kiss her again and leave the bathroom before she can object another time.

I go into her kitchen and open the pantry. Everything’s alphabetically organized and grouped into cans, bottles, or boxes.

I pull out some chicken noodle soup and crackers then glance around the apartment. Everything is spotless. It only makes me fall harder for her. I’m a bit obsessive-compulsive about things being in their places.

It doesn’t take long for the soup to heat up. I put everything on a tray and take it to her bedroom.

She steps into the room with a towel around her body and another around her hair. She glances at the tray and then at me. “Thanks. You can go now.” She sneezes four times.

I pull the covers back. “Slide in.”

She looks down at the towel. “I need clothes.”

“Do you?” I ask, my lips twitching.

She tightens the towel around her body and then shifts on her feet, biting her lip.

“I’ll step out so you can change,” I concede, then do it. After a few minutes, I stick my head through the doorway. “Are you decent?”

Chanel’s sitting up in bed, combing her long red hair. She smirks. “Aren’t you supposed to ask that while the door is still closed?”

“Oops! Sorry,” I tease.

“Are you always so—” She goes into another coughing fit.

I rush over to her, rub her back, and hand her a glass of water. “Here. Drink this.”

She takes a sip. I pull a bottle of Nyquil I found in a cabinet out of my pocket. “You should take this.”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m fine.”

“You’re sick.”

“I’m not taking that!” she claims.

“Why? It’s over the counter. It’s not going to hurt you.”

“It could hurt—” She closes her mouth, stares at her hands, and pulls on her fingers.

I sit on the edge of the bed. “It could hurt what?”

“Nothing,” she mutters.

“Didn’t sound like nothing,” I push.

She snaps, “I’m not taking it. Now drop it.” She sneezes half a dozen times. Her eyes water.

I decide to respect her wishes for the time being. I hand her some tissues and ask, “Do you have a thermometer?”

“No.”

I put my hand on her forehead. “You’re burning up.”

She locks eyes with me, but her exhaustion is clear.

“I should get you some Tylenol,” I announce.

“No. I’m not taking anything,” she insists.

I run my hand through my hair, declaring, “If your fever doesn’t go away in a bit, you should take the medicine.”

“Are you ready to leave now?” she chirps.

I study her then grin.

She asks, “What’s so funny?”

I pick up the tray and put it over her lap. Then I kick off my shoes, drop my jeans, and remove my shirt. I slide into the other side of her bed. “You’re pretty cute when you’re pissed. Even though I have no clue what I ever did to upset you.”

“Put your clothes on!” she cries out.

“Chill out. I have my underwear on. Besides, it’s not like you haven’t seen all of my goods,” I tease.

Her face reddens further. She takes a few deep breaths while staring at her soup.

I grab the remote, scoot closer to her, and lean my face in front of hers. “What kind of shows do you watch?”

She tilts her head, pinning her eyebrows together. “Luca, why are you here? I’ve told you to go.”

I slide my arm around her waist and kiss her cheek. “I’m not going anywhere until you’re better. I could tell you I’m here because I’m concerned about you... which I am, don’t get me wrong. But if you want the honest truth, I’ll tell you.”

Apprehension fills her expression. She finally orders, “Go on then. Tell me.”

I lace my fingers through hers then kiss each of her knuckles. Her tiny gasp fills the air. I drill my stare into hers, confessing, “Ever since our night together, all I do is think about you.”

Silence fills the air. I wait until she says, “It was a mistake.”

Hurt fills me. I’m surprised how much it stings. I try to cover it up and reply, “Why do you think it was a mistake? I thought we were pretty spectacular together.”

Tears fill her green orbs. She looks away.

The hairs on my neck rise. I reach for her chin and force her to look at me, questioning, “You didn’t enjoy our night together?”

Her lips tremble. Her head bobs side to side. She swallows hard. “I didn’t mean that.”

I take it she didn’t mean that I was a mistake, which makes me happy. I kiss her temple and then order, “Eat. I’m not leaving until I know you’re okay. Consider me at your beck and call, stellina.”



Chanel

LUCA NEVER STOPS INTENSELY GAZING AT ME, WATCHING every mouthful of soup I eat. As annoying as it is, a part of me likes that he's here, taking care of me. I shouldn't want him still, but I can't deny my feelings. I'm rundown, sick, and still ambushed with tingles from his mere presence. Yet it doesn't mean I'll let myself act on my attraction toward him.

He's the enemy.

After I eat half the bowl of chicken noodle soup and some of the crackers, I push the tray away.

"You should finish that," Luca states.

"I'm full," I reply, then sit in bed straighter. I stare Luca straight in the eye and sternly say, "Thanks for your help. I think it's time for you to go now."

"Stellina—"

I erupt into another coughing fit, which masks some of my heartache. Every time he calls me stellina, I get butterflies.

Luca rubs my back until I stop coughing. He says, "You need to take some medication."

I snap, "I'm not taking anything, so stop talking about it!"

Luca sizes me up, interrogating, "Why won't you take anything? It's not like it's addictive."

All the thoughts of my baby swirl in my head. I'm not sure what is safe to take, so I figure it's better to err on the side of caution. And I'm definitely not telling Luca I'm pregnant—especially not with his child.

His child.

Ugh!

Luca tries again. “Chanel, please, just take—”

“Drop it!” I angrily yell.

Luca's eyes widen. He shakes his head, rises, and goes into the other room.

My heart falls. *He's leaving.* I want to chase after him and yell for him to come back. My feelings for him want me to beg him to never leave me again, yet it's not only about me anymore.

Our baby deserves to not be subjected to the Abruzzos.

Our baby.

Oh God!

I don't know what Luca would say if I told him I was pregnant. As much as I want to know how he'd react, I remind myself who he is and what that means. I curse myself for the millionth time for being stupid enough to go home with him. He was a stranger. What was I thinking?

Luca returns to the room, tearing me out of my thoughts. He has a spoonful of honey. He holds it next to my mouth, ordering, “At least take this.”

I hesitate, then I ask, “What is it? “

Amusement fills his expression. He chuckles. “You're really a spitfire, aren't you?”

Not sure if it was a compliment or an insult, I ask, “What does that mean?”

“It's honey. You can see that it's honey. However, you still question me, trying to fight me, as if I'm somehow going to

sneak medicine on this dollop and trick you,” Luca reveals, but I don’t miss the hurt in his voice.

I instantly feel guilty. I reach for the spoon, but Luca won’t hand it to me.

He demands, “Open your mouth, stellina.”

I decide it’s best not to argue. If he’s ever going to leave, I need to do what he says right now. And I wonder which of us is more stubborn.

He shakes the spoon in front of my lips, practically singing, “Come on, sexy. Take it.”

My heart swoons. I’m as far from sexy right now as I could be, but I still like that he seems as attracted to me as the night we met. So I swallow the honey, and he hands me a glass of water. I take several sips then hand it back to him and question, “Are you happy now?”

Luca’s lips twitch. He shakes his head and states, “No. I’d feel much better if you took the medicine.”

“That’s not happening, so I suggest you stop talking about it. Thank you for all your help. I appreciate it. Truly, I do. Now I think it’s time that you leave,” I repeat, even though my insides are screaming not to let him go.

Luca does the opposite of what I tell him and slides right back into bed. He tugs me into his arms.

I want to push him away. Well, I don’t really want to push him away, but my mind tells me I should. Instead, I give in to my desires and snuggle closer to him, enjoy every second of his warm arms around me, and listen to his heartbeat. My inner voice yells at me to think about the baby. Yet, I’m too physically and emotionally weak to remove myself from Luca’s embrace.

He kisses my temple then murmurs in my ear, “See, isn’t this a lot nicer?”

I yawn, suddenly super tired. I don’t answer him. I tighten my arm around his rock-hard torso and eventually drift off to sleep.

When I wake up, it's dark. Part of me wonders if Luca really wasn't here, but I can still smell his white musk and patchouli cologne and the faint scent of weed lingering in the air. It wafts in my nostrils even though my nose is pretty stuffed up. It's a cruel reminder of how I want but can't ever have Luca again.

I force myself out of bed. I go into the other room and call out, "Luca? Are you still here?"

Everything is silent. I decide he must've left, and when I go to the front door, my dead bolt is bolted. It confuses me even more. If he's not in my apartment, then how is it locked?

I glance around my tiny space, but he's nowhere. I finally go back to my bedroom, turn on the light, and that's when I see it.

There's a piece of paper on my nightstand. I pick it up and read his note.

STELLINA,

I HAD SOME BUSINESS I HAD TO TAKE CARE OF. I'LL BE BACK AS soon as possible. Make sure you drink lots of fluids and take more honey until I can get some better supplies for you. I left them on the tray.

XOXO,

Luca

I STUDY THE TRAY OF BOTTLED JUICES, HONEY, AND THE spoon. Then I reread the note several times.

He's coming back.

I reprimand myself for my insides doing the happy dance.

I need to make sure he doesn't come back inside. This has to stop. I cannot be with him. He's an Abruzzo.

Why is he being so nice to me? If he's an Abruzzo, he can't be this loving. They do evil, horrible, vindictive things.

So does my boss and his family.

I'm pretty sure my father does, too.

They do it in retaliation though. They're not the devil like the Abruzzos.

If he's this attentive, maybe he'd be a great father.

Stop it! My baby cannot be part of the Abruzzo world!

For hours I toss and turn in bed. When I look at my digital clock, it says 4:15 a.m. I finally fall asleep. It's almost noon when I wake up. I look at the space in the bed next to me, and Luca isn't in it.

My heart instantly sinks.

He didn't come back.

Proves my point. He'd be a terrible father.

I blink away tears then go into the bathroom and freeze.

Luca's naked in the shower. Water rolls down his hard frame. Every muscle in his body seems bigger than the last time we were together.

I'm sure I'm ruined for the rest of my life. No man is ever going to compare to him. He's still bad for me, and I know it, yet I can't tear my eyes off him.

Luca shuts off the water and spins, catching me staring at him. He grins, taunting, "Like what you see, stellina?"

Heat flushes my face. I don't know if I still have a fever or not, but I'm about to break out into a sweat. I stutter, "Wh-what are you doing back here?"

He steps out of the shower. I don't miss every single part of the front side of his body. I shift on my feet, squeezing my legs together. He grabs a towel, dries off, then answers, "I told you I'd be back. Did you not read my letter?"

"Umm... I—"

“Why are you holding your belly? Are you queasy?” he asks, his expression full of concern.

I glance at my hand in horror. I didn’t realize I was holding it like a pregnant woman.

When did I start doing that?

All the warning bells in my head that Luca is bad and who he works for ring at full volume. I cross my arms against my chest, leaning against the doorway since I’m still weak, and blurt out, “Yeah, you were working. What do you do?”

“Just boring business stuff. You should get back in bed,” he asserts.

“Why can’t you tell me what you do?” I hurl.

His eyes turn to slits. “Why do you have so much hostility toward me, Chanel?”

My insides shake with anger and maybe also disappointment. He’s the father of my child, who can never know. I must protect my baby at all costs, and I need to get him out of here. I cannot fall for him again. I reply, “I just want to know what you do. Is that a big deal? Or do you have something to hide?”

I’m unsure why I’m pushing this topic. I already know he works for the Abruzzos, but maybe I need to hear him say it. Perhaps that admission would allow me to solidify my stance about not telling him about the baby.

Luca stays planted where he’s at. Keeping his dark gaze on me, never once flinching, he says, “I’m a businessman.”

“What kind?” I push.

He sniffs hard then steps closer to me.

My heart beats harder, and I suddenly get dizzy. I reach for the wall.

Luca grabs me. “Whoa! You okay?”

I close my eyes, trying to breathe. Sweat pops out on my skin.

He circles his arm around my waist then presses his palm to my forehead. “Chanel, you’re burning up.”

“I am?” I ask, then wince when I swallow. My throat’s dry and hurts.

He leads me to the bed. I slide in, and he insists, “You need medication.”

“I’m not taking it,” I reiterate, but my voice is weak.

“I’ll be right back,” Luca states.

I curl into my pillow and wait for him. When he returns, he has a thermometer, cough syrup, and throat lozenges. I blurt out, “I said I’m not taking those!”

He arches his eyebrows. “Are you a health nut or something?”

I decide it’s best if I lie. I reply, “Yeah, I am. I don’t like unnecessary chemicals in my body.”

He shakes his head disapprovingly then leaves the room again.

The sound of the clock ticking hits my ears. I go into a sneezing fit then hug my pillow.

Luca returns, carrying a new tray. He sits on the bed next to me then pushes a lock of my hair behind my ear. Zings fly down my spine, even though I feel sick.

“I was prepared for this,” he says with a slight bit of arrogance.

“What?”

He holds a glass of cloudy water in front of me. “Take this,” he orders, then holds an empty glass next to it.

I ask, “Wh-what is that?”

His lips twitch. “It’s salt water. Gargle it. It’ll help your sore throat. When you’re done, spit it in the empty glass.”

My pulse beats faster.

I hesitate. “What’s in it?”

He arches his eyebrows. “Salt and water.”

“What else?” I question.

He tilts his head. “Nothing else. I wouldn’t trick you.”

“How do I know that?” I question, then regret it when I see his face fall further. I blurt out, “Sorry.”

Tense silence fills the air as he studies me.

Salt and water; it can't be bad for the baby.

Is it?

No, it can't be.

He softens his tone, trying for the millionth time to understand my attitude. He says, “Chanel, I’m trying to understand what I did to upset you so much.”

Guilt crashes through me. I reply, “You haven’t done anything. Sorry. I’m just... I’m not myself right now.” I take the glass of salty water and gargle half of it. I spit it in the empty glass.

Luca orders, “Finish it, please.”

I point out, “You’re bossy.”

He shrugs. “Just do what I say.”

“Point proven,” I mutter, then down the remaining mixture.

He holds a steamy mug in front of me when I’m through.

I question, “What is this?”

“It’s ginger tea with honey. It’ll help you feel better.”

“Thanks.” I take a sip of tea.

Luca holds a thermometer in front of my ears. There’s a loud click. He pulls it away and frets, “You have a 101-degree temperature!”

I try not to freak out. I should call my doctor, but I don’t want Luca to hear. There’s no way I can do that without him listening and finding out about the baby.

“You should take a fever reducer,” he states.

I shake my head and turn on my side, yawning. “I just need sleep.”

He leaves the room. I’m almost asleep when he puts a cold compress on my neck.

“That’s freezing!” I express.

“You’ll thank me when your fever goes down,” he claims.

I reach to remove it, but he places his hand over mine.

“Chanel, don’t fight me on this. If it gets any higher, I’m taking you to the emergency room.”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

A fever isn’t good for the baby. He’s right.

I slide my hand back under the pillow.

He kisses the top of my head. “Good girl.”

I fall asleep within minutes. When I wake up, it’s the middle of the night and dark outside. A banana, crackers, and some Jell-O are on the nightstand. Two bottles of fruit juice are next to it. Another note is on the tray.

STELLINA,

Please eat. I’ll be back as soon as I can.

XOXO

Luca

I GLANCE AT THE CLOCK. IT’S FIVE IN THE MORNING.

Why is he always gone at night?

Is this what it would be like if we were together?

What can he possibly be doing at this hour?

Nothing good.

Maybe I need to give him the benefit of the doubt.

What am I talking about? We can never be together again.

My stomach growls, so I eat the banana and a few crackers. I drink half a bottle of juice then go into the bathroom and fill the bathtub with hot water and bubbles.

I'm in it so long that my fingers wrinkle. I rise, reach for the towel, and get dizzy. I hold on to the top of the tub so I don't fall, closing my eyes and breathing through the nausea.

"Stellina! What happened?" Luca's deep Italian accent booms through the air. He races toward me, grabs the towel, and wraps it around my wet body. He swiftly picks me up.

The stench of stale alcohol and weed fill the air. I wrinkle my nose. "Have you been partying all night?"

"No. I've not been partying."

"Then why do you smell like a brewery?"

"Work," he states as he carries me into the bedroom. When he sets me on the bed, I notice a faded red mark on his cheek.

I glance at him in horror, taking in his expensive suit and loosened tie. I accuse, "Did you have a good time with whatever woman you were with?"

He pins his eyebrows together. "What are you talking about?"

I have no reason to be upset with him. I'm not Luca's, and he's not mine. But it still hurts.

This is what it would be like if we were together.

I glare at him. "Next time, wash the lipstick off your face before you come into my home."

"Lipstick?" he asks, as if he has no clue what I'm talking about.

I blink hard, willing myself not to get emotional, and curse my pregnancy hormones.

This proves my theory that Luca is bad and should never know about our baby.

Our baby.

An overwhelming sensation hits me. It's all too much. I haven't told anyone about the baby. Luca's presence only reminds me how important it is that no one ever knows it's his. I can't hold back any longer and become a sobbing mess.

Luca slides next to me, pulling me onto his lap and holding me to his chest. His signature scent of white musk and patchouli mixes with the alcohol and weed aromas. It's strange, but it's comforting. Maybe it's because it reminds me of our night together.

He holds me tight to him, caressing my head, murmuring, "Shh."

I continue to sob, telling myself to push him away, but I'm unable to. The thought of him with another woman is painful, yet I'm not strong enough to resist his arms around me.

He declares, "I wasn't doing anything with another woman. I promise you."

It makes me cry harder.

"Shh. I had a work event. I swear to you, it was all business. My boss's wife kissed me on the cheek. It was innocent," he claims.

Is he telling the truth?

An Abruzzo wife?

Everything about that statement makes me feel more ill. I should be happy he wasn't with a woman having sex, but the thought of the Abruzzos once again makes it glaringly clear why we can't be together. And I don't know if I can believe his story or not.

"I would never leave you here sick and screw another woman," he sternly states.

It makes me want to believe him, but I still don't know if I can.

He tilts my head, locking his stern expression on me. "Listen to me, stellina. I want you. Do you understand me? You and only you."

It's as if he took a sledgehammer and pounded it on my head. His statement crushes me. It's all I would want to be true.

I sniffle hard, trying to get the tears to stop.

He wipes them with his thumbs then presses his lips to mine.

I inhale sharply, freezing.

He studies me for a brief moment. My pulse skyrockets, and I softly shake my head while crying harder.

“Please believe me. I would never leave you to be with another woman,” he claims again.

And I want to believe him. But I can't.

If only he weren't an Abruzzo.



Luca

NO MATTER WHAT I SAY TO CHANEL, I CAN TELL SHE DOESN'T believe me. Her hurt expression makes me curse myself. I should have checked myself before I left Jacopo Abruzzo's. It was a party he threw for his wife's birthday, and it's true she kissed me on the cheek, so it has to be her lipstick.

I had plenty of opportunities to play around, but I didn't. I do my best not to get involved with Abruzzo women, even though it's challenging.

No matter what event I attend with the Abruzzos, there is always a slew of women. There are two groups with big distinctions between them. They rarely mix, yet both are there to do whatever any of the men want.

Jacopo's never-ending supply of women from his whorehouses invade the parties when the wives and girlfriends aren't in attendance. Yet the sex workers aren't the most dangerous ones. I can easily let them sit on my lap for hours, pretend to be into them, then take them behind closed doors and fake sleep until it's clear to leave.

The women I avoid at all costs are the ones who were at the party tonight. Those are daughters, nieces, and friends of the Abruzzos. They want marriage, kids, and the riches that come with securing their title.

And while I'll do a lot of things to solidify my role with the Abruzzos and keep my Marino heritage a secret, I refuse to get trapped into a marriage with a woman I'll never be able to love.

Tonight was as expected. The single women were out in full force. As always, I ensured I didn't get in any positions with them that would force me to reject them, yet it wasn't easy. Not engaging with them makes them try harder to earn my attention. But I've become a master at slipping in and out of conversations, and I avoid sitting down at gatherings.

My gut dropped when I got the reminder text about the party. I didn't want to leave Chanel, but I had no choice.

When Jacopo sends you an order to be somewhere, you don't ask questions or send your regrets. You show up and play the part. Defying him is asking for a death sentence. He's a true psychopath, requiring full access to anyone on his payroll. He views any deviation from what he orders as a threat, which leads to severe consequences.

So I stayed long enough to appease Jacopo then snuck out when no one would notice. Every second of being at the party was torture. I normally thrive on the knowledge I'm deceiving so many people. Over the years, I've learned who gets loose-lipped when drinking or taking drugs. More Abruzzo secrets get revealed at these events than at any other time. Yet all I could think about tonight was my stellina, sick and by herself.

But why does she hate me so much?

I've replayed the night we spent together too many times to count. Yet I'm still lost as to what I did to offend her.

And now she thinks I left her at home while sick to be with another woman.

Chanel's green eyes glow like a firefly, lighting up the darkness. Hot tears fall over my fingers. Anger and hurt swirl in her expression, tugging at my heart.

The silence grows, increasing the tension between us. My pulse beats harder, hammering between my ears until I can't

take it anymore. I repeat, “I would never do that to you. Never.”

She turns her head. Her shoulders tremble, and she sobs, “I don’t think you should be here, Luca.”

I tug her into my chest. “Shh. Stop telling me that. I’m not leaving you.”

She tilts her head. “Why? Why can’t you just go?”

My chest tightens. I slide one hand into her hair and the other onto her cheek, replying, “Tell me what I’ve done to upset you.”

She squeezes her eyes shut then whispers, “Luca...”

More time passes as her tears continue to fall. I finally kiss her forehead then pick her up.

She gapes at me. “What—”

“You need to rest,” I claim. I set her down, place the covers around her, then sit on the mattress. I slide my fingers through her hair, tucking a thick lock behind her ear.

She stares at me like a scared bird.

It feels like a knife’s slashing my throat. I blurt out, “Have I ever hurt you, stellina?”

She inhales sharply.

The tick of her clock seems to grow louder. I push, “Well? Have I?”

She hesitates then slowly shakes her head side to side, answering, “No.”

I trace her jawbone, asking, “Have I done something for you to believe I’m the type of man who would physically harm you?”

She bites her lip, her eyes widening.

“Well?” I interrogate.

She quietly replies, “No.”

Relief fills me. “Good, because I would never harm you. So why do you look so scared?”

She scrunches her face and tries to turn away, but I don't let her. I bend closer so my face is inches from hers. Her pouty lips tremble slightly, turning my dick hard. I reprimand myself, but the onslaught of her floral bubble bath scent and flushed cheeks growing hotter only intensifies my reaction to her.

All I can think about is kissing her. Her chest rises and falls faster. The sound of her breath hits my ears. Our eyes lock, as if we're each waiting for the other to crack first and make a move. I hold off as long as possible, then cave. I brush my lips against hers, slowly slipping my tongue along them until she retreats and breaks our gaze.

Her eyes dart to my cheek, and her fingers push on it. She sternly orders, "Do not kiss me with another woman's lips on your cheek!"

Oh shit! Not this again!

I blurt out, "I told you—"

"Do not sit on my bed with the reminder in my face!" she spouts.

"Chanel—"

"I deserve better than that," she seethes.

I can't blame her.

She's right. She deserves so much better, even if I didn't do anything.

I sigh, release her, then rise off the bed. I undo my belt and unzip my pants.

"What are you doing?" she cries out.

I don't flinch, continuing to peer down at her. I drop my pants and underwear to the floor, then unbutton my shirt.

Her eyes dart over my body, pausing on my erection, then she relocks her eyes on mine. "Wh—" She swallows hard.

My lips twitch. I shove my shirt off and respond, "I'm taking a shower. And this is the last time I'm defending myself. This

was an innocent kiss on the cheek. It's nothing more. Stop making me out to be someone I'm not. It's not fair."

Her eyes scan my torso then my lower body, before returning to my pecs.

Arrogantly, I demand, "Eyes up here, stellina."

Her cheeks turn fire-engine red. Her green globes blaze in the darkness, and my cock twitches. I've seen too many beautiful women in my lifetime to count. Yet everything about Chanel makes them appear dull.

I step forward and lean down so my face is over hers. Her hot breath merges with mine. She holds her breath, and I declare, "I'm going to shower. Close your eyes and try to sleep, or I'm going to have a hard time remembering you're sick and that I need to be a gentleman."

"A gentleman?" she whispers.

I lightly kiss her forehead, cheeks, and nose, then hover over her lips. "I'm a man, Chanel. One who remembers every breath..." I kiss her neck. "Every sound..." I drag my finger over her collarbone. "Every part of your body that molded itself to mine."

She takes a ragged breath.

I freeze, arching my eyebrows at her. "Did you think I forgot about our night?"

She stays quiet.

"Do you think I haven't spent hours obsessing over having you again?"

Her lips tremble.

I slide my knuckles down her neck and stop above her cleavage. I lean to her ear, lick her lobe, and she shudders. I murmur, "All I've thought about since our night together is you. So try to sleep, my little one. If I return and you look at me with those green eyes of yours, I'm not going to stop unless you tell me to, sick or not." I kiss the spot behind her ear, feeling like my heart will beat out of my chest.

Her voice cracks, barely audible. “Y-you wouldn’t.”

I grunt, palm her throat, and flick my tongue on her lobe several times.

She squirms beneath me. A tiny whimper reverberates in the air, and I force myself to tear myself away from her. “You’ve been warned,” I add, walking to the bathroom and turning on the shower.

I keep the water cold, trying to cool my blood, but nothing works. Everything about her has permeated me, and I can’t let it go. Her scent flares in my nostrils. The sound of her whimper echoes in my mind. Her soft skin taunts me. I thought I remembered how it felt, but touching her after all this time only proved me wrong. And the way her lips part and eyes lock on mine is a visual that plays on repeat.

A long, cold shower and several minutes staring at myself in the mirror and telling myself she’s sick and to be a gentleman do nothing for my arousal. It’s pointless to even try to fight it. I finally wrap a towel around my body and leave the bathroom, determined to stay what’s left of the night on the couch.

Unable to stop, I convince myself I need to check on her. I go into the bedroom and stand over her. She looks and sounds like she’s asleep, so I press my hand to her forehead.

Happy she doesn’t feel hot, I watch her for a few moments, ordering myself to leave. I finally turn, take a step, and her hand grabs my lower quad. I freeze.

She whispers, “Luca?”

Tingles fly down my spine. I spin. “You’re awake.”

She asks, “Where are you going?”

“To the couch.” I clench my jaw, forcing myself not to get into bed with her.

“It’s...”

I wait.

She continues, “It’s a bad couch.”

The fire in my blood reignites. “Bad?”

She clears her throat. “Yeah. Super lumpy. A tad stinky.”

I bite on my smile. “Lumpy and stinky?”

She nods. “I need a new one. I’m not home often, so I haven’t spent the money.”

Unable to resist, I sit beside her, questioning, “Why aren’t you home a lot?”

“My job.”

“What do you do?”

Nervousness fills her expression. “I’m a flight attendant.”

I rub my thumb over the back of her hand. “That’s a good job. What airline?”

A moment passes, and she states, “I’m not with an airline. I work on a private jet.”

The hairs on my neck rise. I know what happens with the flight attendants on the Abruzzo private jets. I bark out, “Has anyone hurt you?”

Confusion fills her expression. She sits up, exclaiming, “No! Of course not. Why would you say that?”

I study her. She genuinely seems appalled, which makes me relax a tad. Still, I wouldn’t put it past some rich, seedy guy taking advantage of her. So I vow, “If anyone ever tries anything, I’ll kill them.”

Shock fills her features. Her head jerks back slightly.

I add, “There are a lot of men who would do horrible things to you.”

“My employer wouldn’t stand for it,” she insists.

“Who’s your employer?”

She smirks. “A businessman.”

Irritated, I seethe, “A businessman? You’ll have to give me a bit more than that.”

“Gee, do I?” She bats her eyelashes.

“Meaning?” I growl.

“Want to tell me what you do, Mr. Businessman?” she fires back.

“Not fair. Just tell me,” I order.

She crosses her arms and fires daggers at me with her gaze. “It’s none of your business who I work for, but when you can be honest with me, I’ll be honest with you.”

Shit!

She mutters, “Such a hypocrite.”

And we’re back to I’m an asshole.

I run my hand through my hair, tugging at the strands. I ask, “Why do I get the feeling I just insulted you?”

“You didn’t,” she lies.

“Pretty sure I did,” I reply.

She sighs and glances at the ceiling then back at me. Softening her voice, she suggests, “Can we change the subject?”

I don’t like her secrecy about who she works for, but I also don’t want to fight with her anymore. Plus, I don’t want her fixated on what I do for a living. I agree, “Done.”

Silence fills the room. I debate about whether I want to get back to where we were going before I asked her what she does for a living or if I should head to the living room. Her glare tells me the couch is calling my name.

I rise, stating, “If you need anything, just yell.”

She furrows her forehead. “Didn’t we already establish my couch isn’t a good place to sleep?”

I take a few deep breaths, trying to navigate the mixed messages she’s sending me.

She surprises me further and lifts the covers. She pats the space next to her. “This will have to do for now. I don’t have a guest room. And I know I haven’t said it, but I appreciate you taking care of me.”

“I’ll always take care of you. If you let me,” I declare and refrain from leaping over the bed.

Nervousness fills her face. I assume it’s because she’s so young and no one’s ever taken care of her.

Several more minutes pass. I stay frozen, as does she.

Humor finally replaces the nerves. She teases, “You’d prefer a lumpy, stinky couch?”

My body relaxes, and I chuckle. “Nope.”

She motions to the mattress. “Then why don’t you get in before I change my mind?”

I blurt out, “Do you remember what I said before I took a shower?”

Red creeps into her cheeks. She nods. “Yes.”

“It still stands,” I warn.

She turns quiet again. The nerves swirl against her desire for me. It’s the same look I saw the night we got together, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to make her mine again.

I confess, “I don’t know why you hate me, but the last thing I want is for you to hate me more.”

She deeply exhales, admitting, “I don’t hate you, Luca.”

I snort. “Sure have me fooled.”

“I don’t,” she insists.

More time passes. The clock in the room ticks louder and louder until I cave. I walk around the bed, toss the towel on the floor, and slide under the covers. I tug her into my arms, stroke my fingers over her hip, then kiss her forehead. I mumble, “Don’t do anything besides sleep, stellina. Don’t look up at me with those big green eyes or drape those gorgeous limbs of yours any tighter around me. If you do, I won’t be able to maintain my gentleman status anymore.”

Her hot breath permeates my pec. She slides her thumb over my other one. The scent of her strawberry shampoo wafts in

my nostrils. My raging hard-on hurts, and I curse myself for not choosing the lumpy, stinky couch.

Time seems to not move, but I know it does because that damn clock won't shut up. The tick, tick, tick drives me insane. I stare at the ceiling, fighting the urge to make a move on her.

"Why aren't you married? Are you one of those guys who are against it?" she quietly asks.

Shocked by her question, I freeze, then answer, "I'm not opposed to marriage."

"Have you ever been?"

"No," I honestly state.

She tightens her leg around mine and it brushes against my cock.

I close my eyes and lick my lips, digging into the limited willpower I have left.

She interrogates, "Then why aren't you?"

I slide my hand through her hair and trace her ear with my thumb, replying, "I take marriage seriously. It's for life. I never found the right woman, so I never asked anyone."

"What about kids?" she questions.

I'd normally stop this conversation if any woman asked me these questions. Something about Chanel makes me want to answer them. So I tell her, "I love kids."

"Do you have any?"

I turn it on her, responding, "No, I don't. Do you want kids?"

A moment passes, and she says, "Yeah. I've always wanted a family."

I offer, "God forbid I ever have a girl. I'd lock her up for eternity to protect her against all the filth out there."

"What about a boy? What would you do if you had a boy?" she asks.

I smile then confess, "Teach him to be a better man than I am."

She doesn't speak.

I worry I've scared her again. So I kiss the top of her head and return to staring at the ceiling. "It's late. Go to sleep so you can get better."

There are too many ticks from the clock to know how much time passes. Her thumb stops sweeping over the same spot on my skin, so I figure she's asleep.

At the same time I look down, she tilts her head up. In the dim light, she's never looked more beautiful. She's a radiant creature glowing against the darkness.

My heart races, beating faster than the ticks of the clock. She opens her mouth to speak, shuts it, then opens it again. She does that several times until I can't handle it anymore.

The final straw breaks. I mutter, "Did you forget my warning?"

She blinks, nervously exhales, then slides two fingers over my lips.

I freeze, fighting all my demons to stop myself before this goes any further. I swallow hard and assert, "I'm not a man to be teased, stellina. So you need to decide what will happen between us next, because if you don't tell me to stop, I'm done being a gentleman for the rest of the night."

She moves her hand against my cheek. It trembles. Instead of telling me to stop, she surprises me again. She slides over me, holds her face an inch from mine, and opens her mouth. She closes it then stares at me.

I don't move, but the ticking of the clock fades, and the only thing I can hear is my heartbeat as her ragged, hot breath merges into mine.

She gingerly presses her lips to mine, and there's no more holding back or doubt in my mind.

She's meant to be mine.

Tonight and always.



Chanel

EVERY PART OF ME IS TREMBLING. LUCA'S FRESHLY showered, but his fading weed and alcohol scent wafts around me like a tornado. His hard, warm body feels safe and familiar, yet dangerous and forbidden. And the way his lips and tongue caress mine is so intense, I'm borderline dizzy. But his palm on my bare ass and his fist in my hair, gripping me like I'm his to possess, only add to the fire I tried so hard to ignore.

"Luca," I mumble, inhaling his breath, then swirling my tongue back into his mouth.

"Hmm?" he replies, tugs my head back, and leaves a trail of kisses on my neck.

"Oh God," I manage to get out, shuddering harder.

Is this how it was the night we were together?

No. This feels even better.

He pulls my breast into his mouth, and I arch into him, whimpering. Zings shoot to my core, increasing the ache between my thighs. I widen my legs and slide my heat over the tip of his cock, but he grabs my hips.

Luca lowers himself onto his back then pushes me into a sitting position. He kisses my stomach then looks up, pinning his dark, hot-blooded stare on me.

I instantly fret.

Does he know I'm pregnant?

Am I already showing?

“You’re an angel, stellina. A beautiful work of art,” he states.

I blink hard, relieved he doesn’t know but also emotional over his words. He said all kinds of things to me the night we met and got together, so I don’t know why I’m getting teary-eyed. I glide my hand through his thick hair.

He puts his palm over mine, confessing, “There’s something I’ve wanted you to do since we parted the morning after we met.”

“What?” I ask, butterflies jumping around my stomach. I’m sure it’s obvious I’m super naive and inexperienced. I have no doubt Luca’s a man who knows his way around the bedroom, and not just from the night we spent together. Everything about Luca reeks of confidence and experience.

He licks his lips and commands, “Grip the top of the headboard.”

I don’t know what Luca will do, but I’m not about to argue. I reach for the headboard and do as instructed.

“Good girl,” he praises, kisses my belly again, then lowers his head to the pillow. “Ride my face,” he demands as he shoves me on top of his mouth and secures his hands on my hips.

“Wha—”

Luca’s tongue tornados through my pussy. It takes me by surprise, and I lift my hips, but Luca presses them back to his face, growling, “Ride me, stellina.” He suctions his mouth back on my body.

“Oh God!” I shriek as heat plows through my veins.

He moves my hips, grinding me into him in a circular motion until I begin doing it on my own, desperate for every sensation he gives me.

Luca’s fingers crawl up my spine, creating an onslaught of tingles until he reaches the ends of my hair. He bunches it

together and gently tugs until I'm facing the ceiling. His other palm leaves my hip, and he smacks my ass cheek.

I gasp then moan as Luca sucks on my clit so hard, I grip the wood tighter.

He keeps me restrained, staring at the ceiling, clutching the headboard, and quivering over his face. His palm smacks me again, and he barks into my pussy, "Faster! Ride me faster, stellina!"

I obey, submitting to the sensations I've never felt so intensely before.

Luca never falters, sucking and licking me while putting fresh stings on my ass cheek.

The room fades into nothing but the scent of my arousal mixing with Luca's aroma. The echoes of his grunts, slaps, and my whimpers get louder. My tremors turn into tidal waves of adrenaline, pounding me over and over until I'm dizzy with my highs.

And I don't know how he knows how to give me such pleasure or why I love the sound and the bite of his palm so much. But I ride his face until I'm unable to keep my body positioned over him.

I collapse over him, tears streaming down my cheeks from the intensity, my breath hitching, and sweat coating my skin.

Luca moves me down his muscular frame and parts my lips with his tongue, swirling my orgasm into my mouth.

I'm lost in him, still trying to catch my breath, when he breaks our kiss. He turns me on the bed facedown, leans over my back, and slides his arm under my waist. He tugs me until my ass is flush with his body and thrusts his cock into my pussy.

"Luca!" I cry out.

His groan reverberates through the air. He rattles off Italian, but I'm not comprehending any of it. He thrusts deeper and deeper until I see stars. Luca cages his warm flesh over my back. He kisses my neck and murmurs in Italian, "Are you listening to me?"

“Y-y... oh...”

“Stellina?”

“Yes,” I manage to breathe, pushing my lower body toward him and loving every minute of how his cock shimmies against my walls.

His hot breath makes me shudder harder as he states, “You’re mine, stellina. No more running from me.”

I close my eyes, not wanting to think about our reality and unable to stop this or my desire for him. Yet I know this isn’t something I can continue after tonight.

He pushes, “Tell me you understand.”

I reach behind me and dig my fingers into his thigh.

He nibbles my ear and slows his thrusts, demanding, “Tell me. Tell me you’re mine.”

“Harder. Please,” I beg, my body on overdrive and not trusting my emotions to stay in line with what I know can’t be between Luca and me. And I can’t afford to go into some fantasy where we have a happy family and everything works out.

He’s an Abruzzo.

My loyalties are with the Marinos.

He drags his teeth over the curve of my neck, keeping his steady pace of torment. He mumbles, “Two words. Now tell me.”

I shouldn’t give in to him, yet I want the world where Luca and I thrive together. I don’t want us to be enemies. And right now, we aren’t in his eyes as long as he doesn’t know where my loyalties lie. So, I cave, telling myself it’s just this one moment in time, assuring, “I’m yours.”

Luca presses his lips against the back of my neck. “Good girl.” He speeds up his thrusts and returns to speaking random Italian words.

A fierce orgasm sweeps through me, and it’s like I’m floating above us. Luca’s magnificent body hovers over mine, perfectly controlling every aspect of our union.

It only makes me want him like nothing I've ever wanted before. A vision of Luca, me, and our baby together appears so vividly that it makes me momentarily delusional.

Crazy thoughts enter my mind. No matter the situation, who he works for, or the risks, we'll figure out how to be together because I want every part of what Luca can give me.

He shouts something in Italian, pulling me back to reality, and his body detonates inside mine, releasing another onslaught of tremors throughout me.

In the aftermath, his sweat mingles with mine. His frame still cages over me, as if in protection. And he presses his forehead against the top of my spine.

When our breathing slows, I flip underneath him. His dark eyes twinkle in the dim light. I reach up and caress his chiseled cheekbones before he dips his lips, pressing them to mine once more.

I slide my arms around his neck, and he holds me as close as possible, kissing me with just as much enthusiasm as ever. It's all too real. Too perfect. Too much of everything I've wanted since before I even found out I was pregnant, even though I know he's bad for me and my unborn child.

My stomach growls, and Luca tears his lips off me. He grins, kisses me on the forehead, and jumps off the mattress.

"Where are you going?" I ask, suddenly afraid he's going to leave me again.

He bends over, puts his palms on both sides of my head, and pecks me on the lips. He asserts, "Time you ate something with substance."

I clear my throat. "I'm okay. It's late. Get back in bed."

His lips twitch. "You have a bossy streak, stellina, don't you?"

I bite on my smile and shrug, innocently questioning, "Do I?"

He kisses my nose and rises. "Yep. But it's cute. Okay, stay warm. I'll be back soon." Luca spins, grabs the towel off the floor, wraps it around his lower body, and leaves.

As soon as he's out of the room, I release a big breath of air and then bury my face into the pillow. The faint scent of weed and Luca's cologne infiltrates my lungs. I smile bigger, but then panic hits me. I groan.

What did I do?

This was such a bad idea. Why didn't I let him sleep on the lumpy, stinky couch?

Where is my self-control?

Go out to the kitchen and tell him to go. It's best to cut this off now.

I debate for a few more minutes then get out of bed. I toss on a robe and slippers and go into the kitchen. When I turn the corner, I freeze.

Romantic Italian music hums from my radio. The lights are off. Steam drifts out of the pot on the stove. Garlic and butter sizzle in a skillet. Candles flicker in the small room, making Luca's body gleam. He's still in his towel, chopping up herbs and singing the lyrics.

Is this guy for real?

He doesn't move his head, only his eyes, pinning them on me. His lips curve as he states, "Thought I told you to stay in bed where it's warm."

My heart swells. I wish it didn't. More than anything, I wish I had the willpower to dislike Luca, but I don't. He's everything I could have asked for before I even knew what I wanted in a man. Yet we cannot be.

My stomach growls again, and he chuckles, answering for me, "Guess you're too hungry. Sit down, stellina." He motions to the chair.

I avoid the table. Instead, I sit on a barstool, mesmerized by his chef skills. He slices basil like he's a Michelin star recipient. I ask, "Where did you learn to chop like that?"

A soft expression enters his features, almost as if he's reminiscing about good old times. He answers, "My mamma

always told my brothers and me, ‘if you want to ever have a woman fall in love with you, you must learn to cook.’”

His statement warms my heart. I reply, “She did?”

He puts the knife down, scoops up the green herb, and tosses it on a plate. He pours a glass of red wine and sets it in front of me. “She did. Try this. I brought it from my private collection for when you were feeling better.”

My heart swoons again. No one has ever thought about me enough to bring me a bottle of wine. Maybe I’m overreacting, but it strikes me as super thoughtful. Yet, I debate, not sure if I should drink it or not. The doctor said a glass of red wine every now and then was okay, but is it?

“You don’t like wine?” Luca asks.

I shake my head, creating the lie as I speak, “No. I do. I’m just not sure I should have it when I’ve been sick.”

His eyes widen. “Forgive me, stellina. Of course. Leave it.”

“I’ll have a sip,” I say, not wanting to let it go to waste and taking a mouthful before Luca can retract his offer.

“Whoa! What are you doing?” he questions.

I arch my eyebrows. “What’s wrong?”

He chuckles and comes around the island. He sits next to me and takes the glass from me. He puts it on the counter and then positions my hand so my two fingers are between the stem and my palm rests on the bottom. He holds his hand on top of mine and leans close to my face. “This is a thirty-year-old bottle of Barolo. You can’t just toss it back.”

Amused, I retort, “Toss it back? I didn’t exactly chug it.”

“Ah, but you didn’t let it breathe. Nor did you smell it. You didn’t swirl the flavors together,” he points out.

I tilt my head, feeling slightly foolish, and blurt out, “I always thought that was a gimmick.”

He gasps. “My stellina! I thought you were French.”

“I am!”

He puts his face directly in front of mine. “Are you sure about that?”

My face heats. “Of course. I’m—”

He gives me a chaste kiss. I freeze, and he moves my hand so the wine swirls in the goblet. He picks it up, holds it under my nose, and orders, “Slowly inhale and tell me what you smell.”

I obey, taking in the rich aromas. I state, “Black fig, rhubarb, and red currant?”

Approval lights up Luca’s face. He says, “Very good. Now taste.”

I take another mouthful, and the flavors pop out on my tongue, richer than before. I moan, “Mmm.”

Luca tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear, grinning. “Good, right?”

“Yes.”

He picks up the glass and sniffs it, then briefly closes his eyes as he takes a mouthful. He swallows, licks his lips, then pins his gaze on mine. “Perfection.”

I nod. “It’s good.”

He rises, kisses the top of my head, then resumes his position in the kitchen.

“Do you want some help?” I ask.

He glances around the kitchen, grabs a bottle of water, then sets it in front of me, replying, “Nope.” He grabs a tomato, dices it, then adds it to the skillet.

“What are you making?” I ask, inhaling the rich garlic smell. My stomach growls again.

“Fresh tomato and basil sauce over pasta. But I apologize for these,” Luca states, shaking a box of noodles.

“What’s wrong with the spaghetti?” I ask.

He scrunches his face. “It’s in a box.”

“And your point is?”

He shakes his head, looking annoyed. “This is not real pasta.”

“It’s not?”

“No. Real pasta is fresh.”

I gape at him.

“What did I say?” he asks.

“Don’t tell me you know how to make homemade pasta,” I reply.

He jerks his head back. “Of course I do. My mamma taught me right.”

Still not believing it, I question, “Are you serious?”

“Why would I lie about pasta?” he asks.

I stare at him for a moment.

He pushes, “What?”

I hesitate but admit, “You’re a lot different than I would have expected.”

He pulls the noodles out of the box then releases them into the boiling water. He adds the basil to the skillet, stirs the contents, then wipes his hands on a dish towel. He tosses it on the counter then leans over the counter, grabbing my hand and caressing it. “How am I different?”

“You’re a bad boy who cooks from scratch. Plus, you took care of me the last few days.” Flames race up my cheeks as soon as the words come out of my mouth. I curse myself for blabbing my inner thoughts. I try to act nonchalant, shrugging and taking another sip of wine.

Luca takes the glass and pushes the water toward me. He asserts, “I shouldn’t have opened the wine. I forgot you were sick. Let’s stick with water so you don’t have a relapse.”

I open my mouth to protest then shut it. I momentarily forgot I was pregnant. No matter what the doctor said, I’m not totally comfortable or convinced a glass of wine is okay for the baby, so it’s best if I just don’t drink it. I nod, offering, “Thanks.”

He kisses each knuckle on my hand. New tingles rush through my veins. I inhale deeply, and he pins his eyes on mine, saying, "Tell me something no one knows about you."

My pulse quickens, pounding in my neck. "Like what?"

He caresses his thumb over my hand, answering, "Anything you want."

Afraid I might spill everything I need to hide from him, I claim, "I don't have any secrets. I'm boring."

He purses his lips, tilting his head, studying me.

I nervously ask, "What?"

"Nothing is boring about you, my sexy French girl," he states, as if it's a fact and not his opinion.

"I assure you, I am," I reiterate.

He rises and pulls me off the stool.

"Whoa!" I exclaim.

He smiles. "Come with me."

"Where?" I question, glancing at my robe.

He circles his arm around my waist, directing, "Here," and leads me to the full-length mirror by my front door. He stands behind me, tugs my belt, and the robe flies open, exposing my naked body.

I try to shut it, but he grabs my hands and laces his fingers through mine.

His cheek grazes mine, and he locks eyes with me in the mirror, demanding, "Tell me what you see."

My face burns red. I groan. "A naked woman. Can I close my robe?"

He releases one of my hands and shoves the robe over my shoulders.

"Luca!"

"Shh! Just look," he orders.

I squeeze my eyes shut then reopen them, still mortified Luca's studying me like he's looking at a piece of art to see if it's real or fake.

"What do you see, stellina? And think before you talk, or we'll be here until the sun rises," he threatens.

I sigh, lean against him, and fight with the emotions raging around my heart.

I can't tell him what I see. If I do, I'll put my baby into the hands of monsters.

"Once you tell me what you see, I'll tell you what I see," he asserts.

I close my eyes again, hating the tears welling in my eyes.

"Stellina, why are you crying?" he gently asks, swiping his thumb over the one that escaped.

I open my eyes again and begin to sob.

All I see when I look in the mirror is what will never be.

A mother.

A father.

An unborn baby who deserves to have it all but will never experience what every child should.

I can't escape the truth. The more I get to see who Luca is as a person, the further I fall for him. But a mother's duty is to protect her child at all costs.

It doesn't matter if he's everything I could ever want. He works for the devil, and our child deserves better.

Looking in the mirror, it's so easy to forget the world Luca lives in that our baby should never be subjected to. All it would take is for me to look the other way, leave my job with the Marinos, and fall into Luca's arms.

The reflection before me is an apparition of the life I could have. It paints a picture of a man I could love, who I think could love me back. And his confessions earlier this evening

only make me believe he'd fully embrace our baby and love and protect it.

But there is no safeguard from the Abruzzos and their evil.

So I've never been further from having the life I always wanted.



Luca

CHANEL'S BODY QUIVERS AGAINST MY FRAME. HER TEARS fall down her cheeks, and I wonder how a woman as radiant as she could feel so badly by looking in the mirror.

I wipe them away and circle my arms tighter around her. I wanted her to tell me what she sees, but she's too upset. I feel horrible for causing it, so I declare, "Want me to tell you what I see?"

She snuffles and nods, blinking hard to stop the onslaught of waterworks.

I kiss her cheek and once again pin my focus on her in the mirror. I confess, "You're the farthest thing from boring I've ever come across. Look hard, stellina. Every inch, every curve, every feature is perfection. But none of that even matters." I put my hand over her heart, continuing, "There's something special about you in here. I see it. So you're not only sexy. You've got something magical about you. It shines bright, radiating from you like a star in the darkness. Plus, you might be one of the strongest women I've ever encountered."

She scrunches her face, blurting out with a shaky voice, "Strong? How is that?"

I take a moment to study her again. She really is a masterpiece. Her green eyes are what first took me in, but her silky-smooth olive skin, long red hair, and elegant legs all

competed for my attention. Any man would have a hard time not looking twice at her, but what drew me in the most was her personality.

Even in the club, it beamed brightly. And the last few days, even though she hated me for reasons unknown, she had no problem standing up to me. It's rare I find a woman who speaks her mind around me or can stand up to me. Maybe it's because I'm surrounded by Abruzzo women who want to make me their husband or those forced to work at the whorehouses. Perhaps I intimidate women to the point they feel they can't be honest. Whatever it is, I guess it doesn't matter. All I know is that standing in front of me is a woman much younger than me who seems to have no qualms about speaking her mind and drawing a line in the sand where her boundaries are concerned.

Nothing has ever been more refreshing to me.

So I answer, "Yeah, you're not scared of me. You don't hold back or pretend to like or accept anything that doesn't sit right with you. You speak your mind and aren't trying to impress me. So that's the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

She snuffles and stares at me as if questioning my admission.

I softly chuckle, adding, "You even admitted to me your couch is lumpy and stinky."

Her lips curve. She bites the bottom one to keep from forming a full smile and puts her hand over her face, peeking through her fingers. She mutters, "It really is."

"See, I love your honesty," I confess, then remove her hand from her face and kiss it.

Silence fills the room, both of us lost in unspoken thoughts, staring at the other. Something nags me that her expression includes sadness, which I don't understand. I want to know more about it. I open my mouth to ask her what she's thinking, when a loud splash fills the air.

She jerks her head toward the kitchen, as do I. The water from the noodles is bubbling over. I race toward the stove, move the pot to a cold burner, and turn the heat down on the hot one. I

take a towel, wipe up the water, then replace the pot. I tease, “You’re distracting me from my masterpiece dinner, stellina.”

She says nothing and props her ass on the counter next to me, staring at the skillet. Her stomach growls again.

I pick up a spoonful of tomato sauce, blow on it, then hold it in front of her lips. “Try this and tell me what you think.”

She cautiously tastes it and closes her eyes. “Mmm. Way better than a jar.”

“A jar,” I scoff as my blood turns hot. She turns me on in ways I don’t understand. No one’s ever had this effect on me before. She’s young and has a naive innocence, but I don’t underestimate her. There’s also something worldly about her. I can’t put my finger on it, yet all my instincts are screaming there’s nothing simple about her.

The night after we met, I told myself it’s better to stay away from her. I’m in a world she doesn’t belong in, surrounded by bad people who do unimaginable things. And I thrive in the position Angelo Marino placed me in when I first got to this country years ago. So what does that make me?

For years, I’ve stayed away from anything close to a relationship. It never bothered me. I had plenty of women to give me what I physically needed. There was never a reason to get close. No one kept my attention for more than sex. Yet I couldn’t stop pursuing her if my life depended on it.

Over the last few days, I’ve had to question what these feelings mean. I can’t escape them. And every time Jacopo or his higher-ups order me to meet them, tearing me away from her, I resent it.

Normally, I’d do my job willingly, getting an adrenaline rush from navigating the dark underworld and reporting it back to Angelo. Now, all I can think of is how I need to get out. I need to publicly take my place in the Marino family.

Angelo’s always made it clear when I’m ready to take a new role, I can. I’ve already stayed with the Abruzzos longer than expected. I have more money than I’ll ever need, and I would

have the security to protect Chanel even when I'm not with her.

I'm smart enough to know that unless I leap, I'll never be able to build the type of life my stellina deserves. She would never be safe, and I'll be damned if I take her anywhere near the Abruzzos' vile reality.

It's crazy for me to be having these thoughts. All I've done is obsess over getting revenge on the Abruzzos and killing Jacopo. He brutally murdered my papà when I was only seven, making my mamma and I watch. She never recovered, living her remaining days depressed until she committed suicide several years later.

I spent my remaining childhood determined to mete out justice to Jacopo and every Abruzzo I could. When I got to the States, Angelo agreed to let me go undercover. It took me weeks to convince him, with tons of lectures on what I was giving up for my life and the promise that when I was ready to step away, I could.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Chanel asks, tearing me out of memories I try not to revisit.

I put the spoon in the skillet and both hands on the counter near her hips. She deeply inhales as I lean closer, stopping an inch from her lips. I hesitate then do something I've never done with a woman. I put my cards on the table, confessing, "You make me want to change everything in my life."

Her greens widen. She quietly questions, "Why?"

I expected her to ask what I'm referring to, not that I would share the details. She can't know anything about the Abruzzos. Eventually, I suppose I'd have to tell her, but right now, she needs to stay innocent. Asking me why only adds to my intrigue about her. I surprise myself when I don't analyze and truthfully answer, "Because you make me want to be the man you deserve."

She takes several short breaths, opens her mouth, closes it, then studies me further.

My stomach flips. I force myself to stay quiet, wanting to know what she's thinking. Her expression isn't one I can interpret, but it's almost as if she knows things about me. Mixed into that is something else, and I can't help interpreting it as hope.

Does she somehow know more about me than I think?

Does she want me to be a better man for her?

But she can't know more. I've never spoken to her about what I do, and there's no way anyone not in my world would know about me. I live under the radar.

She finally asks, "What does that mean, Luca? What kind of man are you?"

I debate how to answer her. It's a loaded question, but it's my fault for making that type of statement. There are so many things I'd love to admit to her so we don't have any secrets between us. But I can't. One word about the Abruzzos and I could put her in danger. Plus, she doesn't love me yet. Until she does, my truth only serves to ruin any chance we have.

"Luca?" she demands, continuing to give me that look I can't figure out.

I slide my palms over her cheeks, brushing my thumb over her lips. And for the first time ever, I wish I had chosen a different path for my life. When I was a young man, I only saw revenge and taking down the Abruzzos. I didn't think about how it would affect my personal affairs, even when Angelo warned me. All these years, I was content by myself. Now, I'm a thirty-two-year-old man who suddenly sees a future with a woman I barely know. And everything in my head screams at me that if I screw this up, I'll always regret it.

My chest tightens as I reply, "No one has ever intrigued me enough to see past what I get from them in the bedroom."

She pins her eyebrows together, quietly stating, "That doesn't answer my question, Luca."

My pulse pounds between my ears. I debate further about how to answer her without scaring her away then admit, "There are things in my life I'm not proud of... things I had to do..." I

exhale, surprised at how hard this conversation is when I don't even know what I'm trying to say.

She swallows hard. The expression in her eyes reappears, as if she knows things about me. But then she interrogates, "Like what?"

"Things I won't go into," I adamantly assert.

She closes her eyes, shaking her head.

My stomach flips. "Why are you doing that?"

Green fire leaps from her gaze. She accuses, "Don't say things to me and then keep me in the dark. Either tell me the truth or say nothing!"

"I'm not lying to you," I proclaim.

She crosses her arms and glances at the ceiling, blinking hard.

"Stellina—"

"Okay, tell me what you do. And don't you dare say you're a businessman," she fires.

My mouth turns dry. *Is there something she knows about me? Why is she so angry?*

"I'm waiting," she snaps.

I take a step backward, stating facts but not the entire truth. "I do own businesses."

She tilts her head. "What kind?"

I shrug. "Different ones."

"Such as?"

"Restaurants, a few gyms, nothing over the top, but it all adds up," I admit, not wanting to go into detail about anything I do for work. There's only one place that will lead to, and I can't go there right now.

She lifts her head higher. "Who do you own them with?"

"Myself. A few with some family members. Why do you seem upset with me about my business dealings?" I ask.

"I'm not upset," she claims.

“Aren’t you?” I challenge.

She studies me a moment then jumps off the counter. “Just curious about you. Can we eat? I’m starving and tired. I need to go back to bed.”

I open my mouth and then close it, deciding it’s best to change the subject. I’ve somehow ruined whatever it was I was trying to tell her. Now she’s mad at me again.

But what was I thinking? Discussing anything related to my life is a bad idea. There’s not a lot I can tell her while keeping her safe or expecting her not to run.

I step in front of the stove, pick up the potholders, then strain the noodles over the sink. Steam fills the air. I set the pot back on the burner, fill two plates with pasta, and top them with sauce. I carry them to the table and bring water and silverware.

Chanel hasn’t moved. She’s still glaring, but her focus is on the floor.

I return to her and cautiously say, “Come eat.”

She glances up at me, pinning me with a world of hurt, sadness, and something I haven’t seen before in her.

It’s disappointment.

My heart sinks. I take her hand, kiss it, then lead her to the table. I pull out her chair, and she sits. I take the seat next to her and wait for her to start eating.

We stay quiet, not discussing anything throughout most of the meal. A fierce debate takes hold in my mind, but everything I think of saying seems like a bad idea. When the meal’s almost over, I slide my arm around her shoulders and lean closer.

Her body stiffens. She slowly glances at me.

I tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear, stating, “Forgive me if I’ve said things that upset you. I’m... I’m a flawed man. My life consists of working, and I spend most of my free time alone.”

She closes her eyes briefly.

I add, “I like you... a lot. I don’t ever tell women that, but it’s true. And I’m not sure how I keep screwing up and upsetting you, but it’s not my intention.”

Her bottom lip quivers, and she closes her eyes again.

I drag my knuckles over her cheek and plead, “Will you please tell me what I’m doing that keeps upsetting you?”

Time seems to stand still. She finally opens her eyes and clears her throat. “We can’t be together, Luca.”

A bomb explodes in my heart. It’s the last thing I expected her to say. I demand, “Why would you say such a thing?”

Her eyes glisten, and she rises, picking up the plates. “I think you know why.” She goes into the kitchen, rinses the plates, and puts them in the dishwasher.

I follow her into the bedroom. “Tell me what you mean, stellina.”

She angrily spins, putting her hands on her hips. “So I’m supposed to tell you what you want to know, but you can’t answer my questions?”

“What didn’t I answer?” I ask.

She shakes her head and slides under the covers, muttering, “You’re cagey, Luca. You tell me you want to be a better man, and I ask why. Then you slip around the truth. Maybe you’re able to fool everyone you’re involved with, but not me.”

My heart almost stops. Am I so far gone from the role I play on a daily basis that this eighteen-year-old woman can see things others around me can’t?

I need to fix this before I lose her forever.

I slide next to her and tug her into my arms, asserting, “I promise you, I’m not trying to fool you.”

She turns so her face is in front of mine. “You’re hiding things. I may not know about a lot of things, but I know a liar when I see one.”

“What have I lied about?”

“You—” She snaps her mouth closed and looks away.

“I what?” I ask, turning her chin back toward me.

Her cheeks turn red. Flames ignite in her green eyes, but I also see a scared little girl inside them.

I soften my tone. “Stellina, what have I lied to you about?”

She scrunches her face and blinks hard, trying to stop the fresh tears. She finally chokes out, “Forget I said anything.”

“No. I want to know what I said that makes you think I’ve lied to you,” I demand.

She stays quiet.

Unable to let it go, I state, “You asked about my businesses, and I told you what I own. I never lied.”

She squeezes her eyes shut, whispering, “Just stop.”

Anger, confusion, and a desperate need to fix this fill me. I push, “Stop what?”

Her eyes fly open in a new wave of pissed-off rage. She hurls, “Fine. Tell me what you do all day.”

My red flags rise. I once again wonder if she knows something about me that she shouldn’t.

She can’t.

It’s impossible.

Is it?

I cautiously answer, “I work.”

“Doing what, Luca?” she demands.

The tightness in my chest expands until I feel like I can’t breathe. I answer, “Managing my businesses. Looking for other opportunities.”

“With your family?”

I nod. “Sure. But sometimes, I invest on my own.”

“And who’s your family?” she spouts.

The hairs on my neck rise. I don't ever speak of the Marinos. No one knows I'm related to them. I curse myself for telling her how they're partners with me. I finally answer, "I grew up in Italy. My father's enemy killed him when I was seven. My mother couldn't deal with it. She committed suicide a few years later. I have a few cousins and an uncle over here. When I invest with partners, they're the ones I trust."

She gapes at me. Stifling silence fills the air between us. She finally whispers, "Is that true? About your parents?"

Emotions I haven't allowed myself to feel in a long time sweep over me. I clench my jaw and sniff hard, focusing on the ceiling. When I feel it's safe to speak, I grit out, "Do you think I'm a monster who would lie about something like that?"

She places her palm on my cheek, quietly answering, "I-I'm so sorry, Luca. I can't imagine what that was like for you."

I inhale deeply then shove all those feelings to wherever I push them to so I can cope. I turn to her and, in an emotionless tone, state, "It was a long time ago. Get some rest, stellina." I kiss her on the forehead and then roll on my side, unable to continue this conversation.

I thought I could figure out how to be with her, but I was wrong.

There's only one reason I'm still alive. It's to take down every Abruzzo I can.

I won't rest until Jacopo and everyone he cares about are dead.

Chanel is right. No matter how much I want her, we can't be together. I'll never allow her into my world as it currently stands. I don't even know how I allowed myself to think about the possibilities. Choosing her means giving up on the vengeance my parents deserve. And I didn't come this far to stop now.



Chanel

LUCA ROLLS OVER, AND HIS SHOULDERS FLEX, SHOWING THE tension that grows in the air.

His father was killed by an enemy?

Was it a Marino?

His mother committed suicide when he was a child.

Am I wrong about the Marinos? Are they bad, too?

No. The Abruzzos are the ones who are evil.

What if the Marinos are as bad as the Abruzzos?

The questions I've never asked myself before, now plague me. I envision Luca as a little boy, devastated over losing his father and then his mother. It cuts me, making me feel like I'm going to choke on my emotions.

Neither of us moves, somehow making the situation worse.

All I see through the darkness is his pain, spreading over him like a mature vine. No matter who his family is, he didn't deserve to lose his parents. No child should have to experience what he did. Maybe it's my growing motherly instincts, but it seems even crueler now that I'm carrying his child.

When I can't stand it anymore, I scoot closer until my body curls around his. He stiffens as I slide my arm over his waist

and rest it on his racing heart. I press my lips to the back of his neck and murmur, “I’m sorry. You deserved better than what life handed you.”

In a cold voice, he replies, “It happened a long time ago. Go to sleep, Chanel.”

The tone of his statement makes me cringe. I’ve never heard him speak to me so abrasively. It shows me how much he’s still hurting from the past. Instead of obeying, I slide my other arm under his neck and squeeze him tighter.

He fills his chest with fresh air, holding on to it for what feels like forever, before releasing it in a slow, quiet manner. He does it several times then turns, tugging me into his chest and ordering, “Close your eyes.”

“Luca—”

“You need your rest. No more talking, only sleep,” he demands.

I wait a moment, tilt my head up, and start again, “Luca, I... I’m...”

What am I trying to say?

His dark, hardened eyes lock on mine.

It cuts me to the core. Inside that expression is a deep-seated, real pain. I reach for his cheek, stroking it with my thumb.

Moments pass before I open my mouth, but he flips me on my back so fast I gasp. He cages his body over mine and lowers his lips, gently exploring my mouth with a growing intensity that steals my breath.

I clutch him, loving the weight of his body over mine, circling my tongue against his in perfect rhythm until he pulls back an inch and studies me.

Our chests press together, trying to find air. Neither of us breaks our gaze, and I don’t know what to make of it. I start to panic, thinking he’s going to roll off me, and I grip his hair tighter and pull him back to me, sliding my tongue back into his mouth.

He doesn't fight me, kissing me with a new fervor.

I pretzel my legs around him, aching to have him inside me again. I thrust my hips, but he grasps my hip and pins me to the bed, not allowing me to have him.

Yet his kisses continue to drown me into a delirious state where I'm wet, needy, and annihilated with zings ping-ponging in all my cells. The heat of our bodies grows, arousal swirls in the air, and whimpers fly out of me. It all adds to the excruciating anticipation.

Then he bestows a new, slow torture on me. He inches his hips back and forth over my clit, intoxicating me to the point I'm panting.

I whisper, "Don't stop. Faster. Oh God!"

My reward isn't an increase in his speed. He removes his hand from my hip and drags his knuckles up the curve of my waist until his palm cups my breast. Tingles explode under his touch, and his finger and thumb graze my nipple with barely any pressure.

I moan, blinking hard to stay focused, but adrenaline buzzes all around me, making it impossible. Tremors take hold of me, from my pussy, to my breasts, to my limbs entwined with his.

"Please," I beg, the dull edge of an orgasm cascading through every atom of my being, throbbing with a need for more so great, tears come to my eyes.

He maintains it all, keeping me humming and so in tune with my body that it could be his own. He breaks our kiss, leaning to my ear and murmuring so quietly, I almost don't hear him, "I wish I could have you."

I reply just as softly, "You do have me."

He buries his face in the curve of my neck, kissing, sucking, and gently biting while sliding his cock over me faster.

"Oh... oh..."

He presses his forehead to mine, his hot, broken breath slapping mine, drilling his globes of dark fire into my soul.

Every electrified sensation annihilates me, trying to propel me into an out-of-body experience—except that I’m fixated on Luca’s potent gaze studying me as I explode into an earthquake underneath him.

I’m still trembling when he pushes inside me, giving me both sweet relief and a new onslaught of sensations. I widen my legs, trying to take as much of him as possible, even though I’m already full of his pulsating erection.

He groans, sliding his hand until his palm rests under my head and his fingers lace through my hair. He takes his other hand, pushes my right thigh higher, and then thrusts harder.

“Luca!” I cry out.

He locks eyes with me and says in Italian, “You’re the woman I want to care for and love, stellina.”

Tears fill my eyes. I tug his mouth to mine so he doesn’t remember I’m fluent in Italian. I kiss through my tears and push the thought of Luca, our baby, and me together to the back of my mind.

He continues in Italian, mumbling through our kisses. “I’d only be good to you,” and, “What I’d give for you to tell me you love me one day.”

It cracks my heart. I don’t doubt Luca would be good to me. He’s been nothing but amazing. And this new information about his parents makes me question if I’m being judgmental and maybe even on the wrong side of a war that isn’t mine.

His fiery tongue hits my ear as he says in English, “Tell me I make you feel good.”

I answer, “You do, Luca. So good.”

He nods against my cheek, increasing the speed of his thrusts. Then he murmurs in Italian, “I’m flawed, stellina. You deserve better.”

I close my eyes, feeling the high of Luca’s body in mine while fighting the debate about whether I could get past the fact that he’s an Abruzzo or not. My heart wants him. It wants him for

not only me but our baby. Yet my brain won't stop telling me I can't go down that road.

"Christ," he grunts. He slides his cock in and out of me so fast that a new wave of sweat pops out on my skin, and the earth shatters once more.

My voice cracks as I scream, "Luca!" I dig my nails into his shoulders and head, arching my quivering frame into his.

His deep groan fills the air. A violent tornado erupts in him, colliding with my own euphoric ecstasy.

It's as if our bodies feed off one another. Our highs don't die down right away, continuing to ricochet as our heady scent grows thicker and sounds of pleasure reverberate around us.

As it slows, the sound of our breaths and the ticking of my clock replaces our cries. The heat radiating off our skin cools. And the reality of our situation pops back into my mind.

Luca tenderly kisses me, retreats, and studies me for a moment. He opens his mouth then shuts it, rolling over and tugging me into his chest.

I curl into him, unsure what to do with all the unspoken words between us, wishing there were no Abruzzos or even Marinos. If there weren't, life would be normal for us.

But it's not.

His heartbeat slows, thumping in my ear, making me think about when I heard the baby's heart on the ultrasound this previous week. Maybe I'm crazy, but it sounds just like Luca's.

What am I doing? This is my baby's father.

Am I wrong to keep this a secret?

The Abruzzos are vile humans.

Luca's not though. My baby deserves two parents, and I have no doubts. Luca would be an amazing father.

I tilt my head and start to speak, but Luca puts two fingers over my lips.

He orders, “It’s late. You need rest. Close your eyes, stellina.”

Exhaustion sets in, and I yawn. Luca’s right. For the baby’s sake, I need to sleep.

He pecks me on the lips and repeats, “Sleep.”

I slowly nod then curl back into his arms. My mind races with what-ifs, and I decide I need to reassess everything tomorrow. Maybe there is a way we can be together.

He tightens his arms around me, as if I might escape him. I tighten my arm, too, then fall asleep to the beating of his heart and the slowing pattern of his breath.

I don’t wake up until two in the afternoon the next day. Luca’s handkerchief is around my eyes. I smile at his thoughtfulness to shut out the sunshine so that I could sleep. Even though I have blinds, it’s still light in my room. The black satin material of my sheets smells like him. I breathe the scent deeply, debating again about what to do.

I finally decide there’s no way Luca would ever hurt our child or me. Surely he’ll protect his own from any Abruzzo evil?

For several minutes, I sit with my decision to tell him about the baby. The more time that passes, the more resolved I get to tell him. Nothing feels right anymore about hiding my pregnancy from Luca. Not a bone in my body believes he won’t keep our baby and me safe.

And I don’t want to give him up. I barely know him, but my heart is crying out for me to make sure I don’t let him walk out of here without him knowing how I feel about him.

Confident I’m making the right choice and relieved to finally tell him the truth, I put on my robe. I open the bedroom door and call out, “Luca?”

My gut drops as I scan the tiny apartment.

He’s gone.

He’ll be back. He probably had to go to work.

What day is it?

I rack my brain.

It's Thursday.

Relief fills me.

It is the middle of the workday. Stop freaking out.

Still hoping he's here, I check the bathroom, but it's empty. I return to the bedroom then find a note on my dresser.

CHANEL,

I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER OUR TIME TOGETHER. I WISH THINGS were different, but you were right when you said we can't be together.

If I could change my life for you, I would. But I can't. I'm too far in, and for reasons I'll never be able to tell you, there's no getting out. And I'd never put you in a dangerous position.

You deserve the best, my darling stellina. Don't ever settle for anything less.

You'll forever have my heart,

LUCA

MY INSIDES QUIVER LIKE A FREIGHT TRAIN. I READ THE LETTER over and over until it's full of blurred ink from my tears.

For hours, I sit stunned, rotating between tears and dry eyes.

I don't have any way to contact him.

Why didn't I get his phone number?

Stop thinking like this. He admitted it's unsafe for me, and he's never going to be able to get out.

He doesn't know about the baby. Maybe if he did, he could get out.

What am I saying? He's part of one of the most dangerous crime families in the world. He's right. You don't just get out.

My father works for the Marinos. I work for the Marinos. There is no fairy tale ending for us. Luca did me a favor ending this.

Maybe our baby could bring the families together.

Romeo and Juliet both ended up dead. What delusional planet am I living on now?

My baby isn't going to have a father.

You knew that a few days ago before Luca reappeared in your life. This isn't new.

Why does this hurt so bad?

It's turning dark when the doorbell rings, knocking me out of my thoughts. I still have my robe on. The clock reads 5:45.

I rise and get dizzy. I sit back down and curse myself. I haven't eaten all day. The doorbell rings again, and I slowly stand, then make my way to the buzzer. I hold it down and ask, "Who is it?"

"Bill. Delivery for Ms. Moulin," a man's voice says.

"What kind of delivery?" I question, trying to think what it could possibly be. I don't remember ordering anything.

"Furniture," he replies.

The hairs on my arms rise. *Furniture?* I race to the window and glance at the street. A semitrailer is parked in front of my building, and a ramp has been lowered from the back.

I return to the buzzer, push it, and state, "I didn't order any furniture. I think you have the wrong apartment."

He replies in an annoyed voice, "Ma'am, are you, Ms. Chanel Moulin?"

"Yes."

"Then I have a delivery for you. And I'd like to go home and see my kids at a decent hour tonight. Can you please release the lock so we can do our job?" he asks.

“I’m not accepting anything. I didn’t pay for anything,” I claim.

He barks, “This is fully paid for and nonrefundable. If I don’t deliver it, I’ve gotta take it back, and that means my guys and I don’t get to eat dinner with our families tonight.”

“Who paid for it?” I ask.

He groans. “Ma’am, that’s not my department. Every moment you stall makes me miss another minute with my four kids.”

Guilt fills me. I cave and unlock the door. My stomach growls. I grab a pack of crackers and go to the window, watching three men unload covered furniture from the truck. I grasp the wall, steadying myself, and shove crackers into my mouth, barely tasting them.

Several minutes later, there’s a knock on my door.

I peek through the peephole, verify it’s the delivery guys, and open the door. I try again, “I didn’t order anything.”

A man who I assume is Bill has a clipboard, beer gut, and sweat dripping down his face. He scowls, shakes his head, and questions, “Do we need to go over this again?”

I open my mouth and then shut it.

He holds the clipboard out in front of me. He points to a line with an X, demanding, “Sign here.”

I glance at my living room then ask him, “I don’t have room for it.”

“We have instructions to discard your furniture,” he replies.

Still unsure what’s going on and what to do, I fret, “What if I don’t like the new stuff?”

He gazes over my shoulder at my furniture and gives me an exasperated look. “Pretty sure that will be impossible.”

I could be annoyed by his obvious observation about my shabby pieces, but I’m suddenly too hungry and emotionally drained to fight anymore.

He taps the pen on the paper and arches his eyebrows.

I sigh then take the pen and sign. I step back and open my door. I go to the kitchen, grab a banana and bottle of water, sit at the table, and watch.

Within minutes, a plush sectional couch is carried in. It's the shape of an L and has the softest black leather I've ever felt. The movers return with an oversized matching ottoman and chair.

When my furniture is in the hallway, I go to the door and say, "Thank you. How do I figure out who this is from?" It's a stupid question to ask. I already know Luca's the only person who could have sent this to me. Still, I want to be sure, and maybe the furniture store will have his information on file.

"Diana takes most of the orders, but she won't tell you anything. She's as tight-lipped as they come. But don't lock us out. We haven't brought the rest up," Bill informs me and moves toward the elevator.

More?

I return to the window and watch them unload more furniture. I'm suddenly overwhelmed, and so many questions pummel me.

They return with a gorgeous pewter and ornate black wall unit. It has shelves, drawers, and a large space for a TV.

A red-headed man named Matt and a dark-haired man named Lou bring in two coffee tables that match the wall unit.

Bill sets a big-screen TV on the wall unit and orders Matt, "Set it up."

Matt gets to work and then shows me how the remote works, but I can barely focus because Bill and Lou bring a black wooden kitchen table and leather dining room chairs into the apartment.

"Please tell me that's it," I state, not understanding why Luca would write me a goodbye letter and then refurnish my apartment. My boss Massimo takes good care of me. He often sends me extravagant thank-you gifts or gives me big bonuses, but this is out of my comfort zone.

“Don’t sound so grateful,” Bill mumbles, hauling two of my old chairs out the door. He comes back in, helps Lou finish the removal, then pulls his clipboard out of his back pocket, and flips the page. He steps in front of me. “Everything up to your standards?”

I gaze around my apartment. It feels like I stepped into someone else’s place. I utter, “Yes.”

“Great. Sign here.” He shoves the pen and clipboard at me.

“Boss, we forgot these,” Matt calls out, then steps into my apartment with two large bags. The other man follows him, carrying a few boxes.

“What are those?” I ask.

“Pillows, a blanket, and your lamps,” he answers.

Bill groans and puts the clipboard and pen on the coffee table. He and Lou work on putting a silver floor lamp and table lamp together while Matt takes plastic off brightly colored pillows of varying sizes. He arranges them on the couch and chair while I stand stunned.

They finish, I sign, and they leave. I sit on the couch, put the soft cream blanket over me, and hug my knees. Tears of confusion come streaming out, and I wonder how a gift so generous could feel so cruel.



Luca

Four Months Later

IT'S BEEN SEVERAL MONTHS SINCE MY TIME WITH CHANEL. Yet all I think about is her. No matter what I do, I can't shake the vision of her face, or the way her body felt wrapped around mine, or how she's so innocent and pure and way too damn good for me.

I'd do anything to see her again. Several times, I've sat outside her apartment in my car, just waiting for her to come out. And every time I see her gorgeous face, it reignites the pain, desire, and obsession I can't seem to shake.

But I stay away. I know I need to never put her at risk of entering my world again. It's too gruesome, and no matter what I do to keep her away from my reality, I can't keep her hidden under a rock. Eventually, the Abruzzos would find out about her. And I was a fool to contemplate anything long term with her. It would only end with her subjected to my enemy.

Every day, I fall farther and farther into the Abruzzo underworld. In some ways, the time I spent with Chanel reignited the fire I have to take out Jacopo and his family. I've done everything I can to become more and more important to him, and today will be the real test. I'll either leave in a body bag, or he'll solidify my worth to him.

As I pull up to his large estate, drive through the iron gates, and pass the bodyguards, I have a sense of dread. It's mixed with adrenaline. It's not a new feeling, but it's never been this intense. Then again, I've never done what I'm about to do.

I walk through the mansion, entering Jacopo's dining room. His top men and three of his new women are in there.

My gut churns. I hate it every time I see his women. He always has them on a chicken tenderloin diet. They get one small piece of grilled meat, and that's it.

I've seen too many of Jacopo's women waste away to skeletons. And I don't understand why he likes his women without any curves. I don't know if it's just a control thing or really what he's attracted to, but they arrive healthy and beautiful. It only takes a little time before they waste away.

These women aren't here of their own free will. They're prisoners. They sit at his table, listening to everything that goes on, not allowed to speak.

What's even crueller is that all the men eat more food than they'll ever need. Most of them don't seem to even notice the women starving on their water and chicken diet. It's like the Abruzzos only see females as property. Even the ones who come into marriages willingly aren't free to do what they please.

Today is no different. His three women have sad eyes, and I avoid looking at them any more than I have to. It takes everything I have not to pull out my gun and shoot all the men in the room. But I wouldn't leave here alive.

"Luca, sit your ass down," Jacopo orders, pointing to a seat.

I obey him, and a servant puts a plate of food in front of me.

"Eat," Jacopo demands.

I don't dare disobey him. I'm not hungry, but I eat half my plate, listening to the conversation. Nothing is anything I could use against him, so I bide my time, concentrating on my meal.

Jacopo finally turns his attention to me. "What's brought you here?"

I put my fork down and sit up straighter. In my most serious voice, I say, "I have some bad news."

He scowls. "What would that be?"

I glance around at the other men in the room. They are his top advisors, but I still don't trust them. Plus, they're too close to who I'm going to accuse of Abruzzo crimes they didn't commit.

I clear my throat, asking, "Permission to speak with you privately, boss?"

Jacopo assesses me for several minutes, making me want to shift in my seat, but I don't dare make a move. That would show weakness, and there's nothing he hates more.

He finally nods his head toward the door.

The men get up. The women stay.

I glance at them. They may be prisoners in his house, but I don't trust anybody. Jacopo underestimates them. One of these days, his lack of respect for them will backfire. I don't know when or how, but I'm convinced of it.

I think he keeps them there to further display his power and how he thinks of them as nothing more than his sex slaves.

I lock eyes with him, requesting, "Boss, the women, too."

He leers at me again, and I think he'll tell me no. My insides panic. I'd like to think I'm not intimidated by him, yet I know what he's capable of.

Jacopo's one of the greediest, nastiest, most vindictive men out there. He's not mentally stable. At any time, he can crack. I know it, and everyone around him knows it. Yet there's nothing we can do. He's the head of the family. No one dares undermine him. And if I want to take him down, I have to play his game.

He finally looks at them and snaps, "Get your asses up and out of here. Now!"

The women rise. The Black one grabs the table. It's probably from dizziness due to not eating enough. She takes an extra

minute longer to catch her balance.

Jacopo throws his hand on the table. “Whore! Get out. Now.”

An Asian woman grabs her by the arm and helps her out of the room.

Once the door is shut and I’m convinced nobody can hear me, I assert, “Boss, we have a problem with Benny, Sid, and Jimmy.”

Jacopo stares hard at me. The silence becomes stifling.

Benny, Sid, and Jimmy are the three top men in his organization who run his gambling operations. It represents a huge portion of his profits. “What would that be?” he seethes.

My stomach flips. It always happens when I’m lying. Or when I’m setting someone up. I have to be so convincing that he believes me. My head could get chopped off right at this table if he doesn’t. I’ve seen him do it before, so I put nothing past him.

I take a deep breath and shake my head, scowling, attempting to look as disgusted as I can. “They’re traitors.”

“You accuse my top men of betraying me?” he barks.

The air in my lungs thickens. I try to keep my cool, accusing, “They work for the Marinos.”

Jacopo doesn’t move, yet anger crawls through his expression. His nostrils flare as he questions through gritted teeth, “What proof do you have?”

“They’ve been in cahoots with the Marino brothers. I’ve seen it. I heard it.”

“And what did you see and hear?”

“They’re planning on moving your operation to the Marinos. All of it, including the current debt on the street.”

“That’s impossible,” Jacopo states, yet his fingers tapping the table tell me he doesn’t believe his own words.

“Boss, I can assure you that this is what’s happening. They gave Dante and Gianni Marino a copy of your book.”

Jacopo's face turns pale. He takes his scotch and knocks the rest of it back. He grinds his molars so hard, I wonder if his teeth will break. He finally asks, "Where and when did you discover this?"

"Last night. I was down at the docks picking up the guns. It was dark, but I spotted the three of them near the gray zone. I thought it was odd since they have no business being at the docks. Plus, they've been acting sketchy lately."

"How?"

"I can't describe it. Just a feeling I had," I claim.

Jacopo stays quiet.

I continue, "Did you send them there, boss?"

He inhales a deep breath then rises and walks to the bar. He pours two glasses of scotch, hands me one, then takes a large swig from his own.

I don't care for alcohol during the day. I prefer weed, but I drink it to appease him.

He interrogates, "How do you know they gave Dante and Gianni a copy of the book?"

I feign anger and scowl. "Like I said, I thought it was odd they were there. So I hid in the shadows and heard their conversation. There's no doubt they're traitors."

Jacopo finishes his drink, taking longer than normal. I don't speak, waiting for him to give me the orders I'm anticipating. He finally sets his drink down and snarls, "You discovered it. You take care of it."

I nod. "Yes, boss."

"And I want our authority re-established. You take care—"

There's a loud knock on the door.

Jacopo barks, "What is it?"

The door opens. Eddie O'Leary, son of Joseph O'Leary, the head of the Irish Mafia, comes into the meeting. The O'Learys have a long-standing alliance with the Abruzzos.

“Eddie, I didn’t expect to see you today,” Jacopo states.

Eddie glances at me. “We need to talk. Alone.”

Jacopo gets up, pours a glass of whiskey, then hands it to Eddie. “What’s this about?”

“That cocksucker Brody.” Eddie holds up his glass and downs it.

My ears perk up. There’s only one Brody who Eddie would be referring to. He’s an O’Connor and the son of Tully. Brody’s the oldest of four sons and next in line to take over the O’Connor family. They also have a strong alliance with the Marinos.

I rise to leave, not wanting to piss Jacopo off, but he stops me.

“Luca can stay,” Jacopo states.

Surprised, I sit back down.

Eddie assesses me then locks eyes with Jacopo again.

He assures him, “Luca just discovered three of my top men are traitors. He’s safe.”

Eddie arches his eyebrows. “Which ones?”

“Head of my gambling division,” Jacopo sneers.

“Shit,” Eddie mumbles.

Jacopo points to the seat across from me. “Sit. Then tell me what you know.”

Eddie obeys then reveals, “My guy Danny infiltrated the O’Connors. Brody’s the one who had your warehouse seized by the Feds.”

The hairs on my arms rise. This isn’t good. And damn Brody for not being discreet if this is true.

Jacopo’s anger intensifies. “Pig-loving rat,” he growls.

I grunt to show support, but I’m also surprised the O’Connors brought the Feds into their feud. It’s a rare move. There’s an unspoken rule you handle things outside of the law between families.

“Anyway, thought you should know,” Eddie states and lights up a cigarette.

Jacopo goes to the window and stares out into the yard. Fall’s around the corner, and hints of oranges, reds, and yellows pop out in the forest of trees that borders his property. Eddie and I exchange glances until Jacopo orders, “Have Danny bring Brody to the docks. Luca, you’ll meet them, along with Benny, Sid, and Jimmy.” He lights up a cigar and takes several puffs. Then he continues, “Tell them you’re bringing them to kill Brody, but not until you’re already at the docks. They’ll be distracted and you can take them out. Eddie, fill Danny in on the plan. The only people who leave alive are Luca and Danny. When it’s over, dispose of the bodies at the meat plant in Jersey.”

I swallow down the bile in my throat. I predicted Jacopo would have me off his three guys. I’ve never said two words to Brody. He has no clue I’m a Marino and not an Abruzzo. I have no desire to kill him, but this will be tricky to get out of without blowing my cover.

“Is there a problem?” Jacopo challenges.

I rise. “No, boss.” I nod to Eddie and add, “I’ll be in touch when I have things set up on my end.” I move toward the door.

“Luca,” Jacopo calls out.

My chest tightens and I spin. I raise my eyebrows in question.

His lips curl into the sinister smile I hate. One of these days, I’ll enjoy wiping it off his face. He warns, “Don’t take too long setting it up.”

“I won’t,” I claim, then hightail it out of the room. I avoid the faces of the women, other men, and guards. I step out into the fresh air, try to regulate my pulse, and use all my control not to speed out of Jacopo’s driveway.

When I get far enough away from his compound, I pull over and slam my hand on the steering wheel, shouting, “Shit!”

This is bad. I cannot kill an O’Connor. Yet I don’t know how to get out of this.

I veer back onto the road, rev the Viper's engine, and accelerate until I'm racing down the expressway at over one hundred miles per hour.

Horns blare all around me, but I don't slow. I pull off the exit for Angelo's and barrel through the gates. I ignore the guards and go directly to his study, not even bothering to knock on the door.

"We need to talk," I hurl.

Dante and Gianni are with Angelo. They all spin, and Angelo questions, "What's going on?"

I shut the door and approach the men, accusing, "Did you know it was the O'Connors who had the Feds shut down the Abruzzo whorehouse?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Gianni inquires.

"They wouldn't do that," Dante follows.

"Yeah, think again. And now I've been given the job to kill Brody," I state, then light up a joint, trying to calm my quivering insides.

The twins' eyes widen.

Angelo's face pales. "What are you talking about?"

I inhale deeply, holding the smoke in my lungs, then exhale. I take another hit, do the same thing, then go to the bar and pour myself a glass of water.

"Luca," Angelo demands.

I drink all of it then spin toward Angelo. "You knew, didn't you?"

Angelo's expression answers my question.

I snarl, "Did you ever think I might need to know something like that?"

He avoids answering me, asking, "How did they find out?"

"Brody's friend Danny is an O'Leary," I declare.

"No fucking way," Dante mumbles.

Angelo's eyes turn to slits.

Gianni bursts out, "That motherfucker! He's been Brody's right hand forever!"

A new wave of anger bursts through me. "Can we focus on the fact that Jacopo just ordered me to meet up with Danny and kill Brody?"

Angelo points to the chair. "Sit down, Luca."

"I prefer to stand. Now, what the hell am I supposed to do?" I demand.

Angelo firmly orders, "I said to sit down, Luca."

I stare at him for a moment, trying to regulate my breathing, barely feeling the effects of the weed.

Angelo softens his tone. "Sit."

I cave, plopping down on the oversized seat and taking another drag of my joint.

"You, too," Angelo orders his sons.

They sit on the couch, and Angelo stands between us. He asks, "When and where is this taking place, Luca?"

I scrub my hand over my face then answer, "Down at the docks. I'm supposed to let Eddie know when it's arranged."

Angelo nods. "Good. This is good. We have control, then."

I blurt out, "I'm going to blow my cover if I stop Danny from killing Brody or don't do it myself."

"We have time to figure this out," Angelo claims.

I sarcastically laugh. "Time? Do you think Jacopo is giving me time? He wants this done now!"

Angelo holds his hands in the air. "Take a breather, Luca."

"Easy for you to say," I mutter, then take another long drag.

"Can you give me two days? Tully is back from Ireland tomorrow night," Angelo informs.

I shake my head. "Two days is a lot for Jacopo. You know how he lacks patience."

Silence fills the air.

“I’m fucked. I either kill Brody or blow my cover. And I’ve sacrificed too much to end this now, Angelo.”

He takes a deep breath then goes to his desk. He sits down and dials a number.

Dante and Gianni stare at me, but I ignore them. Those two are so in tune with each other that these types of moments annoy me.

Angelo keeps his gaze on me, stating into the phone, “We have an issue, and there’s no time to wait for your return. I assume I have permission to direct your sons as needed?”

The room stays silent. We never tear our gaze away.

Angelo finally says, “Noted. Have a safe flight home.” He hangs up and states, “I’ll send for Brody. Clear your schedule the rest of the day.”

“You’re going to tell him who I am?” I question, my stomach churning. The O’Connors may be a Marino alliance, but the more people who know my true identity, the riskier my situation becomes.

“Do you have a better solution to make sure Brody doesn’t die while your cover doesn’t get blown?” Angelo asks.

I exhale loudly. There’s no way around this. Either way, one of us has to lose something. In this scenario, it makes sense my cover comes first. I don’t like it, but it is what it is, so I threaten, “He better know how to shut his mouth.”

Angelo declares, “The O’Connors know how to stay quiet.”

“Do I have a choice other than to take your word for it?” I sneer, inhaling another lungful of weed. I stub it out in the ashtray then release the smoke.

The room stays quiet. Angelo crosses his arms over his chest. He gives me more leeway to discuss things with him how I want because of the role I play for the family. But when he gives me that expression, I know I’m teetering on the disrespect line.

Frustrated, I walk toward the exit and demand, “Call me when I’m needed.” I make my way through the house and get back into my Viper, revving the engine, then going faster out of the driveway than Angelo would prefer.

I don’t know where I’m going, but I absentmindedly drive to the street Chanel lives on. It’s stupid. I know I can’t have her, yet my mind tells me if I can just see her face, it’ll calm me down.

I pull in front of her building and turn off the car. Hours pass with no sign of her. I almost start the engine and leave when I spot her walking down the sidewalk. She’s wearing a rusty-orange dress and tan leather knee-high boots. She’s carrying two brown shopping bags. But what I notice the most is how she appears to be glowing.

The deep ache inside me hurts more than ever. I hold myself back from getting out of the car, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

She’s twenty yards away when one of the grocery bags splits. Produce falls out of the bottom and rolls all over the sidewalk.

Pedestrians continue walking. Not one of them stops to help her. Not thinking, I jump out of my car and race over to her.

She’s bending down and grabbing a head of lettuce when I get to her. I take off my jacket, crouch down, and hold it in front of her, instructing, “Put your groceries on this, and I’ll carry them inside for you.”

She freezes. Her face pales, and she slowly pins her greens on me. Her pink, pouty bottom lip trembles, and she stares at me like I’m a ghost.

My heart breaks and soars all at once. I reach for her cheek, not thinking about what comes pouring out of my mouth. “I’ve missed you so much, stellina.”



Chanel

STRANGERS RUSH ALL AROUND US, STEPPING OVER MY vegetables and fruit. Luca's scent of white musk and patchouli mix with hints of weed. It's so intoxicating, it makes me dizzy. I smelled it before I heard his voice.

My insides quiver and my pulse quickens. A debate pops into my head about if I should run from him, slap him for leaving me and then sending me furniture that reminds me of him anytime I look at it, or throw myself into his arms.

Luca reaches for my face. He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear then cups my cheek.

Tingles plague my body. I stay frozen, not trusting myself to move nor wanting him to remove his hand. All I've thought about is how it felt for him to touch me. It haunts my dreams. Then I wake up and spend too many hours in the day trying to recreate it.

It tortured me.

He tortured me.

He states, "You're more beautiful than ever, stellina."

Anger floods me. "What are you doing here, Luca?" I snap.

Something passes in his expression. Is it sadness? Confusion? Regret?

Whatever it is, there's no time to figure it out. Someone kicks my butternut squash, and it goes flying down the street.

Luca shouts, "Watch where you're going, dickhead," then he grabs my bag of apples and tosses it on top of his jacket.

"Fuck you," the man calls back.

Luca's face turns dark. He starts to rise then freezes, as if making himself not go after the man. He takes a deep breath then returns to picking my produce off the sidewalk.

I'm so shocked, I just I watch, unsure if this is a real moment, or I'm somehow in a new dream. Luca picks up the grocery bag and the jacket full of food and holds them in one hand. With his free one, he reaches for me. "Let me help you up."

I ignore his gesture. I stand and glare at him. "Thanks for your help. You can give me my groceries and go now."

His face falls, but he doesn't let it stop him. He says, "Don't be silly," then circles his arm around my waist and leads me down the street.

I open my mouth to object, but nothing comes out. Luca's warm body next to mine is a fresh injection of truth. We still fit perfectly together. He makes my head spin with desire, and not just for our physical chemistry. Hope laces through the air that this time, he'll stay. That maybe, in some crazy world where nothing else except us matters, he won't disappear, and we'll be together.

We get to my building, and he demands, "Key?"

"Luca—"

"I just need the key, Chanel," he sternly says.

I should stop all this now. I should take my groceries from him, tell him to never contact me again, and leave him on the doorstep.

But I can't.

His pull over me is too strong. Maybe it's all the extra hormones, but my heart hurts too bad without him. It wins, and my rationale loses.

I reach into my pocket, unlock the door, then open it.

He kisses me on the head, tugs me back into him, and leads me to the elevator. A few people step out, and we get in. He hits the button for my floor, and we say nothing as it slowly ascends.

Within moments, we're inside my apartment. Luca sets the bag and his jacket on the counter then spins. He studies me, as if hesitating, then asks in a soft tone, "How have you been?"

My voice sounds stronger than I do. I fume, "Since you left me and sent me an apartment full of furniture?"

He closes his eyes, deeply inhales, then exhales. He pins his sad gaze on mine, admitting, "All I think about is you."

I scoff, trying to stop tears from falling, and ask, "If that's true, then why didn't you ever come back?"

Tense silence fills the air, growing thicker until I feel like I can't breathe.

My voice shakes when I say, "You should leave, Luca."

Hurt fills his expression. He asks, "Is that really what you want me to do?"

I nod then stop. Tears blur everything, and without thinking, I slowly shake my head before covering my hand over my face.

He steps forward, pulling me into the safety of his chest, and I sob. "Shh," he coos, along with, "I'm sorry."

I'm overwhelmed. I can't stop my tears. I've spent months fantasizing about him returning and how we'd make it work, even though our loyalties lie with different families. I went to too many doctor appointments without him, including the one where I found out our baby is a little girl.

He should have been there. I shouldn't have to go through all of this alone, yet I am. It's partly my fault, but then again, if Luca can cut me out of his life so easily, then what would stop him from doing the same to our daughter?

"I never meant to hurt you," he murmurs, tightening his arms around me and sliding his fingers through my hair.

I push against his chest, looking up. I sniffle then hurl, “Then why did you?”

He clenches his jaw, staring at me.

I push again, but his palm holds my head, and his arm holds my back firmly so I can’t move. I seethe, “I deserve an answer!”

He takes another moment, as if gathering his thoughts, then replies, “It was never my intention.”

“I need a better explanation than that, Luca!” I fume.

His hot breath merges into mine. He glances at my lips then pins his gaze on mine again. He offers, “My world isn’t one you belong anywhere near. If I could redo my life, knowing I’d meet you, I would. But I can’t. And someday, once I’ve done what I need to do, maybe then I’ll be able to make all this up to you. I’d give anything—*anything*—to have that chance. But right now—and I hate myself for this—I can’t give you the life you deserve.”

His words are painful. It solidifies that all my fantasies of mom, dad, and baby are just delusional thoughts. I’ve always known he was an Abruzzo, and nothing will change his roots. Yet, unless he’s lying, his statement also shows me how deep his feelings are for me. And one thing I’ve never believed is that Luca is a liar.

It all crushes my soul further. The grief I’ve felt over coming to terms with the fact my daughter will never know her father reappears. Now, it feels even rawer because he’s right here in front of me. All I want to do is beg him to run away with me somewhere far from here.

The only thing I can muster is, “Then why are you here?”

Guilt appears in his expression. He stays silent.

“Don’t you dare stand there and not answer me!” I warn, pushing my palms harder into his rock-hard pecs.

He hesitates then releases me. I take two steps back, but his eyes widen. He follows me until I’m pinned between the wall

and his body. He tugs on my hair, grazes his thumb over my lips, then confesses, “I watch you all the time.”

My butterflies kick into overdrive while the hairs on my arms rise. “Wh-what do you mean?”

He doesn’t flinch, continuing, “I’ve spent hours sitting in my car or down the street in the cafe, watching your place.”

I inhale sharply then ask, “Why?”

He leans closer, kisses my cheek, then forehead, then repositions his mouth in front of mine. Heat rushes to my face, and he admits, “I can’t stop myself from wanting what I can’t have. And every glimpse I get of you only makes my obsession worse.”

His words are cruel. I wonder how the universe can put two people in each other’s lives who are so right yet so impossibly wrong for each other.

He drops his voice, staring at my mouth. “I shouldn’t be here.”

I squeeze my thighs together, hating how his mere presence turns me on after all these months. My agreeance comes out weak. “No, you shouldn’t.”

His erection pushes into my stomach, expanding the ache between my legs. There have been too many dreams of Luca. And too many nights feeling like I may explode out of my skin from him not touching me.

The fire in his dark eyes glows like a wild animal ready to bite into its prey. It breaks my resolve. I should make him leave, but like every time we’re in the same room, I can’t escape his magnetic pull.

“Tell me to leave, stellina. Tell me right now, or I’m kissing you. I’m warning you that if you don’t tell me to go, I’m staying the night. I promise you, everything you’re thinking about me doing to you, I’m going to do ten times better than I did previously,” he threatens.

My insides quiver with anticipation and too many hormones. The dull voice in my head weakens with every inhale of Luca’s scent. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

He cocks his eyebrows, challenging me, “Say it before you regret me more.”

Oxygen seems to escape my lungs. My chest rises and falls faster with every passing moment.

He kisses the curve of my neck, mumbling, “Five.”

I squirm between the wall and him.

He presses his lips to the middle of my neck. “Four.”

Sensations explode all over me like fireworks on a hot summer night. I whimper, gripping his shirt.

“Three,” he murmurs, flicking his tongue on my lobe, then lightly sucking it.

“Oh God,” I whisper, my knees wobbling.

He drags his knuckles down my cheek while kissing my forehead. “Two.”

I barely hear myself say, “Luca.”

He pauses in front of me, pinning his fiery gaze on me, daring me to tell him to leave.

I can't. He's peanut butter in a trap, and I'm the mouse. I wanted him before our previous encounters. None of that matters anymore. Right now, it's not about my wants.

It's about need.

The longing for his touch never goes away. It only gets harder the longer we're apart. So I tell myself the same thing I told myself all those months ago.

Just one more time.

When I don't object, he ruins me further. His lips take ownership of me. His tongue flawlessly dances with mine, doing nothing to extinguish the fire between us.

His fingers move between us, unbuttoning my coat, and I freeze.

The baby.

I'm barely showing.

What if he guesses?

He retreats from our kiss, clenches his jaw, and frets, “Do you want me to stop?”

I blurt out, “I’ve gained some weight.”

His eyes widen. He glances down then back at me. “What are you talking about? You’re gorgeous.”

“My stomach—”

“Do you think I care about your weight?”

I close my eyes, trying not to cry. It’s the perfect thing a man could say to a woman, which only makes our situation more painful.

“Chanel.”

I open my eyes.

He slides his palm under my shirt and presses it to my stomach. His other one cups my cheek. He asserts, “You’re perfect, stellina.”

Emotions roll into my throat. I wonder if our baby can feel his hand. Then the vision of Luca holding her forms. I’m about to lose it, so I tug his head to me and slip my tongue back into his mouth.

Like everything Luca does, he seamlessly undresses me. My clothes hit the floor, and his lips trail down my body. A path of zings follows him until I’m buzzing with the rush I’ve only ever experienced from him.

My core sings when he plays with my breasts. He’s gentler than I remember, yet every sensation is more potent.

Tears fill my eyes, and I wipe my cheek when he lingers on my stomach. I wonder again if he knows about the baby. Unable to take anymore, I push his head down.

He sweeps his arms under my thighs until they rest on his shoulders. His lips curl, and he pauses for a moment, locking his dark-fire gaze on me.

I caress the side of his head, catching my breath for a split second before his mouth slowly teases my pussy.

Tremors immediately erupt throughout me. Moans escape my lips.

Luca speeds up his rhythm, sliding a finger inside me, and a powerful high rushes to my head. White light blinds me. I grip his hair to steady myself, holding him to my body.

He grunts, curling his finger against my walls, sucking on my clit more forcefully.

“L-Luca!” I cry out.

He’s relentless, showing me no mercy until I’m dripping with sweat and clutching my chest to the top of his head. He releases my legs, presses me against the wall, then rises.

Breathing hard, I whisper, “Luca.”

“Shh,” he says, then tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear. He kisses me then picks me up, carrying me to the couch. He drops his pants, sits, then tugs me over him so I’m straddling him backward.

My body slides over his with relief, as if it’s curing months of my cravings for him. His arms circle my waist. One hand cups my breast, pressing me to his chest. The other grips my hip, controlling the pace. His hot breath hits the curve of my neck before his lips do.

He murmurs in Italian, “Beautiful woman.”

Bliss sheathes me as his cock shimmies against my walls. He slides his hand from my hip to my pussy, circling his thumb on my clit.

It’s all too much. I’m overstimulated like never before. A hurricane of orgasms spins through me, absolving me from any thoughts about what we’re doing and how it’s wrong.

“Christ, you’re better than I remember,” he states, still speaking his mother tongue.

I turn my head, catching his eye, breathing hard and bending my arm so that I can palm his head.

He drowns me in his kisses, making me feel whole, which I haven't felt since the last time we were together.

He repositions his hand from my breast to my hip and increases the speed of our thrusts, creating a new explosion within me.

“Yes! Like... oh God! Like that, Luca!” I cry out.

He grunts then holds my face in front of his, intensely studying me as another orgasm rips through me.

Red fills Luca's cheeks. A drop of sweat falls down his face. His breath becomes ragged, and he buries his forehead into my neck.

Whispers, muffled cries, and groans mix with the scent of our potent arousal. The sensation I'm floating above us hits me, and everything becomes blurrier. Luca shouts something in Italian, but I don't comprehend it. His cock detonates inside me so forcefully, I can no longer hold myself up. He tightens both arms around me and presses his face to the back of my neck. A violent shudder overpowers him, pounding into my convulsions.

Time seems to stand still as the aftermath of our actions continues to roll through our bodies. Sweat turns cold, except for where our skin still touches. A new chill runs through me, and goose bumps cover my limbs.

Luca slowly removes me from his body, scoots over to the chaise part of the sofa, lies down, and orders, “Come here, stellina.”

I don't think, just obey, curling into his body. He takes the cream blanket, puts it over us, then kisses my head.

Neither of us speaks. I close my eyes, listening to the beat of Luca's heart, thinking about how our baby sounds just like his. All the previous debates about whether or not to tell him I'm pregnant rear their ugly heads again.

I remind myself that Luca's made it clear he's not in a world where I belong. Who knows what would happen if he knew the Marinos employ me and my father works for them, too?

But the baby is his flesh and blood.

My job as the baby's mother is to protect her at all costs.

Surely her father wouldn't hurt her.

Do I even know anything about Luca?

It's not about him. It's about who he's around.

Would the Abruzzos take my baby from me? Especially if they know I'm loyal to the Marinos?

"I could stay like this forever," Luca murmurs, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I turn toward him more and tilt my head, asking the painful question I wish I didn't have to, "What are we doing?"

Guilt and sadness fill Luca's face. He stays quiet, repeatedly grazing his thumb over my lips, never taking his eyes off mine.

Deciding it's best to change the subject, I run my fingers over a dark mark on the back of his shoulder. It's a few inches and shaped like a silhouette. I ask, "Is this a birthmark or a tattoo?"

His eyes turn nostalgic. "Birthmark. My mamma used to tell me it was my guardian angel. She said I had so much energy in me that I needed to always have her on me."

I smile and peer closer, noting, "It does look a little bit like one. Do you believe in guardian angels?"

He kisses my forehead. "Maybe."

I reach up and cup his right cheek. I stroke his scar and ask, "How did you get this?"

A tiny curve forms on his lips. He admits, "In Italy. I was twelve."

I jerk my head back. "Why are you smiling about it?"

His grin widens, and he answers, "Because I was a cocky little shit that needed to learn a lesson."

"What do you mean?" I question, still horrified over the thought of a twelve-year-old boy learning a lesson by obtaining a lifelong scar.

He stares at me momentarily then confesses, “When my mamma died, I went to live with my father’s employer. I had a big chip on my shoulder and always tempted his son to do things he shouldn’t.”

“Like what?”

Luca grunts. “Play in his father’s office. Open drawers we had no business opening. Spy on his sisters and their friends when they were getting dressed.”

I graze my finger over his scar, quizzing, “Seems innocent to me.”

He snorts. “No. Nothing was innocent. We knew who his father was and that it was wrong. We also knew it was disrespecting not only the girls but also his father, by spying.”

I cringe. “So his father sliced your face?”

Luca chuckles. “No. His youngest daughter, Aurora, did it. She was nine.”

I gape at him in horror.

“Ah, don’t feel bad for me, stellina. I had it coming. But I have to give it to her. She also sliced her brother’s cheek before her mamma came into the room and demanded she drop her weapon. If I ever have a daughter, I want her to be just as courageous as little Aurora,” he claims.

My guilt about the baby eats at me.

Am I doing the wrong thing?

Doesn’t our daughter deserve to have a father like Luca who will teach her to be daring?

Luca leans closer and murmurs, “Yep. I’d teach my daughter to be as strong as any man so no one would mess with her.”

And once again, Luca’s words stab me like a dull knife trying to reopen an old wound. New pain mixes with old, and all of it crushes my soul once again.



Luca

EVERYTHING FEELS WRONG AND PERFECT AT THE SAME TIME. Chanel's in my arms, breathing softly, stroking her fingers over my chest hair. From time to time, we converse, but it's light, and we're both avoiding the obvious.

I shouldn't be here.

I need to stop obsessing over her. I just don't know how.

Her stomach growls. She looks up at me and asks, "Are you hungry? I'm starving."

I smile, admitting, "Yeah, I could eat. Want me to make us something?"

She opens her mouth, but my phone rings.

My body instantly tenses. It's the ring for Angelo. With everything going on, there's no way I can't get it. I sit up, move her off me, then rise. I reach for my phone and motion for her to hold on a second. I answer, "What's going on?"

Angelo responds, "I need you to get to my place. He's on his way."

I sigh. The timing couldn't be worse. Yet there's no way I can get around this. I curse Brody again for being so stupid to let Danny in his life, but especially for calling the Feds. What was

he thinking? You don't call the Feds on another crime family, and I have a hard time believing he doesn't know the rules.

I tell Angelo, "I'm on my way." I hang up the phone and turn toward Chanel.

She arches her eyebrows. She tries to cover her hurt expression, but it's hard to not see it.

I stare at her for a moment, trying to find words so she's not disappointed in me again. I finally say, "I have to go out. I have a meeting I can't miss."

Her eyes turn to slits. She blurts out, "I thought you said you were staying the night."

More guilt crashes through me. More hatred for the life I'm leading and how I can't have what's right in front of me. I step toward her. "I'm sorry. There's something that's come up that I can't get around. I have to go."

She tilts her head and shakes it. Anger, frustration, and sadness are all there in her expression. I caused it and know it. She mutters, "This was a mistake anyway."

I shouldn't push our situation. I should agree with her and move on. Instead, I reach for her cheeks, palming them, begging, "Don't say that."

She scoffs, hurling, "What are we doing, Luca? This isn't good. You and I both know this isn't good. You've told me you can't be with me. Yet you appear out of nowhere and then leave again. So tell me what you're doing here and why you keep doing this to me."

My gut flips. The last person in the world I want to hurt is her. Yet I don't know how to answer her question. She's right. I shouldn't be continuing to appear in her life and then disappearing.

She adds, "Are you trying to continue to hurt me?"

"It's not intentional," I firmly answer.

She looks away, shaking her head.

I know we can't be together. And this is just like opening a scab and letting it bleed, but I can't seem to let her go. To make matters worse, I assert, "I'll come back as soon as possible. I promise."

She jerks her head and, in an adamant voice, seethes, "No, Luca. We're done. This is it."

To throw more gas on the flames, I reply, "Don't overreact, stellina."

Her voice grows louder. I've never heard her speak like this. She snarls, "Don't overreact?"

"I'll come back."

She sarcastically laughs. "When? When are you going to be back, Luca? Are you going to be back in a day? A week? Months? When? Tell me when you're going to be back this time."

"Why are you getting so angry with me?" I ask. But I already know the truth. She's not delusional or in the wrong. She has every right to say what she's saying.

Chanel rises and starts pacing the room.

"What can I do so you aren't angry?" I question.

Tears fill her eyes, but she blinks hard to keep them from falling. She replies, "Stop coming in and out of my life. Stop fucking me then leaving me while I'm sleeping in the middle of the night or right after we're together for whatever it is you do! Don't leave me notes, disappear, then send me extravagant gifts. This isn't how the world should work, Luca. You've been very clear about what you can and can't be to me. So don't bother returning only to keep hurting me over and over!" She marches into her bedroom and slams the door.

I follow, but I can't open the door because it's locked. I pound on the door, demanding, "Chanel, come out so we can talk."

"Go do whatever it is you have to do, Luca!" she shouts.

I sigh, cursing myself for the life that I have. Then I curse the O'Connors and Abruzzos. I even curse the fact I'm a Marino. I'm tired of everything. Especially the Abruzzos. They not

only destroyed my parents' lives, but I've let them destroy mine with this need for vengeance I can't escape.

Unable to throw in the towel, I call out, "Stellina, please open up."

She doesn't answer this time. Loud music blares behind the door.

Defeated, I scrub my face. I leave her apartment and drive over to the Marino estate. I get through the gate and pull up to the front steps behind the O'Connors' black SUV.

I pull my Glock out of my pants and get out at the same time Brody and Aidan do.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Brody accuses, then both pull their guns on me at the same time I pull mine on them.

"Get your fucking guns off me," I snarl.

"You don't call the shots on Marino property," Aidan claims.

"Neither do you. And if you don't put your fucking guns down, I'll blow both your heads off," I threaten.

Aidan adds, "Not before—"

"Put your guns down. Now!" Angelo demands.

We all turn our heads.

Angelo's standing on the front stoop, scowling at all of us. He reiterates, "I said now!"

I wait until Brody and Aidan lower theirs before I follow Angelo's orders.

He marches down the steps. He points at the O'Connors. "Get inside now."

"What's he doing here?" Aidan asks.

"I said to get inside. When I give you orders, you follow them, just like if your father would order you. Now get your asses inside," Angelo replies.

The O'Connors glare more daggers at me but obey.

Angelo motions for me to come forward.

I step in front of him.

He declares, “Don’t ever pull your gun on them again.”

“So I’m supposed to let them pull theirs on me?” I ask.

“You heard me,” he warns.

“Then they better not pull a gun on me, because the next time they do, they’re leaving in a body bag,” I claim.

Angelo’s face darkens. He grabs my shirt. “Are you getting too far in?”

I snort. “Don’t insult me.”

His cold eyes pin mine. “Do I need to remind you who’s in charge?”

I clench my jaw.

“Answer me!” he seethes.

“No, I didn’t forget, boss,” I state.

He adds, “We can’t afford for you to start making bad decisions. Calm down before you come inside. But don’t you dare step foot in my house until you’ve got yourself under control and this attitude is gone. Understand me?”

I sniff hard, not speaking.

He releases me then goes inside.

I pull out a joint and smoke it, barely feeling the effects. When I feel confident enough to handle myself, I go inside to Angelo’s office.

Brody and Aidan sit on the couches. They sulk with their arms crossed. Angelo’s lecturing them but stops when I step inside.

I shut the door and lean against it.

Angelo points to the chair. “Sit.”

“I’m good here,” I claim.

Angelo grinds his molars then threatens, “I’m not going to warn you again, Luca. Sit.”

I cave and do as I'm told. I've pushed Angelo enough today. Any further, and I'm in hot water. Instead, I refocus my anger on the O'Connors. They put me in a bad position, and now my cover is blown. The other Marinos may trust the O'Connors, but I don't. I've barely ever had any contact with them, so until they pass my test, I'm not fully trusting them.

Angelo takes the seat next to me. "Seems we've got a big problem."

"What's that?" Brody asks, not taking his leer off me.

Angelo interrogates, "Brody, you want to tell me why you called the Feds on the Abruzzo whorehouse?"

Disgust fills Brody's expression. He explodes, "Feds? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"We know you did it," I declare.

"You better shut your mouth," he warns, pointing at me.

Aidan hurls at Angelo, "Why is he even here? Why aren't you killing him for stepping foot on your property?"

He answers, "I'll get to that in a moment. Does your father know that you called the Feds?"

"For the last fucking time, I did no such thing. I don't know where you get your information. But if it's from him, obviously there's a problem," Brody claims.

Angelo leans forward. "So you're swearing to me, Brody, that neither you nor any of your brothers called the Feds on the Abruzzo whorehouse?"

New red rage fills his features. "Of course I fucking didn't! You think I'm a rat?"

"I don't know. Are you?" I mutter under my breath.

"What is your fucking problem? Why is he here?" Aidan asks again.

"Shut up. All of you, shut up," Angelo commands. He rises, goes to the bar, and pours several shots. He hands them to all of us, but I decline. He continues, "All of you need to calm down."

Brody takes his shot of whiskey and then says, "I'll calm down when you tell me why an Abruzzo is sitting across from me in your house."

God, I hate being called an Abruzzo. I can't wait for the day when everyone knows I'm actually a Marino, and by blood, not just some Abruzzo wanna-be who does everything Jacopo demands.

I cross my arms and scowl at Angelo, still not happy my cover is now blown.

He explains, "Luca's my nephew."

Both O'Connor's gape, glancing between Angelo and me. Brody finally says, "Tell me he's your spy."

"Of course I'm his spy, you idiot!" I hurl.

Brody holds up his hands. "Hey, you can't blame me for asking."

I grind my molars.

Angelo clears his throat. "Luca was at Jacopo's today. Eddie O'Leary told him your boy Danny is one of them."

Brody's face turns pale. He shakes his head. "No way. Not Danny."

"It's true," I claim.

He fumes, "He's my best friend. I've known him forever. There's no way. I'd know if he was a traitor."

"No one knows about me," I state.

"That's different."

"How?"

Brody glances at Aidan. He says, "Not Danny."

Aidan asks, "What proof do you have?"

"It came straight from Eddie's mouth," I reply.

"He's a liar," Brody declares.

"Well, you'll know the real answer when he sets you up to go to the docks," I respond.

Brody's eyes turn to green slits. "Sets me up?"

I nod. "To kill you."

Tense silence fills the air.

Angelo says, "Eddie told Jacopo Danny's their guy and told him you called the Feds on the whorehouse."

Brody jumps off the couch. "I told you, I'm no rat!"

"Why did your boy tell Eddie you are?" I ask.

Brody paces the room, shaking his head. "I don't know."

Aidan snarls, "Danny's dead."

Angelo directs, "You'll kill him when the time is right."

Brody spins. "How do you know Eddie isn't setting Danny up? Maybe his cover is blown." He points to me.

My chest tightens. I consider it then dismiss it. "It's not. Jacopo let me sit in on the meeting. Eddie didn't know I'd be there."

"How do you know?" Brody challenges.

The oxygen in my lungs turns stale. It's always a possibility, but I once again dismiss it. "I know. And you'll have no doubts when Danny creates a situation for you to go down to the docks."

"Meaning?"

"Benny, Sid, and Jimmy are Jacopo's guys who run his gambling operations. I convinced Jacopo they're working for the Marinos," I explain.

"Why'd you do that?" Aidan asks.

I crack my neck then answer, "So three of his top guys die."

Aidan contemplates it then grins. "I'm down with that."

"Shut up, Aidan. Luca, what do they have to do with this?" Brody quizzes.

"He wants me to kill them and Danny to kill you."

"Why together?"

I shrug. “Not sure, except we discussed it before Eddie came in and said you ratted on Jacopo.”

“I didn’t!” Brody insists again.

“So when is this happening?” Aidan inquires.

“Jacopo isn’t patient. Eddie is supposed to get word to Danny. I imagine it’ll happen in the next few days,” I state.

Aidan scowls. “Let’s kill Danny tonight.”

“You can’t do that,” I assert.

“Why not? He’s a traitor,” Aidan seethes.

I bark, “You’ll blow my cover.”

Aidan shrugs. “People die. That doesn’t mean your cover will be blown.”

I lurch toward him and pull him off the couch by his shirt. “If you blow everything I’ve been working toward, I swear to God, I’ll hunt you down and—”

“Enough!” Angelo growls, tugging me off Aidan.

My blood races hot through my veins. I glare at Aidan, curling my fingers into fists at my sides.

Angelo points at Aidan. “You’re going to do what I order you to do, understand?”

He licks his lips. Defiance fills his expression.

Brody asks, “Does my father know about this?”

Angelo turns toward him, answering, “No. I didn’t want to discuss details over the phone. But he authorized my lead on this.”

Brody clenches his jaw and then stares out the window.

I can’t help but feel sorry for the guy. It would suck to find out your best friend’s been betraying you all these years. But now, it’s even more important than ever that I don’t blow my cover. I’m the closest I’ve ever been to taking down the Abruzzos. One of these days, I’m going to be in a position to kill Jacopo without leaving in a body bag myself.

Angelo continues, “Aidan, you’ll go with Brody and Danny. No matter what happens, you three take Jacopo’s guys and Danny out. Understand?”

“I’m clear,” I state.

“Same,” Aidan replies.

Brody keeps his gaze on the lawn, muttering, “I’ll let you know when Danny calls.” He turns and walks out of the office.

Aidan and I follow. We all get outside, and Aidan gets in the car. I open my door, and Brody calls out, “Luca!”

I glance up.

He steps closer, lowering his voice. “You’re sure about Danny?”

I sigh. “I’m sorry, but it appears to be true.”

“Things aren’t always as they appear,” Brody claims.

I lock eyes with him then ask, “You want me to take Danny out? You can take one of the Abruzzos?”

Brody sniffs hard then shakes his head. “No. I’ll do it.”

Silence flares between us. He finally spins and gets in his SUV.

I slide into my car, turn on the engine, and exit the Marino estate. I drive for hours, lost in my thoughts. Against my better judgment, I veer my car off the exit and end up across the street from Chanel’s building. I turn off the car and sit for hours until darkness sets in.

Her apartment is dark. I wonder if she’s home or out. I try to imagine her out with friends, but I don’t even know that aspect of her life. Besides the night I met her, I’ve never seen her with anyone. It’s only been the two of us.

There are so many things I wish I knew about her. Yet the one thing I wish the most was that I could be the man she deserves.

The light in her family room turns on. She appears at the window, and my heart skips a beat.

Can she see me?

Does she want to see me?

What is she thinking?

Even though I know I'm flawed and can't offer her what we both want, I can't stand the thought of leaving things between us the way we did. So I finally get out of my car. I wait on her steps until another tenant comes out of the building then enter.

My pulse quickens. The elevator's on the top floor, so I take the staircase. When I get to Chanel's front door, I pause.

What am I going to say?

How is this helping?

It's not.

We can't end things like this.

There's no good solution. She's better off if I leave her alone.

I promised her I'd return.

Mustering my courage, I knock on her door. The longest minute of my life passes before I hear, "Go away, Luca."

My gut sinks. I knock again.

She doesn't change her mind. "I said go away!"

I sink lower, threatening, "Should I discuss our business in the hallway so your neighbors hear?"

A sad, emotion-filled laugh hits my ears. "Do you think I care anymore?"

I close my eyes and press my forehead on the door. "Please open the door."

"Why can't you just go?" she asks.

I ponder her question then honestly answer, "Because I can't."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Please give me five minutes," I beg.

Several minutes pass and then I hear the door unlock. I step back and wait for her to open it. She finally does, and my heart sinks lower.

Her eyes are red and swollen. She looks exhausted, but most of all, she glares at me with hatred.

I step inside, close the door, and tug her into my arms. She pushes against my chest, but I don't release her. She finally gives in and sobs.

I've never felt so horrible, but it only gets worse.

She catches her breath, looks up, and says, "If you care about me at all, you'll leave me alone, Luca."

"Don't say that."

Her bottom lip trembles. She raises her chin. "I mean it. If there's any good left in you, you won't come back here. If you see me around town, you'll walk the other way. I'm begging you to let me move on."

A knife slashes through my heart. I want to object, but I can't. Too many emotions are lodged in my throat.

"Please," she whispers, closing her eyes.

I swallow hard and cup her cheeks.

She opens her eyes, and warm tears fall over my hands.

I ask, "Is this what you really want?" I beg her inside my head to say no.

She hesitates then slowly nods. "Please."

Before her, I never knew what it was like to feel crushed by a woman. Now, I can honestly say it's the worst thing on Earth.

"Please, Luca," she implores again.

Saying nothing, I slowly nod my head. Then I kiss her on the forehead and leave, hating myself more than ever.



Chanel

THE NIGHT SEEMS TO NEVER END. WHEN MORNING FINALLY comes, I'm exhausted. I get up, go into my bathroom, and look in the mirror, cringing. My eyes are red and swollen, with black circles underneath, and my tear-stained face is pale.

Damn him for doing this to me.

The vision of Luca giving me a final kiss plagues me. I close my eyes, holding on to the countertop, trying to fight more tears. I thought I cried everything out of me, but apparently, I didn't.

I do my best to put on my makeup. It's pointless though.

My eyeliner smears from the moisture. Mascara barely sticks to my lashes, and my foundation does nothing to give me any color.

Giving up, I toss on my flight attendant uniform.

I won't be able to fly soon.

One of these days, I have to come clean to everyone.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and leave my apartment. I jump into a taxi. On the way to the airport, I start crying again. By the time I get on the plane, I'm a complete mess.

I only have a few minutes before Massimo arrives. So I do everything to prepare the plane and then try to clean myself

up.

My reflection makes me wince. The person staring back at me isn't one I ever show the world and definitely not my boss.

I sigh and leave the bathroom just as Massimo enters the plane.

He's unusually chipper, chirping, "Well, good morning, sunshine."

I arch my eyebrows. "Why are you so happy?"

He freezes, studying me. I want to crawl in a hole and die. I know I look like crap, and the look on Massimo's face tells me he thinks so, too. He finally asks, "Chanel, is something wrong?"

I put on a smile, but it feels fake. I answer, "No. I'm fine. Are you ready to take off soon?"

He tilts his head and crosses his arms. "Chanel, something's going on. You look exhausted, and you've been crying."

I take a deep breath and try to smile bigger, but it's not working. Massimo isn't a man who I can trick.

Still, I point to the back of the plane. "Which room are you going to sit in?"

"Chanel. I need to know what's going on, right now. You're not okay," he insists.

"Everything is—" Pain sears through my stomach. I put my hand over it and shriek, "Ouch!"

Massimo puts his hand on my back. "You okay?"

"My... Oh God! I-I don't know what's going on!" I admit, crouching over.

"Tell me what is happening here," he orders.

I open my mouth, but I can barely breathe. My stomach cramps worse than any period I've ever had. I can barely stay on my feet. I get light-headed, and my skin turns clammy.

Massimo moves me to a seat, asking, "Should I call an ambulance?"

I lock eyes with him. My lips and hands shake. I can't bear it. Another round of spasms hits me, and I grimace, moaning and clutching my stomach.

Massimo questions, "Chanel, what hurts? Is it your appendix? Something else? Do you have the flu? What is it?"

There's no way to answer him. I start crying, scared I'm about to lose the baby. I'm only six months pregnant. This is too soon to be in labor. Is this what it feels like?

"Chanel, please tell me what's happening," Massimo begs.

"I'm six months pregnant and think I'm going into labor!" I choke out.

He glances at my body then back at my face. "What do you mean you're six months pregnant?"

"I... Oh God! Oh, oh, it hurts. Oh... I... Oh..." I start sobbing.

He tugs me into his chest. "It's okay. Don't worry. Everything will be okay. We're going to get you to the hospital."

"You'll miss your flight," I point out.

He looks at me like I'm crazy. "Don't worry about it. Come on. Let's get you out of here." He picks me up, carries me down the stairs, then puts me in his SUV.

"Hospital. Now," he directs his driver then shuts the privacy glass.

Cold sweats rotate with rushes of heat across my skin. Massimo rubs my back. "Do you want me to call your father?"

Panic hits me. "No! Please don't call my father. He doesn't know."

Massimo's eyes widen. "But if you're six months pregnant, why doesn't he know?"

Another wave of contractions hits me. I ignore his question and cry out, "It's too soon. It's way too soon."

Massimo squeezes my hand. "Okay, stay calm. I think you're supposed to breathe or something."

That feels impossible and makes my fear accelerate. I sob harder.

He continues trying to calm me down. He offers me water, but I can barely take it.

The ride becomes a blur. His driver races through traffic, weaving in and out of lanes on the expressway. He finally veers off the exit and pulls up in front of the emergency room.

Massimo helps me inside, and we go through all the protocols. I get escorted to a room, and they have me change into a hospital gown.

Massimo reenters the room, frowning. “Chanel, is there anyone you want me to call? Maybe the father?”

More guilt sears through me. “No, please! Nobody can know yet!”

“The father doesn’t know?” he questions.

I squeeze my eyes shut, begging again, “Please don’t tell anyone!”

He puts his hand out. “All right. I won’t say anything. But I’m staying with you.”

I don’t want him to leave, but I know this isn’t his problem. I reply, “I’m sorry. You can go. I know you have important things to do.”

“Chanel, don’t be ridiculous,” he chides as the doctor enters the room.

“I’m Dr. Keelee. We’re going to have to do a full examination. Are you the father?” he asks Massimo.

“No,” I answer.

Massimo steps closer to me. “I’m her boss and a family friend.”

The doctor looks at me. “Do you want him to stay in the room while I examine you?”

I shake my head. That would be way too weird. “No.”

Massimo pats my head. “I’ll step out in the hallway.”

I reply, "Thank you. And, Massimo..."

"Yeah?"

"Please don't tell anybody," I fret.

He holds his hand in the air. "I'm not telling anybody. But don't worry about that right now." He leaves.

The doctor gives me a full exam and does an ultrasound.

When he's through, he declares, "Everything's okay. You're just experiencing some Braxton Hicks contractions."

Confused, I question, "What are those?"

He smiles. "It's common and often called false labor. It's just your uterus trying to prepare for when labor does happen. But nothing's wrong with the baby. Everything is fine."

"So my baby, she's okay?" I ask to make sure.

His grin grows. "She's perfectly fine."

I add, "But I'm barely even showing. And now I'm having these Braxton Hicks."

He points to my stomach. "Some people don't show as much. You're also taller, so the baby's spread out. There's more room for her to hide. You don't need to worry."

I release an anxious breath.

"Would you like to call the father?" he asks me.

Shame fills me. I hate every time my gynecologist, Massimo, or this doctor asks me about the father. It makes me think about Luca and how I'm hiding this from him. But I need to protect my baby. Nothing has changed. Luca only proved to me the other night that that is the best decision I can make for her.

I raise my chin in the air. "No, it's just me raising the baby."

His expression is full of pity. I cross my arms, as if to shield myself from his judgment. He stays quiet then finally states, "I'm going to let you rest. The nurse will come in soon and give you instructions before discharging you."

Relieved to be off the topic of my decision of single motherhood, I say, “Thank you.”

He leaves the room, and I change into my clothes.

Massimo returns. He pulls up a chair and sits back. “Well, this was a little more exciting than what I had planned for my day.”

“I’m so sorry. I know your business is important. I would never—”

“Chanel, please. It’s not a big deal. You know you’re more important than any business thing I have going on.”

I stay quiet.

He leans closer. “You know you can’t hide this forever, right?”

I glance at the ceiling, trying to stop all the emotions bubbling up inside me.

My father’s going to kill me.

My life as I know it is over.

Everyone will always ask me who the father is, and no one can ever know the truth.

Massimo adds, “You need to tell your father.”

I softly state, “He’ll never forgive me.”

Massimo grunts. “He won’t be too happy at first. But you know what? I’ve known your dad for a long time. One thing I can tell you is he’s going to love this baby no matter what.”

“How do you know that?”

Arrogance washes over his features then he grins. “Because I know everything.”

I roll my eyes.

Massimo’s face falls. His voice turns more serious. “It’s his flesh and blood. He’ll love your baby.”

I ponder his words, hoping they’re right.

“But who’s the father? Why are you hiding this from him?”
Massimo interrogates.

More shame crashes through me. I think about all the ways to answer that without telling the full truth, and I finally decide on, “He’s not a good enough person to be in her life.”

Massimo’s eyes turn to slits. “Is there something I need to know about this guy?”

I slowly shake my head. “No, I took care of him.”

Massimo’s eyes widen. “You took care of him? How’d you do that?”

I take a few deep breaths. “I told him not to come see me anymore. And he agreed that he would stop.”

Massimo’s face darkens. “He’s come to your place when you told him not to?”

“Yes,” I admit.

Anger swirls across his dark features. He presses his fingers together. “Are you sure he doesn’t know about the baby?”

“Yes.”

Silence fills the air.

“Chanel.”

“Hmm?”

He studies me. “Are you sure you don’t want the father involved?”

The debate I always have resurfaces. Yet I know what I have to do. So I straighten my shoulders, declaring, “Yes, I’m positive.”

Massimo keeps staring at me.

“I am,” I insist.

He nods. “Then I trust you know what’s best. But I’m worried if he’s coming to see you. Do you need me to take care of him?”

My lips twitch. I shouldn’t be surprised I can count on Massimo to act like an older brother if needed. And I’m sure he’d beat the hell out of Luca to protect me. Then again, he

might fire me and never talk to me again if he knows I'm carrying an Abruzzo baby.

"No, you don't need to do anything. But thanks for the offer."

"What if he doesn't keep his promise to stay away?" Massimo questions.

I blurt out, "I just need to sort out my situation."

"Meaning?"

I curse myself for everything I've put off doing. I haven't started getting anything for the baby, but I need a bigger apartment and haven't even begun looking. And it's the only way to make sure Luca stays away.

Massimo waits for me to answer, arching his eyebrows.

I confess, "I need to find a new apartment on the other side of town so he doesn't know where I am."

Massimo glances behind him then leans closer, lowering his voice, "Are you sure you don't need me to step in on this?"

"Yes, I'm sure he's harmless. But I don't want him in the baby's life. I just want him to forget about me," I insist.

More tension fills the air. I think Massimo will keep pressing me about Luca, but he finally drops it, saying, "Okay."

Relieved, I smile. "Thanks for the offer."

"It'll always stand. But, Chanel, you're six months pregnant. You can't run away from this or hide it forever," he lectures.

"Yes, I know."

"What can I do to help you?"

His kindness makes me feel good for the first time in a long while. I answer, "You don't have to do anything, Massimo. I appreciate you bringing me here."

A little bit of hurt crosses his face. He asks, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Another round of embarrassment eats me up. I answer, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to lose my job. I still don't. Can I continue to work for you after I have the baby?"

Shock fills his features. “Do you really think I would fire you because you had a baby?”

I wince, confessing, “I don’t know how this works.”

He sits back in his chair, tapping his fingers on the armrest. He asserts, “You take all the time you need. I’ll put somebody in your place for the meantime, and the minute you’re ready to return, they get kicked to the curb. That’s how this works.”

I smile. “Just like that?”

He snaps his fingers. “Just like that.”

Relief fills me. It’s one less thing I have to worry about. I add, “Thank you, Massimo. You’ve always been a great boss to me.”

He shrugs. “Don’t be telling people that I have a sweet spot for you. I don’t have it for most people.”

I laugh. “Noted.”

Several more moments pass then he asks, “So who does know that you’re pregnant?”

More uncomfortableness fills me. I scrunch my face and reveal, “My doctor.”

Massimo gapes at me. “You’ve really not told anybody? Not even one of your friends?”

“No. What was I supposed to say? ‘I’m pregnant, and I don’t want anything to do with the father, so I’m going to raise my baby on my own’?” As I say it, it doesn’t sound that ridiculous. For some reason, it did in my head.

Massimo chuckles. “Yeah, that sounds perfect to me.”

I put my hands over my face, groaning and revealing, “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Well, that’s to be expected. You’re having a baby,” Massimo teases, then rises. “I’ve got to make a couple phone calls, then I’ll see when we can get you out of here. I’ll be right back.” He leaves.

I pull the blanket under my chin and close my eyes, exhausted from everything.

When I wake up, Massimo's back in the room. "I've got your discharge instructions. Let's get you home. I'll stay with you tonight."

"That's not necessary. Plus, I don't have a guestroom," I insist.

"You can't be on your own right now. I'll stay on your couch."

"You can't stay on my couch, Massimo."

He crosses his arms. "And why can't I do that?"

The humor in a Marino sleeping anywhere but in luxury hits me. I laugh, stating, "You're Massimo Marino—billionaire—trillionaire—whatever the hell you are. I doubt you've ever slept on a couch your entire life."

He grunts. "Well, that's not true. I used to sleep on the couch all the time when I was a kid. Ask anybody."

I reiterate, "You really don't have to stay. I'll be fine."

"Sorry, Chanel, but it's your place or mine. Which one do you prefer?" he threatens.

There's no way I can go to the Marino mansion and stay there. What would I tell them? 'Hey, I'm just going to chill out in your house for the night.' Yeah, like that's not going to raise any questions.

"You have to pick," he orders.

"Fine. My place," I grumble.

He grins. "Good. Let's get out of here. I'm starving."

My stomach growls. I admit, "Me, too."

"I think it's a pizza and ice cream night. What do you say?" he questions.

I nod. "Sounds good."

"Great. I'll order it on the way," he declares, then pats the wheelchair. "Let's go."

"I don't need that," I claim.

“They won’t let you go without it. Unless you want me to carry you?” he smirks.

I groan and sit in the chair.

Massimo wheels me through the hospital and outside. His driver pulls up, and we get into his SUV. I doze off again, and he wakes me up when we get to my place.

The pizza and ice cream arrive a few minutes after we get inside my apartment. We eat, watch a movie, and when it’s time for bed, I say, “I’ll sleep on the couch. You take my bed.”

Massimo shakes his head, claiming, “Pregnant women get beds. Now, go rest. I don’t want to argue about this anymore.”

Realizing there’s no point in discussing this further, I begrudgingly obey.

The next day I wake up, and the sun’s shining. I put on my robe and go to the kitchen. I expect Massimo to be gone. But he’s still there, sitting at my table and reading the paper. He looks up, teasing, “It’s about time you woke up.”

I yawn. “What time is it?”

He glances at his watch. “After ten.”

“Oh my gosh! I don’t ever sleep this late,” I claim.

“You needed it. But go get ready. We have somewhere to go,” he adds.

“Where are we going?” I question.

“You’ll see. Now get moving. Don’t make me tell you again,” he warns.

“How did you get fresh clothes?” I inquire.

Arrogance lights up his face. His lips twitch. “Did you forget I’m rich? I snapped my fingers.”

“Ha ha!”

“Get ready,” he orders again.

“You’re really bossy.”

He grins. “That’s good since I pay the wages. Now go.”

I ask, “Can you tell me where we’re going? So I know how to dress.”

“Wear something comfortable. Don’t worry about makeup and all that,” he says.

Bewildered, I take a quick shower, put on my sweatpants and a long-sleeve shirt. I throw a zippered hoodie over it, toss my hair in a ponytail, then slide into my sneakers.

I return to Massimo and ask, “Are you sure it’s okay to wear these clothes?” I’ve never been dressed down around Massimo before.

He glances at me then rises. “Perfectly fine. Let’s go.”

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going now?”

He smirks. “Nope.”

“You’re mean,” I whine.

He chuckles and leads me out of the building and into his SUV. We drive to the other side of town and pull up to a newer building.

“Where are we?” I ask.

His lips twitch. “Oh no, you don’t. You got a few more minutes before you know what’s going on.”

I tilt my head. “Seriously?”

“Yep.” He steps out of the car and reaches in to help me out. We go into the building and through security, then up to the fifteenth floor.

We get out of the elevator and go down the hall. Massimo opens a door, and we enter a condo.

The place is huge. It’s a three-bedroom, open floor plan. There’s a small den, and it has a big bedroom suite with its own bathroom. Everything’s brand new, and the entire front is glass, overlooking the city.

“Wow! This is beautiful. But why are we here?” I question.

“But do you really like it?” Massimo asks.

I glance around again. “Of course I do! Why wouldn’t I like this? This is gorgeous. Anybody would love to live here. Is this one of your new investment places?”

Satisfaction fills his expression. He dangles keys in front of me, answering, “Not anymore.”

I freeze. “What do you mean?”

“This is your new place,” he declares.

I gape at him. “What are you talking about?”

He reveals, “I was going to sell it, but you can consider it my baby gift.”

I nervously laugh. “A baby gift? Are you crazy? This is worth more than any gift anyone would give somebody for a baby.”

He leans closer, chirping, “Not if they’re Miss Chanel, my number one flight attendant.”

I stare at him in shock.

“Are you going to take the key?” he asks.

“Umm... Are you being serious? Or is this a joke?”

His face falls. “No, it’s not a joke. You said you needed to move somewhere that wasn’t near your old place. Plus, it needs to be big enough for you and the baby. I think this will do, don’t you?”

I scoff. “Yeah, I think this will do. This will more than do.”

“Okay, then. Glad you love it, because right now, I have movers at your house. They’re going to be bringing all your stuff here within the next hour,” he informs me.

My mouth drops to the floor.

He puffs out his chest. “You should see your face right now.”

I stutter, “A-are you kidding me right now?”

“Nope. I hope you enjoyed your last night in your apartment.”

A strange feeling overpowers me.

The last night in my apartment.

Luca will never be able to stop by again.

“What’s wrong?” Massimo asks.

I shake off the sadness and smile. “Nothing is wrong. This place is beautiful. How much is my rent?”

“Did I not make it clear that I’m giving this to you?”

“To live in, but I have to pay rent,” I proclaim.

Massimo puts his arm around my shoulders. “The title is getting changed into your name as we speak. You’ll have some paperwork you have to sign. But there’s no rent.”

More shock hits me. I clear my throat. “I’m going to own this?”

“Yes.”

I gape at him.

Amused, he adds, “I’m also increasing your salary to include the property taxes, insurance, and condo fees. So you don’t have to worry about those.”

Overwhelmed, I question, “Massimo, can you keep it in your name?”

“Why would I do that?”

I blurt out, “So no one can find me.”

Silence fills the air. He finally nods. “Okay, but it’s yours. When you’re ready to transfer the title, just let me know.”

“This is too much!” I proclaim.

He firmly insists, “No, it’s not. And I don’t want to hear about it again. But there is one thing you have to do for me.”

I tilt my head. “What is it?”

“You can’t stick your head in the sand anymore. This baby is coming, so it’s time to fess up to your family. I don’t want to be accused of hiding things from your father,” he asserts.

My gut drops, but I know he’s right. I slowly nod my head, agreeing. “Okay. I’ll get my shit together.”

He assesses me, and in a low voice, questions, “Do you have any second thoughts about me paying your baby’s daddy a visit?”

My heart sinks. This is it. I’ll never see Luca again. There’s no reason for me to ever return to my apartment.

It’s for the best.

I lift my chin higher. “No. He won’t be a problem.”



Luca

Several Days Later

FOR THE LAST FEW DAYS, I'VE DONE EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO stay away from Chanel. As much as I've wanted to drive by her place and wait for her to appear or go up to her door and beg her to run away with me, I haven't.

I know it's for the best. I've never been a quitter. It's in my blood to take down the Abruzzos, and I can't let my personal desires cloud my truth.

She was right to ask me not to ever see her again. If I don't cut it off, neither of us will ever be free. It'll be a constant wound we keep opening, and she deserves better.

To try and get my mind off her, I've tortured myself in the Abruzzo gym. I've worked out harder than ever. I've been in the boxing ring too many times to count. Every punch that lands on me, I barely feel. Every hit I bestow upon my enemy only feels like a sliver of what they deserve.

None of it makes me feel better. Every day, all day long, I have to deal with more of Jacopo's shit. It all adds to my determination to put him in a body bag.

Waiting to get Eddie's word that Danny is ready to take Brody to the docks adds to the torture. I'm ready to get this over with, and every second that ticks by messes with my nerves.

Jacopo's not helping. He's more impatient than I am. He's constantly reminding me he gave me a job to handle. Each time, I restate that Eddie needs to do his part. It shuts him up. Then he pins his evil expression on me again, and I don't know what's going through his crazy head.

Whenever he does it, part of me thinks he knows I'm a fraud. I imagine him taking his knife out and slitting my throat. He'd probably set my head on a platter on his dining room table then eat his meal with my lifeless, bloody eyes staring at him.

It's not out of his character. I watched him do it once. He made me and several of his men continue dinner as if nothing was wrong. And he kept checking our plates, ensuring we were eating. It was all to test us. God forbid we shouldn't be able to stomach food with blood surrounding us. In Jacopo's eyes, that would make us too weak to work for him or a flat-out traitor.

All the mixed-up emotions I've felt for Chanel make me hate Jacopo more. I not only resent him for killing my father, but I hate him for destroying any chance I had of a normal life. It never bothered me before Chanel. I lived off the adrenaline rush of navigating the underworld. Now, I can't shake the feeling I'm missing out on my life.

All the questions I've always pushed to the back of my mind won't hide anymore. And I'm not getting any younger. I assumed I'd get into the Abruzzo circle and find the opportune time to kill Jacopo, but years have passed. Angelo warned me it wouldn't be simple. He claimed Jacopo would always be surrounded, and the ability to kill him and live wouldn't be easy.

I thought he was exaggerating.

I was young and cocky. My hotheadedness made me underestimate Jacopo and not listen to my uncle. Now, this sense of regret keeps popping up. And I wish I could go back to the time when I didn't feel it.

I step out of my third shower of the day and dry off. I open my locker and pick up my phone.

BOSS: *It's set. 11:00 tonight.*

Me: *Got it.*

I erase the message. Boss in all capitals is Angelo. Boss with a capital B and the rest in lowercase is Jacopo. I toss on my clothes and leave the gym. I get in my Viper and turn on the engine.

As expected, Jacopo calls.

I answer, “Boss. You have good news for me?”

“Eleven tonight.”

“Consider it done,” I state.

Silence fills the line. My chest tightens like it always does when he does this. I never know what his silence means. A man like Jacopo isn’t predictable. At any time, he can turn on you.

I often think he knows how his silence makes men squirm, even if they don’t show it or he can’t see. Like now, I’m on the other end of the phone line, but I’m squeezing my fists and trying not to move.

He finally orders, “Let me know when it’s complete,” and hangs up.

I sigh in relief, but new thoughts plague me.

What if Jacopo knows I’m lying? What if he spoke with Benny, Sid, and Jimmy?

What if I’m the one being set up?

Normally, I’d not even have that thought, yet something about tonight has me rattled. Chanel’s face pops into my mind, and I groan.

“Get it together,” I mutter, then veer into traffic. I race through town, weaving in and out of traffic, pissing off a lot of drivers. But I don’t care.

People may say reckless driving is risky, but they have no idea what risky is. My entire life is one big gamble. And I’m starting to resent it more and more.

It takes about twenty minutes to arrive at Jacopo's house, where the gambling operations are headquartered.

I park, step out, then nod at the security guys. I make my way through the house, fist-bumping a few crew members, and finally end up outside the office. The head of security stands outside of the door.

"Luca," Andy says.

"I need to talk to Benny," I state. I assume Sid and Jimmy are with him, but Benny's the one in charge. So even if he's alone, the message will get to the others.

Andy knocks four times then opens the door. "Luca needs to see you."

"Let him in," Benny directs.

Andy motions for me to pass him. I step inside and close the door.

Clouds of cigar smoke fill the room. Three metal desks fill the space, along with walls of televisions to monitor games. The volumes are turned down. Stacks of cash and other valuable items such as watches, keys, and jewels fill the desks.

Benny's desk is in the middle. Jimmy and Sid are at their desks. I grab the chair in front of Jimmy's and sit.

Benny blows out a puff of his cigar, sets it on the ashtray, then peers at me. He asks, "Luca. What brings you here? You want to place a bet?"

I grunt. "Nah. Not looking to lose my cash today."

Jimmy chuckles. "You must be the worst gambler in history since you always say that."

I point to the items sprawled over his desk. "Not looking to have my possessions end up with you."

"So why are you on this side of town?" Benny questions.

My chest tightens. I lock eyes with him, asserting, "We have a problem."

Benny's eyes turn to beady slits. "Yeah, what's the problem?"

I scowl. “Jacopo said he has a job for us tonight at eleven. He says there’s someone we need to take care of, and you three will want to be there.”

“Who is it?” Benny interrogates.

I shrug. “Boss didn’t say. Said he’s keeping it under wraps, but we’ll know when we get there.”

Benny turns to Jimmy. “You think it’s that corporate prick who our guys haven’t been able to find?”

Jimmy’s cheeks turn red. “It better be. That motherfucker owes us over thirty-k right now.”

Benny redirects his gaze on Sid. “You got anyone not accounted for?”

He shakes his head. “No. We just dealt with the one loose end last night. What about you?”

Benny’s nostrils flare as he takes a moment to think. He finally nods. “No one at the stage of taking them out.”

“It’s gotta be him, then,” Jimmy announces.

“What else did the Boss tell you?” Benny asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing. You know how he orders these things.”

“Where’s it taking place?” Jimmy demands.

“Not sure. Jacopo will send his orders once I pick you up. I’ll see you at ten thirty to be safe,” I add, then rise. I walk toward the door.

“Hey!” Benny calls out.

My insides quiver. I spin. “What?”

Benny studies me a moment then quizzes, “Why do you think he’s so hush-hush on a corporate guy? It’s not like he’s anyone important. Plus, it’s only thirty-k. He normally waits to kill them when it’s over fifty.”

I shrug. “Hey, I’m just a messenger. I’m not the boss. Besides, you know how the boss likes to keep us on our toes.”

Jimmy grunts. “Yeah. It’s annoying as hell.”

Benny's head jerks toward him. "Do not disrespect the boss," he seethes.

Jimmy holds his hands out. "Sorry! Didn't mean any disrespect."

Benny leers at him for a moment then turns back to me. "One more question."

"What's that?" I reply, feeling like my skin's crawling and needing to get out of here. I hate questions. I never know which lie I'll have to cover up or if I'll have to create a new one on the spot.

He leans back in his seat and presses his fingers together. "I've been meaning to ask you. Whatever happened with you and that redhead?"

"Redhead?" I question, thinking about Chanel. My gut churns.

Please tell me he didn't see me with her.

Benny nods. "Yeah, the one all over you at the boss's party."

I rack my brain but don't know who he's talking about. There are so many women at all the events. I reply, "Which party?"

"You know, a couple months back."

I try to remember what party I could have been at where a redhead gave me attention, but several redheads have set their eyes on me over the last year.

Jimmy laughs. "He's got so many women, he doesn't know what to do with them. He forgets them so soon."

I go along with it. The truth is Chanel's the only one I've touched since I met her. I've always tried to stay far away from anyone associated with the Abruzzos. And maybe that's why I fell so hard for her. She's not anywhere close to my world.

Benny continues, "It's the one from his daughter's birthday party. The redhead in the cut-out minidress. Boobs, ass, and legs."

It all comes back to me. I blurt out, "Jacopo's niece from Italy?"

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Nothing happened. She was wasted. I took her to her room and left,” I claim. I don’t tell them I intentionally got her drunk so she would pass out and I could leave.

“You didn’t stay to get a piece?” Sid questions, making my stomach pitch.

God, I hate these thugs.

I do my best to hold in my temper, trying not to burst with anger and disgust. “You forget I like my women conscious.”

Sid’s cocky smirk grows. He shrugs. “A pussy’s a pussy.”

I turn back to Benny, trying to stay calm. “Why are you asking?”

He grins. “Wanted to make sure nothing was going on.”

“Nothing is or was going on,” I declare.

He nods. “Good, since I’ve fucked her too many times to count.”

Jimmy and Sid erupt in laughter.

“Have at it. I’ve got shit to do. See you tonight,” I say and leave.

I return to the gym and get another workout in, trying to pass the hours and work out my nerves.

It doesn’t work. This might be the most dangerous situation I’ve ever been in. I have to make sure that the right people die and Brody, Aidan, and I walk out alive.

I leave the gym and stop myself from pulling off the exit where Chanel lives. I attempt to eat dinner, but my stomach’s a mess.

I just want this over with. I’ve never wanted to be away from the Abruzzos so badly. But I’m more determined than ever to see this through and kill Jacopo and everybody around him.

Tonight’s assassination will be another huge knock on Jacopo’s hierarchy. It’ll disturb his operations while he’s replacing Benny, Jimmy, and Sid. So I may not be able to kill

Jacopo right now, but getting rid of his higher-ups is a way to harm him. And, it should move me up his ranks.

Plus, they all deserve to die.

When it's finally time to leave, I dress in all dark clothes. I get into my black SUV and drive back to the gambling house. When I park, I text Benny.

Me: *I'm here.*

I wait for them to come out and get in the car.

Benny sits in the passenger seat next to me. He questions, "Did Boss send word where we're going?"

I don't take my gaze off the road. "The docks."

"Why there?"

I lock eyes with him. "It's not your corporate guy."

He pins his eyebrows together. "Then who is it?"

"The O'Connors," I inform him.

Benny asks, "Which ones?"

I sniff hard. "Brody and his buddy Danny. We're going to kill them. Well, we're killing Danny. Boss said Brody's to be brought to him. We can rough him up, but nothing major."

Shock fills the air. Killing another crime family's son is a big deal. It's not something you do lightly. It's an unspoken rule everyone follows. If they didn't, no one would be able to walk freely down the street. And no place is safe. Even though we're doing it down at the docks in the gray area, word can get out. Plus, there's no way that Tully O'Connor would have one of his sons disappear and not come looking at all of his enemies.

Sid whistles and, with a touch of nervousness, demands to know, "Why are we involved in this?"

"You going to be a pussy about this?" I provoke.

"Shut up," he sneers.

"Sid's question isn't out of line. This isn't some dumb-ass gambler off the street," Jimmy states.

“When the boss gives orders, I follow them. I don’t question him. Do you?” I challenge.

The vehicle turns quiet. No one would dare ask Jacopo to explain his orders.

Relief fills me. I don’t want to have to create more lies. I don’t want to go into some long, detailed story about why we’re doing what we’re doing.

Thankfully, my answer appeases them.

Tension fills the car as we travel through the city. I can feel their nerves, and I’m glad it’s not just me. I do my best to appear nothing but confident.

We pull into the docks. We put our silencers on our Glocks. Then I put my hand on the door and instruct, “Hold on.”

All three of them wait.

“Jacopo said Jimmy’s to shoot out the cameras in the gray zone,” I lie.

“Why me?” he asks.

I can’t blame him. If any crime family found out he disturbed the cameras, he’d be dead within a few days.

I continue, “Once again, I don’t ask questions. Now, don’t forget. Brody stays alive. Jacopo was very insistent on this.”

Benny asserts, “Understood. Let’s get this over with.”

We get out. I lead them through the docks, ignoring the workers. We get a few feet from the gray line, and I nudge Jimmy.

He shakes his head, aims at the camera, and hits it. I point to the other one, and he does the same.

I step into the gray zone and swallow the bile rising up my throat. I’m dead if I’m being set up or anything goes wrong.

Better to be dead than have Jacopo torture me.

I push that thought to the back of my mind and concentrate on the dark fog, squinting to see if Danny and Brody are anywhere in sight.

But there's no one to be seen.

The hairs on my arms rise right as three pops fill the air. Benny, Sid, and Jimmy all fall to the ground with bullets in their heads. Another pop rings loudly.

My pulse quickens. I glance around then rush farther into the gray zone, trying to stay on the border that doesn't butt up to anyone's territory.

Someone makes a "Psst" sound several times.

I spin to see Brody and Aidan.

"Sorry, but don't want you to blow your cover," Brody states, then lowers his gun and shoots.

Pain grazes my outer thigh. "What the fuck!" I shout, dropping my Glock. I fall to the ground. Blood pools all around me.

"You need to get out of here. Go back through the Abruzzo territory," Brody says, then motions to Aidan.

He grabs my Glock and removes the bullets, shoving them into his pocket. Then they pick me up, drag me through the gray zone so fast, I can't catch my footing, and drop me back on the ground.

Brody crouches in front of me.

Aidan mutters, "He's fine. Let's go."

Brody's green eyes glow with guilt. "Sorry. Get to a doctor. You're losing a lot of blood."

"Fuck you," I grit through my teeth, but in all reality, he might have just saved my life. Going back to Jacopo without Brody's body won't be good.

They run off.

I limp through the gray zone, dizzy and full of shooting pain. When I get closer to the territory, I shout, "Zinc!"

Jacopo's guard rushes over to me. "Shit! What the fuck happened? Tiny!" He glances over me with his gun pulled.

Tiny, who's actually the biggest guy I've ever seen, appears through the darkness.

Zinc takes his shirt off and ties it around my thigh. He orders Tiny, "Get him to Jacopo's."

Tiny and Zinc drag me through the docks, but at some point, everything turns as black as night.



Chanel

The Next Week

“GO ON AHEAD. I’LL BE THERE IN A MOMENT,” MASSIMO orders the guys on the plane. They leave, and he points at the seat. “Sit down, Chanel.”

My stomach flutters with nerves. I obey and blurt out, “Did I do something wrong?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Just wanted to have a talk with you.”

“Oh, okay. About what?” I inquire, still unsure if I’m in trouble or not. Massimo never asks me to stay on the plane after he lands. He usually leaves as quickly as possible and is on to whatever his next endeavor is. I clench my hands in my lap and wait for him to speak.

“I hired a temporary flight attendant for when you’re on maternity leave.”

A new set of nerves fill me. I’m still worried that I might end up losing my job.

What if she does a better job than I do?

I try not to let it show and state, “That’s good.”

As if he can read my thoughts, he demands, “Stop worrying.”

“Sorry. It’s just that I’ve never been off work before. I really value my position with you,” I add.

Amusement fills his face. “That’s good to hear, especially since I appreciate what you do for me. But you’ll have to get used to not working for a little bit.”

I bite my bottom lip and stare at the ceiling. Any thought of being off work and caring for a baby scares me. I have no idea what I’m doing.

He asks, “Have you thought about what you’ll do once the baby comes?”

“Such as...?”

“Who will watch the baby while you’re in the air? I mean, you can bring the baby for maybe a few months. But eventually, you’ll need to figure something out,” he asserts.

Surprised, I question, “I can bring the baby on the plane?”

He shrugs. “Sure. Don’t they just sleep the first few months?”

I nervously laugh. “I’m not sure. I mean, I’m reading that one book.”

He arches his eyebrows. “What book?”

“You know that book about what to expect when you’re pregnant?” I reveal.

He replies, “I have no idea. I’ve never knocked anybody up. Hoping it stays that way.”

Shame fills me. I was so stupid to trust that my birth control would protect me. When Luca asked the first night we got together if I was on anything, I told him I was on the pill. He told me he was clean and it was good enough for me. Now, I realize how reckless we were.

Massimo clears his throat. “Sorry. Didn’t mean for that to sound judgmental. I’ve just been lucky.”

I force a smile. “No worries.”

“So, do you know what your childcare will be once you return to work?”

It's another issue that I've stuck my head in the sand about, so I admit, "I haven't figured that out yet."

He studies me.

I squirm in my seat. "Is there anything else you need to discuss?"

"I want you to train Barbara," he informs.

"Who?" I ask.

"The new flight attendant."

"Oh."

"It's just temporary," he reminds me.

I blow out a breath of air. "Sure."

He adds, "And it'll be good to have a sub in case we need it."

Goose bumps break out on my skin. "A sub?"

"In case you have any last-minute emergencies once you're a mom," he answers.

"That won't be needed," I object.

He grunts. "At some point, something will come up where you'll need to stay on the ground when I need you."

More panic fills me. I grab his arm. "Massimo, I don't want to lose my job!"

"You aren't, so chill out," he states.

"It sure sounds like it," I admit.

He shakes his head, repeating, "You aren't. But we need to be realistic and prepare. Things change. Life changes, Chanel. I'm just covering both our asses, that's all. Promise."

I look out the window at the falling snow.

"I promise," he repeats.

I exhale and decide I need to accept it. Massimo will do what he wants. I ask, "How did you find her so fast?"

He throws his fingers in the air. "Just some random flight attendant Papà said he's used in the past when needed. She

signed all the confidentiality agreements and everything. So I think it's safe to use her."

I fret, "Your papà knows I'm pregnant?"

"Calm down. I told him you needed some time off for a personal matter. He doesn't know," Massimo reassures.

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Disapproval fills his face. "I take it you haven't told your father yet?"

His question hangs in the air like bullets waiting to fire at me. I confess, "No, I keep chickening out."

He sternly asserts, "Chanel, you have to tell your father."

"I know. I will," I say.

He crosses his arms. "I'm giving you two days to tell him. If you don't, I will."

"No, don't do that. My father will be more upset if he hears it from you instead of me," I claim.

Massimo nods. "I agree. Plus, this isn't something you can keep from your family. You're going to need them. So strap on your balls and fess up."

I scrub my face, muttering, "I don't have any balls."

He scoffs then lowers his voice. "Look at me."

I obey.

He quizzes, "Do you know why I enjoy you working here?"

"For my perky personality and loyalty?" I chirp.

He chuckles. "While I appreciate those things, I also respect that you aren't afraid to look my guests in the eye. Or me, for that matter. You stand up for yourself and don't let me push you around, either."

"You don't try to push me around," I claim.

He snorts. "I did at the start. I wanted to see if you'd let me."

"You did?"

“Apparently, it wasn’t obvious enough,” he mutters.

I stay quiet.

He continues, “Look, the sooner you get this over with, the easier it will be.”

I groan. “You don’t know my father.”

He taps his fingers on the armrest. “I do know him. And I know my father. Not sure if I’d rather be in your shoes or mine, but we all have our own pressures to deal with. This is yours. Stop being a sissy and go do it.”

I give him a little salute. “Hearing you loud and clear, Boss.”

He rises. “I’m serious, Chanel. You have two days. You can’t keep this hidden forever. And I don’t like keeping things from your father or mine.”

I sigh. I forgot how Massimo’s head is on the chopping block, too, for hiding my secret. I resign myself to tell my dad. “Okay. I promise I’ll tell him.”

Satisfaction forms in his expression. “Good. I’ll see you in a few days, and you can train the new flight attendant. She shouldn’t need that much help, but I don’t want to deal with any prior bad habits she may have.”

My nerves about my job return. I ask, “Why am I training her so early? The baby’s not due for a few more months.”

He glances at my stomach then pins his dark gaze on mine. “You can’t keep flying. You’re six months pregnant.”

I inform him, “I’m allowed to fly until I’m eight months. The doctor said.”

He shakes his head. “No. You’ll take a couple months off to get ready for the baby.”

“That’s not necessary,” I insist.

“You have a lot of things to prepare for and plan. But don’t worry. You’ll still get paid.”

I gape at him then question, “You’re still going to pay me even though I’m not working?”

He nods. “Yeah, of course, I am. It’s the right thing to do.”

“It is?” I ask.

“Yep. So figure your life out. You’re having a baby and can’t keep ignoring your problems.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. It’s one thing for me to know my life is a mess. It’s another for my boss to know it.

He adds, “I’ll see you in a few days. Get Barbara trained, and you can figure your personal shit out. Got it?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“The offer is still open. If you need me to go with you to talk to your dad, let me know.”

I’m grateful for all his kindness and support, but I know what I have to do. I reply, “It’s okay. I have to deal with him on my own.”

“Understood. If you change your mind, I’m a phone call away.”

“Thanks,” I say.

He pats me on the shoulder and leaves.

I finish cleaning up the cabin and go home. When I get inside, I call my mom.

She answers, “Ma chérie. Why have you been ignoring my calls?”

I cringe. “Sorry, Mom. I’ve just I’ve been really busy with work.”

“Too busy to call your mother?” she guilts in her thick French accent.

I sigh. “I’m sorry. Umm... are you and Dad home tonight?”

She responds, “Yes. Why do you ask? Are you finally going to come see us? It’s been a month since I returned from France. Your father said you didn’t even visit him the entire three months I was gone!”

My mother always knows how to hit me with guilt. Over the last few months, I’ve made too many excuses not to see my

parents. It's the longest I've ever spent not seeing them. I'm tempted to blurt everything out over the phone and let her tell my father. The only thing stopping me is Massimo's voice telling me to *strap on my balls*. Instead, I voice, "Our schedules never lined up."

She dramatically gasps. "Your schedules? You need a schedule to see your father?"

I remind her, "Mom, I have a career. So does Dad."

She tsks several times.

"Anyway, I thought I would come over. Maybe for dinner?" I ask.

"Well, yes, of course. I'm making lamb chops with a cognac dijon cream sauce. If you returned my calls, you would have gotten your invite for your favorite meal," she adds.

Normally, I'd be excited about dinner. Something about lamb makes my stomach queasy. But I can't exactly tell her to make something else. So I acknowledge, "Sorry I didn't call back. Can you make sure you have lots of crusty bread?"

She huffs. "Well, of course, we'll have lots of bread. We're French, aren't we?"

I smile. My mother has always been proud of her French heritage. Even though my father works for an Italian, she's stayed true to her roots. I ask, "Can we have dinner around seven?"

She replies, "That should work. Let me confirm with your father. Can I shoot you a text message back?"

My mother just learned to text, and I smile bigger. She loves asking if she can text me.

"Yeah, that'd be great, Mom, thanks."

"And you'll confirm you got my text, correct, ma chérie?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Mom. I will respond to your text."

"Okay. See you tonight," she states.

“Bye.” I hang up, make a few peanut butter crackers, and eat them. I sip on a glass of water and go take a shower.

When I get out, I glance at my phone.

Mom: *Seven works perfect.*

Mom: *Why aren't you texting me back?*

Me: *Got it! Sorry, was in the shower.*

Mom: *I'll give you a pass on this one.*

Me: *Okay. Don't text me anymore. I need to get ready.*

I put down my phone and try to rehearse what I'll say to my parents in front of the mirror.

“Mom. Dad. I'm pregnant,” I blurt out, then mutter, “Not the smoothest announcement.”

I take a few minutes then try again. “Mom. Dad. I had sex with a—”

Nope! That doesn't sound right.

I straighten my shoulders in the mirror and raise my chin. “Mom. Dad. I'm going to be a single mother.”

I stare at myself then groan.

Why can't this be simple?

Why doesn't my book have something on how to tell your parents you're knocked up and not telling the father?

I give up and continue to get ready. When I'm done, I hop into a taxi and head over to my parents' house. It's early, but for some reason, I want to see my mom before my dad gets home.

The taxi pulls up to their building, and my insides quiver harder.

This is it. I'm out of time. I have to tell them.

I have no doubt Massimo will if I don't hold up my end of the bargain. And it's not fair to keep him involved in this or for my parents to hear it from anyone besides me.

I take a deep breath, get out of the taxi, and walk through the building. I step into the elevator, go down the hall, and knock

on their door.

She opens it and embraces me as soon as the door shuts. “Ma chérie!”

I squeeze her tight, my eyes filling with tears. It’s been too long since my mom hugged me. I realize how much I’ve isolated myself and missed her.

She retreats. “Let me look at you.” She puts her hands on my cheeks, and then her face falls.

Nervous butterflies dance in my stomach. I ask, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

She peers closer at me. Her voice changes when she asks, “Why are you glowing?”

I cringe. My mother’s always had this sixth sense about her. It’s like she knows everything before anybody can even mutter a word. I stayed away all these months, knowing she would somehow know, even though I’m not showing very much and my jacket is still on.

To make matters worse, she takes her hand, unfastens two buttons, and slides it on my stomach. Her face turns white. “Ma chérie, are you pregnant?”

Tears slowly fall from my eyes. Months of emotions choke me. All I can do is nod.

She gasps. “How far along are you?”

I sniffle and admit, “Six months.”

“Six months! And you don’t tell your mother?” she shrieks.

Shame becomes a blanket cocooning all around me.

She takes my hand and pulls me over to the couch. We sit, and she orders, “You need to start talking, Chanel.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, admitting, “I didn’t know how to tell you.”

Her eyes turn to slits. “And why is this? I am your mother!”

More guilt and humiliation fill me. I stay quiet.

She lowers her voice. “Who is the father?”

My face heats.

“You don’t know?” she asks in horror.

“No! Of course I know who he is! But that’s why I didn’t want to tell you,” I confess.

“Well, who is he?” she pushes.

I shake my head.

Confusion fills her expression. “So you don’t know who the father is?”

I hold my hands in the air. “No. I know who the father is. But I’m not telling you who he is. And he doesn’t know, either.”

Shock fills her face. “Why would you not tell him? This baby is his own flesh and blood.”

More tears slip down my cheeks. I look away.

She reaches for my chin and turns it toward her. “Chanel, why would you not tell the father?”

My entire body shakes. My lips tremble so hard, my teeth almost chatter. I barely manage to get out, “He’s not who I thought he was, Mom.”

Concern fills her face. She questions, “What does that mean? Did he hurt you?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Then what do you mean?”

I don’t know how to answer her without telling her the truth, and I’m never letting the cat out of the bag. I insist, “You need to trust me on this. And it’s nobody you know.”

She stares at me, and it scares me. I don’t know what she’s thinking. It’s one of the rare times in my life that I just can’t figure it out. She finally squeezes my hand. “Are you sure you’re not going to tell the father?”

“Yes,” I adamantly confirm.

She waits a moment and asks again, “You really won’t tell me who he is? Just so I know?”

“No, I won’t tell anyone ever. I will never, ever tell anyone.”

“Is he married?”

My gut flips. It’s something I never even considered. Could Luca be married?

I answer, “No.”

A moment passes then a tiny smile forms on her lips. “Am I having a granddaughter or grandson?”

Relieved that at least she’s not accepting this news as badly as my father would, I answer, “It’s a girl.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and she claps. “Okay, so we’re having a girl. I get to be the first one to hold her.”

I laugh. Then I start sobbing.

“Oh, ma chérie,” she coos, pulling me into her arms. “Don’t cry. It will all be okay. I’ll help you.”

Her words only make me cry harder. I finally choke out, “Dad’s going to kill me. He’s never going to talk to me again.”

She rubs my back, claiming, “Your father will be fine. I will handle him.”

I look up. “How?”

In a stern voice, she orders, “I will handle your father. He’s going to be upset, yes. But he’s going to mostly be worried about you. But don’t worry, everything will be fine.”

“Do you promise?” I sniffle.

My father’s hurt voice booms, “Chanel, you’re having my grandbaby, and you hide this from me?”

My gut drops. I don’t know why I didn’t ask my mom if he was home and assumed he was out. I spin toward him. “Dad, I’m sorry.”

“Who is he?” he demands.

I raise my chin, trying to appear as confident as possible. “I’m not telling anyone.”

“Tell me right now who he is,” he orders.

I shake my head. “No. He’s out of my life. He will never be in my baby’s life. It doesn’t matter who he is.”

My father walks over and kneels in front of me, grabbing my hands. “This is the father of your baby. He has responsibilities. But if he’s a bad person, then I will handle him.”

Fear fills me. I have no doubt my father would do just that. I assert, “No! That’s not necessary.”

“Then why can’t he know?”

“Enough,” my mom states.

He addresses her, “Sophia, it’s not okay for a man to impregnate our daughter and leave her on her own to raise a child.”

“He doesn’t know,” I inform him again.

My father looks at me with disappointment. “It is not right to hide a child from the father.”

“It is if she has her reasons,” my mother claims in my defense.

“Which is why I should deal with him if needed,” my father declares.

Silence fills the room.

Frustrated, he glances between us, then adds, “There’s more to this story. I want to know the truth of this, Chanel.”

I plead, “Please, Dad. You have to drop it. If you don’t drop it, I won’t come back here.”

His head jerks back. “You threaten to get rid of your father?”

“No, I don’t want that. But I have to protect my baby how I see fit. Just like you and Mom always protected me.”

“What are you protecting her against? If he’s so terrible, then it is my job to take care of this man for you,” he claims.

“Just a person who shouldn’t be a father. That’s all,” I state, but Luca’s face comes to mind as I say the words. And it hurts because I actually think Luca would be an amazing father. But there’s just too much around him that’s dangerous.

My father rises. He shakes his head and starts pacing the room.

“Pierre, this is good news. We’re having a grandbaby,” my mom chirps, then squeezes my hand again.

My father goes to the bar and pours a shot of scotch. He downs it then returns to pacing.

My mother rises and goes to him. She demands, “Pierre, stop.”

He spins, his eyes full of fury and hurt.

She places her hands on his cheeks and says in French, “We are having a granddaughter, and that is what we will focus on.”

“I will focus on finding out who the father is and why Chanel is so scared to tell him,” he seethes.

I rise. “Then I won’t come here again.”

My parents turn toward me. Mom says, “Do not say that.” She spins back to Dad. “You will not speak of this again, do you hear me, Pierre?”

He clenches his jaw and stares at her.

She softens her tone. “It’s time for dinner. We will continue this conversation, but it will not include anything about the father. Do you understand?”

My father grinds his molars.

She cups his cheeks again, softly repeating, “We are having a grandbaby. And we will have her and our daughter in our lives.”

He finally glances at me then back at my mother, caving. “Fine, Sophia, I will not speak of it.” He walks into the dining room.

Relief hits me. He won’t be drilling me anymore, but my resolve to keep my secret only grows stronger.

No matter what, I need to take the truth about Luca to my grave.



Luca

Two Months Later

“YOUR WOUND IS FINALLY CLOSED,” PHIL, THE PHYSICAL therapist, states.

I glance at the scar tissue on my thigh. I’m over the physical therapy sessions Jacopo insisted I do. I’m still pissed at Brody for shooting me. Then again, I knew that night it was the right thing to do.

Jacopo grilled me for hours. I had to be very careful to keep my story straight and not waver from anything while on pain medication. I didn’t even want to take it, but Jacopo insisted, which I think he did to try and find a hole in my story.

He still isn’t happy Brody got away. He doesn’t know Aidan was there. I expected him to order another hit on Brody, but he’s backed off for some reason.

And it’s good that Aidan took the bullets out of my Glock. Jacopo checked it while I had the bullet pulled out of my thigh. Once he was satisfied I did my best, he praised me for killing his three guys.

I tell Phil, “Yeah. All closed. I think we’re done here now, right? No more sessions?”

He chuckles. “Ready to get back to normalcy?”

“Yeah,” I state, but I’m not sure what that is anymore. The only thing I know is I need to keep busy. All this downtime has me wondering what Chanel is doing and if she’s okay.

Phil informs me, “I’m releasing you from PT. I’ll let Jacopo know you’re good to go.”

“Good,” I say and tug on my sweatshirt. “Thanks for everything.”

He pats me on the back, and I leave the physical therapy section of the gym. I make my way outside and get in my car, revving the engine and pulling out into traffic.

For hours, I race around the city with no particular place to go. I stay on the expressway, making several loops and forcing myself not to veer off at Chanel’s exit.

The last few months have been tough. I’ve not been able to do much. For a few weeks, I could barely walk. Jacopo insisted I sit the bench until I recovered. I’m finally to the point where I’m barely limping any more.

Fucking Brody. He could have made me a cripple in my thirties.

Since that night, I’ve not had any contact with the Marinos except for one text to Angelo. A few days after I was shot, I texted I was okay. Then I told him I was lying low and deleted his response.

I should check on Chanel.

No, I promised.

I make a spur-of-the-moment decision and take the exit for Angelo’s. The last thing I want to do is anything Abruzzo related. And I know my break is about to end. When Jacopo knows Phil gave me the green light, he’ll have me doing his dirty work again.

I pick up my phone and call.

Angelo answers almost immediately. ” Luca.”

“Is it clear for me to come over right now?” I question.

He replies, “Yes. Perfect timing.”

“Great. I’m down the street.” I hang up and continue on through his gate. I park behind a black SUV.

Who’s here?

Must be one of Angelo’s vehicles.

I shake off my hesitation to enter and get past the security guards. I go through the house and knock on the office door.

Angelo opens it and embraces me. “Luca, it’s good to see you. Are you fully recovered?”

“Yeah,” I reply as he opens the door wider. I step inside and then freeze.

Tully and Brody are in the office. A cloud of cigar smoke hangs thick in the air. Tully puffs on the offending item and has a glass of whiskey in his hand. Brody’s drinking a bottle of water. He looks like he just came from the gym.

Maybe he was working out with the Marinos.

Irritation gives me an itchy feeling under my skin. For once, I’d like to work out with my cousins instead of having to go to the Abruzzo gym, but that’s not my reality.

Why are they here?

Angelo motions for me to sit.

I hesitate another moment before stepping closer and clenching my fists at my sides.

Even though I know Brody probably did the right thing, I’m not going to show him I’m okay with him shooting me.

As if Angelo can read my mind, he states, “Brody did what he had to do.”

I glance at him. I’m unsure how he knows what I’m thinking.

He chuckles and points to my fist. “Best to calm down, Luca.”

I take a deep breath, take out a joint, and light it up. After a couple inhales, I finally sit across from the O’Connors. “Thanks for shooting me, you motherfucker,” I seethe at Brody.

Brody grunts, claiming, “Somebody had to save your life.”

Still not wanting to admit anything, I grumble, “Bullshit. You owe me one now.”

Tully clears his smoker’s voice. He declares, “I think it’s the opposite. I think you owe us a favor.”

“Excuse me?” I snarl.

Angelo holds his hands in the air. “Nobody owes anybody, Tully. This isn’t one of those times you can claim a debt.”

He grins, and I want to smack him. He replies, “Come on now. My son saved his life. If he hadn’t shot him, there would have been a price to pay with Jacopo. We all know it would have been his life... or at the very least, a limb.”

I scowl in disgust. Tully O’Connor is not a man I’ve been in a room with very often, but whenever I have, something about him rubs me the wrong way. I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him, so that includes his sons.

Angelo firmly repeats, “There’s no debt owed on this for either of you. Got it?”

Tully shrugs. An arrogant grin overpowers his face. He takes another puff of his cigar then says, “All right, I’ll let this one slide.”

I grunt, responding, “Like you have any authority over me.”

“All right. This conversation is over,” Angelo orders.

I take another hit then focus on Brody, pointing out, “You’re lucky Jacopo hasn’t killed you by now.”

“Not really,” Tully asserts in his cocky voice.

I turned toward him. “What are you talking about now?”

He pins his beady eyes on me. “Threats go both ways.”

“Meaning?” I ask, already tired of this entire situation.

He takes another puff, exhales, then takes a mouthful of whiskey. He casually answers, “I sent the fingers from one of Jacopo’s nephews to him in a box.”

I freeze. The last thing I need is Jacopo all riled up. I inquire, “And why did you do that?”

“Let’s just say there was a warning with it.”

“Mind spitting information out faster?” I sneer.

Tully smirks, adding, “He knows the rules. A hit on my son’s life equals a hit on his. If any of my sons wind up missing or dead, his little prince Biagio will also be missing... until I send his head to his father in a box.”

I stare at Tully. The man’s as insane as Jacopo, but he is smart. Still, I ask, “So you think Jacopo’s not going to hurt Brody? Or come after him?”

Tully knocks back the rest of his drink. He adds, “I also put a picture of his niece in the warning.”

I gape at him. Adding women into the crime family feuds is another huge no-no. I hurl, “Are you crazy? You have a daughter.”

Tully pins his hardened expression on me. “My daughter is safe and will remain that way. However, Jacopo’s favorite niece—the one he promised to Eddie O’Leary—well, let’s just say as long as my family is safe, so is she.”

“You’re crazy,” I mutter. I’ve heard enough. I turn to Angelo, “Is there anything going on I need to know about?”

“No. Nothing out of the ordinary,” he answers.

I rise, no longer able to smell the stench of Tully’s cigar or look at him. I state, “Let me know when something pops up.”

Angelo says, “Wait. Don’t you want a drink?”

I take the last puff of my joint and stub it out in the ashtray, slowly releasing the smoke. I shake my head then scowl at the O’Connors again. “No, I don’t.”

I leave the room, going directly outside, but Brody follows me.

He shouts, “Luca, wait up.”

I spin, snarling, “What do you want, Brody?”

His face turns serious. “You know I had to do it, right?”

I scoff. “Did you?”

He clenches his jaw.

“Is there anything else?” I ask.

“Hey, I didn’t shoot you anywhere that would have long-term consequences,” he says, as if it makes up for it.

“How do you know?” I challenge.

He crosses his arms. “Looks to me like you’re walking okay.”

“Yeah, no thanks to you,” I point out.

“Okay. What else did you want me to do? How would you have gotten out of it?” he inquires.

I exhale deeply. I know he’s right. I know he did what he did to save my ass. Just like I did what I did to save his butt. Yet, he didn’t get shot, so I’m not going to admit that to him.

He reaches toward me and holds out his hand.

I stare at it.

He chuckles. “Jesus, you’re a stubborn bastard.”

I stay quiet.

He offers, “Truce.”

“Whatever, Brody. I don’t have time for this,” I state, unsure why he cares to make this good between us.

He sighs. “Hey, man.”

“What?”

“If you hadn’t come forward, I’d be dead right now. My best friend would have been responsible. Can’t we call a truce?” he asks.

I ponder his request and once again feel bad for the guy. It would suck to learn the person you trusted the most was a lying rat.

Just like I am to the Abruzzos.

But like he stated, I’m stubborn. I reply, “So this is your way of saying thanks? By shooting me?”

He groans. “You’ve gotta get over it, Luca.”

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter.

“Dude. Come on. Are we good?” he questions, then holds his hand out again.

Tired of fighting, I finally grumble, “Yeah. We’re cool.” I slap his hand and get in the car. I rev the engine, get through the gates, and then resume driving on the expressway.

I pass Chanel’s exit three times before I finally can’t handle it anymore. I cave and veer off the ramp.

What am I doing?

We need to figure out how to be together.

There has to be a way to keep her safe.

There isn’t.

I pull up to her place. There’s a big moving van in front of the building. Something about seeing it makes me panic. The doors are open, so I race through the building and go to her apartment.

Chaos reigns in her unit. Movers are there, as well as what looks like new tenants.

A bald man turns. He glances over me and asks, “Can I help you?”

My pulse pounds harder. I reply, “Yeah, where’s the girl that used to live here?”

He shrugs. “How the fuck would I know?”

I try to contain my anger, quizzing, “Well, did she leave a forwarding address?”

He looks put out. “Not sure, man. Go talk to the landlord. I don’t have time for this.” He turns to the movers. “Yeah, put that TV over there.”

I stay planted for a few minutes.

He stops and looks at me again. “Is there something else you need?”

Defeated, I respond, “No.” I leave the apartment.

The neighbor next door is in the hallway. She has several bags of groceries. I go over to her and grab one of the bags. “Here.

Let me help you.”

Surprised, she looks up. Within seconds, she gives me a flirtatious smile, purring, “Oh, thank you. Do you live in the building?”

“No. I wonder if you know where the woman from next door went,” I inquire.

Her face falls. “Sorry. She moved out a couple months ago.”

“A couple of months?”

She nods. “Yeah. It was kind of quick. I mean, she left. I don’t even think she was here when the movers packed her crap.”

“And you don’t have any clue where she might be?”

She gives me a smile filled with pity. “No, but not a lot of people really knew her. She kind of kept to herself. But I think she was too busy working. She was always dragging around her suitcase.”

My heart sinks further. “Thanks for your time.”

“Sure. Is she someone special? Or are you single?” the woman asks.

“Sorry. I’m taken,” I lie, then return to my car, feeling suffocated.

How am I going to find out where she went?

I know her last name. I can do a search.

I speed home and turn on my computer. I search her name but don’t find anything. I call the operator, but she tells me there’s no listing. I do everything I can to find where Chanel Moulin went, but it’s like she disappeared into thin air.

I research who the landlord is for the building, get his phone number, and call. He hangs up on me.

So I research what he looks like and where he lives. The next day, I wait for him to leave his building.

When he finally appears, I step in front of him. “Conrad.”

He pins his eyebrows together. “Who the fuck is asking?”

“I need to know where Chanel went,” I blurt out.

“Who?” he asks.

“Chanel Moulin,” I inform him.

His eyes light up. “Oh. You’re that guy that called me last night, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am. You got a problem with that?” I say, putting on my most intimidating look.

He takes a step back. “I’m not looking for any trouble, man.”

I continue, “Then tell me where she is.”

He tosses his hands in the air. “I don’t know where she went.”

“How is that possible? Didn’t she give you a forwarding address?”

“No. She left and didn’t even get her security deposit. She moved out, but her rent was completely paid,” he informs me.

“Why would she not get that?” I ask.

“Not sure, but it’s forfeited. She had a time frame to tell me where to send it,” he states.

I don’t say anything else. I get back in my car, and the truth hits me.

I lost her.

She doesn’t want me to know where she lives.

The truth hurts worse than any pain I’ve ever felt. And I get the sinking feeling I’m never going to find her.



Chanel

Six Weeks Later

“SOPHIA, HAND ME THE SCREWDRIVER,” MY FATHER CALLS out.

My mom rolls her eyes.

Dad keeps leaving his tools all over the place. For the last four hours, he’s been putting the crib together. He’s not the handiest of men, so it tends to take longer, but eventually, he always gets it right.

And I’m running out of time. I debated about how I wanted to decorate the baby’s room for too long. My parents showed up this weekend and finally made me get everything ready. They lectured me about how there’s no more time to procrastinate, and they’re right. The baby’s due in a few weeks.

So my parents and I picked out the furniture yesterday. My mom and I spent all morning shopping for different baby items. Now, we’re washing the clothes we bought and putting them away.

My mom holds up a little onesie. “This is so cute, isn’t it? I think you should take this to the hospital with you for her to wear home.”

I look at the pink onesie with sparkles and ruffles on it. “Kind of fancy for a hospital, isn’t it, Mom?”

She dramatically gasps. “Ma chérie! For your daughter’s first outfit? I think not! And look! We can put this over her when we’re ready to leave. She holds up a pink trench coat, white tights with pink hearts, and blingy booties.

I tilt my head, assessing the items. While it’s adorable, I imagine my baby wearing it to a party, not home from the hospital. But I don’t care to argue. My mom is so excited about her grandbaby that I don’t want to rain on her parade. I reply, “Whatever makes you happy.”

Disapproval fills her expression. “Don’t you care what your child wears home?”

I shake my head. “As long as she’s clothed and warm, I don’t think it’ll matter.”

Shock fills my mother’s face. She states, “This is a big moment. We’ll need to take pictures. And you’ll always remember this moment.”

I put my hand on my hip and tilt my head, inquiring, “Okay, what did I wear home?”

She rolls her eyes. “You wore all white because your grandmother insisted.”

I shrug. “What’s wrong with all white?”

“Tsk, tsk!” she says, her eyes widening. “It’s a girl. She should wear pink.”

My father yells, “Sophia! Screwdriver!”

“Whoops! Better take this to Dad,” I say, picking up the screwdriver.

“So I’ll pack this?” Mom questions with hope in her eyes.

I cave. “Sure.”

She claps, and I can’t help but smile. Ever since I confessed everything to my parents, I’ve enjoyed my pregnancy a lot more. I’m excited for the baby to come, and things don’t seem so impossible anymore.

I take the screwdriver to the bedroom. “Here you go, Dad.”

He grabs it. “Thanks, mon chou.”

I smile bigger. Every now and then, he tries to find out who the father is, but he’s pushing less and less these days. My mother always steps in. But since he found out I was pregnant, he’s started calling me mon chou like I was a young girl. It’s a term of endearment fathers call their daughters in France, but it literally means sweetheart. I made him stop calling me it when I was a teenager, but it’s somehow worked back into his vocabulary. And I actually find it comforting and sweet now.

“Wow. That looks great!” I beam. The crib’s almost put together. He’s on the last part. It matches the same dark wood and pewter as the rest of my apartment’s furnishings.

After I moved into the condo, maybe I should have gotten rid of all the furniture Luca gave me. But something wouldn’t let me.

One day, I went to the same store where Luca bought me everything. I picked out a matching bedroom set and some furniture for the den.

They didn’t have cribs, so maybe that’s why I put everything off so long. But yesterday, when my parents and I were at the third store, I found the crib, dresser, and oversized rocking chair. They match perfectly, and everything now feels like it fits.

Having more furniture that matches what Luca bought me feels like he’s with me. It’s the only part of him I can give my daughter, so while it’s silly, I couldn’t help myself.

My parents spent the rest of yesterday painting the walls pink. I would have left it the off-white color, but my mom insisted. Now that it’s done, I’m happy she pushed me to allow them to paint it.

My father takes a screwdriver and fastens the last bolt. He steps back. Pride radiates on his face as he announces, “All done.”

I give him a hug. “You did good, Dad.”

He embraces me back and murmurs, “I know your mom says that she gets to be the first to hold the baby, but—”

“Ouch!” I shriek, clutching my stomach.

My father’s eyes widen. “Mon chou!”

I continue to wince in pain.

My mother runs into the room. “*Ma chérie*, are you okay?”

Another intense cramp hits me. I whine, “Oh God. Not again.”

“You’re in labor,” Mom insists.

I shake my head. “No. They’re the Braxton Hicks. I still have a few weeks.”

My parents exchange a worried glance. My mom states, “Better to go get checked out.”

“No. I’ve gone three times. This is the same as—” My breath gets stolen as pain more intense than I can remember hits me. But then again, every time I have these Braxton Hicks, it seems more intense than the last time.

“Breathe,” Mom orders, going through the breathing exercises we learned in the Lamaze class.

I try to mimic her, but the pain gets worse and worse.

“Let’s go sit down,” my father directs, steering me into the family room.

I get halfway to the couch when my pants turn wet. Horrified, I cry out, “I peed my pants!”

“No! Your water just broke. We need to get you to the hospital,” Mom informs me.

“What? No! It’s too early! I’m not due yet!” I assert.

“You’re fine. It’s not too early,” she claims.

“Yes, it is! She’s supposed—” Another sharp contraction hits me. I declare, “My uterus is going to fall out!”

My father asks, “Sophia. Where are the car keys?”

“In my purse. The baby’s clothes aren’t washed!” she frets.

“We’ll do it later. Keys, Sophia,” Dad sternly orders.

My parents race around the apartment, grabbing my overnight bag and my mom's purse. I sit on the couch, trying my best not to completely melt down.

What if she comes before I get to the hospital?

Is it too early?

My parents have me out the door and in their car within minutes. Dad drives while Mom sits in the backseat with me.

"Pierre, go faster," she demands.

"Sophia, there's traffic," he replies.

I glance out the window for the first time. It's Saturday night, and New York City is bustling like normal.

Traffic becomes heavier. We stop at a stoplight, and my breath gets stolen again. More pains hit me, but this time it's my heart. New tears fall.

Luca gets out of his red Viper. He approaches a group of people standing outside a new Italian restaurant.

Seeing him hurts more than I anticipated. I've tried my best to forget him, even though I know it's an impossible quest.

I'm having his baby.

It seems like a cruel punishment for the universe to put him in front of me while I'm in labor. I'm tempted to roll down the window and beg him to get in the car. But then another blow hits me.

A beautiful redhead's eyes light up when she sees him. She rushes toward him and throws her arms around him then kisses his cheek.

My heart shatters into a million pieces.

He's moved on.

She's beautiful.

How could he move on when I'm carrying his child?

He doesn't know.

Of course he's moved on. I told him to stay away from me. I moved so he could never find me again.

A moment of insanity hits me as I wonder if I did the right thing. Should I have not been so set on keeping my pregnancy from him?

A blonde walks up to him. She throws her arms around him and kisses him, too. It makes me want to die watching all of these women touch him and knowing he's no longer mine.

I sob harder.

"Ma chérie, we're almost there," Mom informs me, rubbing my back.

But I can't stop sobbing. All I feel is pain.

The red light changes to green. My father pulls the vehicle closer to Luca, and I swear we lock eyes for a brief moment. My father drives past the intersection. I'm torn farther and farther away from the father of my child and keeper of my heart.

Dad turns the corner, and Luca disappears as a longer contraction hits me.

I shriek in agony.

"Almost there," Mom repeats, tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear.

It feels like forever. We finally arrive and my parents rush me into the emergency room. I'm taken directly to the delivery ward. My clothes come off, and a paper gown is placed over me, along with a paper blanket. A team of medical professionals comes in.

"If you want to stay, you have to scrub up," a nurse tells my parents.

Mom goes first then Dad. When they return, a doctor pulls metal stirrups out of the table and positions my feet on them.

My contractions come more frequently. I whine, "I need the epidural."

The doctor looks at me with compassion. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but it’s too late.”

New panic hits me. I’m not a brave soul who plans to go through labor without pain medication. I’ve heard those horror stories about the women who do that. That’s not in my plan. I’m a wuss when it comes to pain.

The doctor sternly states, “You’ll be okay, ma’am. Promise.”

“No, no, no!” I refute.

Dad takes my hand. “You’ll be okay, Chanel.”

“No, I will—Oh God!” I scream as another contraction hits me. Then I claim, “She’s crushing my uterus!”

“All normal. You’re fully dilated. Push on the count of three,” the doctor instructs.

I sob. “I can’t. It hurts.”

“You can do it, mon chou. Squeeze my hand,” Dad encourages.

Mom strokes my head and takes my other hand. “Come on, ma chérie. Your baby wants to see you.”

“One. Two. Three. Push!” the doctor orders.

I push with everything I have, but it’s not enough. It feels like something stuck in my vagina. It takes more of my breath away, and sweat coats my skin. I cry harder.

“Don’t cry, don’t cry. Come on. Breathe, Chanel,” Mom directs, doing the Lamaze breaths again.

I mimic her for a few seconds.

The doctor states, “Good girl. One more push and that should do it. One. Two. Three. Push!”

I obey, and suddenly, my lower body feels empty. The room turns silent, and the doctor holds a baby in the air.

“Why isn’t she crying?” Mom frets.

My heart almost stops.

The doctor and nurses do something to her, and a wail fills the air. Relief crashes over me. Fresh tears hit, but this time, they're happy ones.

My father kisses my head, and my mom holds her arms out, cooing, "My grandbaby! Let me see my grandbaby."

The nurse takes the baby from the doctor. "Sorry, Grandma. Moms get to hold the baby first."

My mom purses her lips, giving the nurse a look of death, but she steps aside.

I reach forward, and they put my daughter in my arms. And it's like time stops and no one exists except her. I study her, amazed at her full head of dark hair. It reminds me of Luca's, which makes me tear up again.

Holding her to my chest, she reaches for my breast. I push her closer, and she finds my nipple and latches on.

"She's a natural," the nurse comments.

I continue staring at her. She's perfect. She has my lips, and I catch glimpses of green when she flutters her eyes. I see Luca's nose and chin on her. Little tearstains mark her cheeks, and I count her fingers and toes.

Dad breaks my trance, asking, "What's that on her shoulder?"

I glance at it and freeze. A birthmark, the same shape and color as Luca's, stains her shoulder.

In shock, I mumble, "It's her guardian angel."

"Guardian angel?" Mom questions, peering closer.

"I guess it does look like one," Dad confirms.

"She'll always have someone to protect her, then," Mom declares, which only makes more emotions lodge in my chest.

But part of me is happy that she has it. Even if Luca isn't here to protect her, maybe it's the same guardian angel that protects him. Or could it somehow be Luca protecting her?

It's probably not possible, but maybe it's him protecting her, just like he told me he would always protect his daughter if he

ever had one.

When the medical team leaves, Mom turns to me, inquiring, “Are you finally going to tell us what you’re naming her?”

For months, I went back and forth on names. Until now, I still didn’t know. Without hesitating, I answer, “Her name is Zara Luciana.”

My mother’s head jerks back. She questions, “Sorry, but Luciana? Isn’t that Italian? And Zara is of Arabic descent!”

“There’s nothing French anywhere in her name,” Dad adds, as if my mother’s statement wasn’t clear enough.

“Yes. Where’s her French name?” Mom inquires.

I hold my baby closer to me, stroking her cheek. I kiss her forehead, staring again at her guardian angel birthmark. I restate, “Her name is Zara Luciana. I’ve always loved the name Zara and you know it. Plus, she looks like a Zara, doesn’t she?” I add, arching my eyebrows at my mom, challenging her to fight me on this.

My parents stay quiet, assessing Zara.

Dad finally puts his hand on my shoulder. “Yeah, she looks like a Zara. That’s a good name.”

“But why, Luciana?” Mom questions.

Heat crawls up my cheeks. I wish I could tell them it’s to honor her father. I wish it didn’t feel right giving her a piece of him when I can’t give her the real thing. But it does feel right.

If I could confess all of this to my parents, I would. Yet I can’t. Instead, I tell a half-truth about the reason. “Zara means princess, and Luciana means light. I thought that was a good combination.”

“Oh,” my mother mutters, pins her eyebrows together, then nods. “That is a good combination.”

The nurse comes into the room. “Sorry, but visiting hours are over.”

“I’m going to stay the night,” Mom states.

The nurse's expression hardens. "No one is allowed to stay the night."

"What if I were the father?"

"Are you?" the nurse questions, crossing her arms.

"Mom, I'm fine," I state.

"Sophia, time to go," Dad orders.

Mom huffs. "What is the big deal?"

"Sophia!" Dad sternly says.

"Ugh." Mom rolls her eyes, picks up Zara, and kisses her forehead. She whispers something in her ear then hands her to my dad.

He kisses Zara, also whispers something in her ear, then hands her back to me. He smiles. "You did good, mon chou."

I tear up again. My parents kiss me goodbye, and Dad drags Mom out of the room.

I get settled into the silence, the sound of Zara breathing the only thing breaking the quiet. She whines and reaches for my breast again. I move her to it, and she latches onto my nipple.

"You're lucky," the nurse states.

"Why?" I ask, looking up.

She smiles. "A lot of babies don't latch right away."

"Oh." I look down and smile at my gorgeous girl.

"I need to fill out the birth certificate," the nurse states.

"Okay."

"Your mom gave us all your information. Can you look it over to make sure it's correct?" she says.

I glance at the form. "All good."

She nods. "And what are you naming her?"

"Zara Luciana," I inform her, my emotions choking me up again.

"That's a pretty name," the nurse claims.

“Thank you.”

“And the father? Do you have his information?” she questions.

My gut drops. I take a deep breath, lift my chin, then lock eyes with her. “There is no father.”

Pity fills her expression. I want to slap it off her. She asks, “Are you sure you don’t want to list one? If you want any child support—”

“I said there is no father,” I repeat in a sterner voice.

She studies me then nods. “Okay. No father it is.” She spins and leaves the room.

The rest of the evening is spent mostly alone with Zara, minus the few nurses that come in to check on us. I change her diaper twice, and she feeds another time. A new nurse arrives for night duty. She suggests I put her in the crib next to my bed.

Exhaustion sets in, so I don’t argue. Zara cries for a bit then finally settles. When she’s asleep, I continue stroking her guardian angel birthmark.

As tired as I am, I don’t sleep very well. When I do, I dream of Luca, Zara, and me. I always wake up when Luca’s doing something with Zara. He’s changing her diaper, bathing her, showing her how to ride a bike, and taking her to a dance.

Every time I wake up, I cry.

Those things will never happen.

I stare at Zara, knowing she deserves so much more than I can give her alone.

I contemplate if I made a mistake. Then I see Zara sleeping peacefully and convince myself that I didn’t.

I may not be the full package, but I vow to give her everything she needs. That includes protecting her at all costs.

So there is no question about what’s right. I need to keep her as far away from Luca as possible. Even if it hurts.



Luca

Ten Years Later

“I’M TURNING INTO AN OLD MAN, ANGELO,” I CLAIM, scrubbing my face in frustration. I’ve been undercover for over two decades. Anytime I have a chance to kill Jacopo, something screws it up. Not that I often get an opportunity.

But tonight will be different.

Angelo steps in front of me. In a serious tone, he questions, “Are you ready for me to pull you out of this?”

I’ve lost track of the times he’s asked me this. I normally don’t hesitate. Lately, I think more and more when he asks me.

I’ve not hidden my intentions with him. He knows that the moment I kill Jacopo, I’m getting out. But the longer this goes on, the more discouraged I get. I’m tired of wishing my life was something different. Yet I’m too far in. The only way to get out without killing Jacopo is if my cover gets blown. I don’t have the ability to let go of my vengeance.

Not until they’re all dead.

Angelo waits for me to answer, studying me closely.

I shake my head. “No, I’m not leaving until I finish the job. You know this.”

He peers at me closer. “You’re allowed to change your mind at any time, Luca. Our family will always be indebted to you for all you’ve done.”

“It’s not over yet,” I state.

“You’ve been in a long time, Luca. I’m worried about you,” he confesses.

I brush his concern off. “You don’t need to worry about me.” I deeply inhale another hit of my joint, holding the smoke in my lungs before exhaling it.

I’m smoking way too much weed these days. I used to smoke a joint a day. Now, I’m up to three or four. It’s the only thing that keeps me calm. I can’t deal with the horrors of my life without it.

Anytime I think I’ve seen the worst of the Abruzzos’ terror, I get to witness something else. Sometimes, I have no choice but to take part. Those situations have made me wonder if there’s any good part left in my soul.

Angelo caves, inquiring, “Okay, what’s going on? You said you had something to discuss with me?”

My adrenaline spikes. I blurt out, “I’m killing him tonight.”

Angelo stares at me. It’s not the first time I’ve stated I’m about to kill Jacopo. Every time I do, something stops me from succeeding. But not tonight. Tonight, I’m ending this.

Angelo crosses his arms. “How?”

I answer, “It’s Jacopo’s birthday. He’s celebrating in his VIP suite at the sex club.”

“You know the rules at the club,” Angelo warns.

I hold my hands in the air. “I know. But no one will know it was me.”

“How are you going to pull that off?” he asks.

I take a mouthful of water, swallow it, then reply, “I need Dante or Gianni to pull the hallway and bathroom footage when they see him go there.”

Angelo scratches his head and then goes to the window, staring out into his large yard. The sex club is the only place where all the families agreed to have peace. They all have their own suites and stay away from each other, but there are strict rules. Neutral bouncers run the place and make sure everyone adheres to those rules. But some things, like doing business in the club, happen behind their backs. They know it but can't prove it, so as long as there is peace between families, they let things slide.

And anything and everything goes in the sex club.

Angelo paces the room. He doesn't ever approve plans to break rules in the club. He prefers to avoid the consequences. Not having access to the club jeopardizes business getting done. One thing Angelo doesn't like is disruptions.

"I need to get this over with," I stress, trying not to sound like a beggar but feeling desperate.

I need to end this.

He continues to stay silent.

"Angelo, it's time. I have to get this done. It's the perfect way to do it. He'll be intoxicated, and the bathroom is the perfect place as long as the cameras are pulled."

Angelo grinds his molars and shakes his head. "I don't know, Luca. If you get caught, it puts our entire family at risk."

"I'm not getting caught," I insist.

"Nothing is guaranteed," he declares.

"Where else are we going to do it? How many more years do I have to spend in this shitty life, doing horrible things and waiting to kill that motherfucker?" I explode.

Angelo steps closer, lowering his voice. "I've asked you if you needed to get out."

I glance at the ceiling, taking several breaths. I pin my gaze on him, reiterating, "I'm not done until I kill him. It's not over yet."

Minutes of Angelo assessing me pass. Neither of us speaks.

I finally can't take it anymore. I blurt out, "I can get it done tonight. Have Dante or Gianni pull the footage."

Angelo finally submits to my request. He points at me. "I'll do it, but if anything goes wrong, your ass is on the line, Luca."

"That's fine. Nothing's going wrong this time," I declare with more determination than ever.

"Don't make me regret this," Angelo warns.

"You won't," I claim, then leave. I drive to my condo and go directly to my penthouse. I shower and select a pair of dark designer jeans, a form-fitting black T-shirt, and a sport coat.

I study my reflection in the mirror.

It'll all be over tonight.

One more night of debauchery.

The sex club is a unique place. Anything you're looking for, you can find. It's also one of the places I hate the most.

There are so many different types of women there. But they're always associated with a family. Often, you never know which family they're with, which can create issues.

After being with Chanel, I learned that I need to stay far away from women. If I have sex, it's a one-nighter. I never go back for seconds, nor do I ever take them to my place. It's either at the sex club, in a vehicle, or in a hotel. And I never stay the night.

The only women I've fucked over the last ten years are Abruzzo women. They're the only safe ones. I never take advantage of the women from the whorehouses though. I stick to the friends of the wives and girlfriends. They're the safest, it's consensual, and they're an arm's length away from Jacopo.

It hasn't eliminated my conquests from trying to get more when they see me next, but I always turn them down. I'm a dick to them. It's the only way to not get close to anyone.

It's another thing I've learned to despise about myself.

And God forbid a woman smells like Chanel's strawberry shampoo. It's been ten years, and I still haven't forgotten her.

Whenever a woman sits on my lap and whispers things in my ear, I play along like I'm enjoying it. But it makes me wonder what my stellina is doing and who she's with.

Is she married?

Does she have an army of kids?

Does she ever think about me?

Normally, if I could get out of going to the sex club and never return, I would—but not tonight. Right now, I'm actually looking forward to it. Because while it may be Jacopo's birthday, this is the last birthday he's ever going to have.

I finish getting ready and grab the Gran Habano No. 5 cigars I bought for his gift. I had to pay over \$100,000 for the box. It's the most expensive cigar on the planet. But you don't go to Jacopo's birthday and not give him something extremely expensive.

I have my driver drop me off at the club, and then I make my way through security and the main downstairs area.

The scene looks like it always does. The dim lights create a sexy atmosphere. Music plays, and the dance floor is already starting to get full. Oversized beds are strewn in the middle of the room to encourage orgies. Tables for viewing surround the mattresses. Different sitting areas and multiple bars are everywhere.

Many women are already naked. Women are fucking women. Men are fucking women. The only thing not happening in the main area is men fucking men. Observers intently watch. Some are getting themselves off while others just study the scene. But what goes on down here isn't anything compared to what happens in the VIP suites or private rooms.

I stay toward the edge of the room, taking the staircase to the fourth floor and get past the security guard. I pass the Marino suite, and Dante and I lock eyes. I continue toward the Abruzzo suite. Gianni's in the hallway, entertaining several women in a sitting area. He's in a perfect position to watch who goes to the bathroom. He pins his dark eyes on me, and it's all I need to know.

The Marino twins are ready.

For the first time in a long time, I'm feeling positive I'm finally going to kill Jacopo. I happily enter the Abruzzo suite, scanning the room. Jacopo's already pretty hammered with his son Biagio.

I approach them, and Jacopo shouts, "Luca, it's about time you showed up!"

I shake the box of cigars at him. "These weren't the easiest to find. They just arrived. Thought you'd forgive me." I hand the box to him.

I refrain from shifting on my feet. You never know how Jacopo will respond to things. He opens the box, takes a cigar out, and sniffs it. Then he states, "Well, I guess I'll give you a pass."

Relief hits me. He's in a good mood. It's another sign that tonight is the perfect night.

"Can I get you another drink?" I ask, then pick up the bottle of scotch and pour him another shot.

He takes it. I hand shots to Biagio and several of his men as well. I take one with them then pour myself a tumbler. I still don't really care to drink. But it's one of those things I have to do.

"Excuse me. There's a woman I saw outside I need to find." I wink at Jacopo.

He grunts and waves me off.

I leave the room and go to the hallway, where a group of younger Abruzzo women are seated. A new girl gives me doe eyes. I don't know who she is. I don't really care, but she makes the perfect decoy.

About an hour later, Biagio goes to the restroom. I try to stay engaged in the conversation with the brunette, but I'm barely listening. A moment later, Jacopo passes me.

The hairs on my neck rise. "Excuse me," I say to the woman, taking her off my lap.

She giggles. “Baby, where are you going?”

Not your baby.

“I’ll be right back,” I state, then rise.

I glance down the hall where Gianni disappears then reappears. He taps his hand on his hip, and I go toward the restroom.

I’ll kill both Biagio and Jacopo. Perfect scenario.

I’m ten steps from the restroom when Biagio steps out. He puts his arm around me and orders, “Luca, come with me.”

Not now.

“I have to take a leak. I’ll see you in a minute,” I announce.

“You can wait. There’s someone I need to see, and you’re going to help me,” he claims.

My gut flips. I protest, “Let me use the bathroom first.”

He chuckles, grabs me, and steers me down the staircase.

Not again.

Why does this always happen?

We get to the end of the staircase, and Biagio opens the door to the third-floor suites.

“What are we doing here?” I ask.

“Getting a woman.”

“This isn’t our floor.”

He shrugs. “So? Don’t be a pussy.”

Fuck!

He saunters into the O’Connor suite, approaches Aidan’s girlfriend, and spins her into him.

She gapes at him in surprise.

He leans into her, murmuring, “Hey, baby, I think you’re in the wrong suite.”

She pushes him and screams, “Aidan!”

I tug at him. “Biagio, we have to go.”

It’s too late. Aidan rushes over, pushes his girlfriend back, then plants one right on Biagio’s cheek.

Biagio doesn’t flinch. It’s probably because he’s on so many steroids, but he barely moves.

Aidan flings himself back toward him.

I get in the middle to stop it. “Enough! We’re leaving,” I shout, but it’s pointless. Aidan is livid, and Biagio loves a good fight. I try to push them apart, but Brody comes flying into the mix and hurls his body at me.

I fly out from between them, and he lands a right hook on me.

All the anger I felt about him shooting me years ago resurfaces. His green eyes give me the impression he wants to kill me. I instinctively reach for my knife, flip it open, and slash his thigh.

“What the fuck, Luca!” he screams.

A team of bouncers comes barreling in. It takes three to contain Biagio and two for each O’Connor and me. One of the waitresses brings a towel over for Brody’s bloody leg.

Sergio, the head of security, arrives. He snarls, “What the fuck do you guys think you’re doing?”

“He started it,” Aidan says, wiping his bloody mouth.

“They’re in our suite,” Brody points out, wincing as a bouncer tightens the rag around his thigh.

“What game are you playing?” Sergio asks Biagio and me.

Biagio has the balls and audacity to glance at Aidan’s girlfriend and state, “I’m good. I’m just getting my whore for the night.”

Aidan’s anger resurfaces. His face burns red, and his eyes look like those of a wild animal ready to kill. He roars and tries to get out of the bouncers’ grasp. His legs and arms flail in the air. He threatens, “I’ll kill you!”

Tully appears. In his smoker's voice, he barks, "What the hell's going on in my suite?"

Silence fills the air.

Tully steps in front of Biagio. "Why are you here?" he seethes.

"Everyone out," Sergio orders.

Tully jerks his head toward him. "This is my suite. Abruzzos aren't welcome, and you know it. This isn't our fault."

He points to Brody. "Get your son to the doctor. Night's over for all of you."

Tully glances at Brody, and his eyes widen. "What the fuck?"

Brody glares at me.

Tully glances at the bloody knife in my hand then drills his beady eyes into mine. A part of me feels guilty, but the other side thinks Brody finally got what was owed to him for shooting me.

Jacopo saunters in with two bodyguards. He taunts, "Tough times in your suite, Tully?"

"You're out, too, Jacopo," Sergio declares.

Jacopo's expression darkens. "I'm not going anywhere. It's my birthday."

"I don't give a fuck. You're all out," Sergio demands again. "And you've all crossed the line. Four months suspension for all of you."

"Excuse me?" Jacopo snarls.

"I'm not getting banned for those thugs coming into my suite," Tully insists.

"Out! Or I'm extending it to six months!" Sergio threatens.

Without saying a word, we all make our way through the club. Security never leaves our side. When we get outside, Tully's SUV pulls up. He steps in front of Jacopo, reminding him, "I've warned you once about laying a hand on my kids."

Jacopo's lips curl. "You think your threats scare me? My son isn't the one needing medical attention."

Tully's jaw clenches. He sizes him up then steps closer. "An Abruzzo touched my son."

"It was a fight, not a planned execution," Jacopo states.

Tully's green eyes blaze with a vengeance. He glances at Biagio and me then turns back to Jacopo. "I don't make threats without following through. You know this."

Jacopo stays silent.

Tully adds, "Do you really want a war? Because I'll give you one."

Jacopo stands taller. He glances at me and replies, "Like I said, this wasn't planned. I'll take care of the mistakes on my side. Think it's best if we keep the peace."

Tully continues to study him before motioning for his sons to get in the SUV. He states, "I'm warning you. Another incident like this, and I won't show you mercy."

Jacopo's SUV pulls behind Tully's.

Brody scowls at me and states, "We aren't done here, Luca."

"Looking forward to it," I mutter.

The O'Connors get into their vehicle and take off.

Jacopo turns on me. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Anger flares through my cells. I point at Biagio. "Talk to your idiot son."

"Excuse me," Jacopo snarls.

I clench my jaw, trying to calm myself.

"You know what the rule is about touching the O'Connor boys without my go-ahead," he asserts.

My mouth doesn't help me. I blurt out, "Are you serious right now? I just defended your son."

Jacopo steps closer. The smell of scotch and cigars makes my stomach churn. He lowers his voice to the one he uses to intimidate men. "Are you arguing with me?"

I don't answer.

“Are you disrespecting me?”

I continue to remain quiet.

“Do I have to remind you who the boss is?” he interrogates.

It takes everything in my power not to say another word. He shouldn't be here right now. He should be dead. Yet here he is, once again, defying the odds.

He adds, “No pay for a month, and you're on cleanup duty.”

My gut drops. Cleanup duty is the worst. It's the person who has to dispose of the dead bodies. I had to do it when I first started working for the Abruzzos. I've been here for over two decades, and now I'm back where I started.

Jacopo pats my cheek. He gets in his SUV and rolls the window down. He demands, “Report at five a.m. at the docks.”

It's already three in the morning. My gut sinks. He'll have me doing shitty work for days with no sleep.

I say nothing, and they take off.

I call my driver, and he pulls up within seconds. My phone rings. I groan and answer, “I don't want to hear it.”

Angelo orders, “Get your ass over to Tully's. Now.”

“I'm not going to Tully's,” I protest.

“I said get over there now,” Angelo snarls and hangs up.

I close my eyes and hit my head on the backseat. When my driver drops me at my place, I get in my car and take off.

The entire way to Tully's, all I can wonder is, how much more of this can I take?



Chanel

Six Months Later

“WHY WON’T YOU TELL ME?” ZARA BORDERLINE SHOUTS.

I put my hands over my face and groan. “Zara, we aren’t going over this again.”

“It’s my father. I have a right to know. Just tell me who he is,” she demands.

It’s the same fight we’ve had for the last few years. Everything between Zara and me was perfectly fine. She was a little girl who loved her mommy and never knew anything different. Then everything changed.

Zara came home from school and asked me why she didn’t have a father.

I knew that day was coming. No matter how I tried to prepare for it, nothing I said to her stopped the questions.

I explained that sometimes mommies and daddies aren’t meant to be together. And even though her daddy wasn’t around, I loved her enough for both a mommy and daddy.

That only sparked more questions.

“Doesn’t he want to see me?” she asked, her big green eyes widening with hurt.

My heart broke. I tugged her close and lied, “I’m sorry to tell you this, sweetie, but I can’t discuss anything about your father. One day, when you’re older, I’ll tell you everything.” As I said it, my stomach pitched.

What would I eventually tell her? She can’t ever know the truth.

Since that day, she’s been relentless. As soon as I think she’s let it go, she brings it back up with more determination than ever to find out the details.

I can’t say I blame her. But every time I give her the same excuse, it just feels worse and worse. And it’s causing friction between us.

“I have a right to know!” she repeats, stomping her foot.

I point to her bare feet. “That isn’t going to get you any answers.”

“Mom!” she shouts, her face red with anger. “Tell me!”

I open the fridge and pull out a pan of leftover lasagna, ordering, “You can cut the attitude.”

“Ugh! You’re so mean!” she hurls at me.

“Whoa! What’s going on?” My mother’s voice interrupts as she enters the room. Sometimes I regret giving her the key to my place. She’s always popping over. Most of the time, I don’t care. Still, sometimes, I’d like to have an argument with my daughter without her interference—especially on this topic.

“What are you doing here?” I inquire.

She waves her hands. “I just wondered what you two are up to tonight.”

Zara spins, and I brace myself for what’s to come. She throws herself at my mother and cries, “My mom won’t tell me who my dad is! Please make her tell me, Mamé!”

My mother wraps her arms around Zara and gives me her *I told you so* expression. My parents have been wonderfully supportive, but they still want to know who Zara’s father is, too.

“Zara, go do your homework,” I command.

She looks up at my mother. “Mamé, can I stay with you and Papi for the weekend? Please!”

Mom wipes her tearstained cheek. “Of course you can. You’re always welcome at our house.”

“Excuse me. I’m here,” I state, waving my hand in the air.

Zara turns. “I’ll go pack.”

“Zara!” I sternly say.

She tilts her head and crosses her arms over her chest. “I want to stay with Mamé and Papi.”

Hurt fills me. I know I’ve brought this on with my decisions and not having a good enough excuse to give her about her father. Yet, I’m clueless as to what I could tell her that would make her drop it. I sigh. “I thought you wanted to go to the movies tomorrow.”

“Mamé will take me. Right?” she asks my mom, giving her a big smile.

“Of course, ma choupinette. If that is what you want to do,” my mother coos.

I glance at the ceiling and take a few deep breaths. Maybe this is what I get for allowing my mom to watch Zara when I work. The two are inseparable, and sometimes that puts me on the sidelines. Plus, my mother spoils her.

I’ve also talked to my mom about not supporting me when Zara plays sides like this, but she only sees it as enjoying her granddaughter.

“Cool! I’ll go pack my new jammies,” Zara chirps and runs out of the room.

“Mom, you have to stop doing that,” I state.

She widens her eyes, all innocent. “Doing what?”

I shake my head. “You know what.”

“I’m just enjoying my granddaughter.”

“I need your support.”

“Don’t you think it’s time you told her a little more about her father?” Mom states.

I cross the island and step in front of her, lowering my voice. “And what would you have me tell her?”

Mom shrugs nonchalantly. “Maybe some details about him.”

“You just want details,” I accuse.

“I do deserve to know,” she asserts.

I roll my eyes. “Here we go again.”

“What?”

“Don’t play innocent with me,” I warn.

“I’m just saying that some details wouldn’t harm her,” Mom claims.

I scrub my face, tired of this conversation and feeling ganged up on.

My mom steps closer. “Let’s change the subject. What are you going to do tonight now that you’re free? Maybe go out with Jeff?”

I cringe inside. “Mom, I told you I broke it off with him.”

She gives me her disapproving look, voicing, “I don’t understand that. He’s a good man with a decent job. You dated quite a while. I’m sure Zara would have loved him. Maybe she’d even stop asking about her father.”

I gape at her.

“What did I say now?” she asks.

“I dated him for four months. We’re not a good fit. And I’m not introducing anyone to my daughter unless I’m getting married,” I adamantly proclaim.

“Maybe you’re being overly cautious,” she suggests.

That’s what Jeff and the six men before him said to me. I count to three in my head then reply, “I don’t need Zara getting attached to anyone.”

My mother smiles and puts her arm around my shoulder.
“Well, a wedding would be nice to plan.”

“Mom!” I groan.

“It’s true!”

“Okay! I’m ready!” Zara shrieks, wheeling an overnight bag behind her.

“Did I say you could use the new bag Massimo gave me?” I ask, relieved to get off the topic of my failed love life. I’ve come to the conclusion I’m doomed. No matter who I date, I never feel what I felt with Luca.

I wondered once if it was because I constantly see him in my daughter, but then it hit me the last time Jeff and I got done having sex.

No one is Luca and no one will ever come close. All I’m doing with these men is chasing an apparition of what it felt like to be his and how he made me feel.

Unfortunately, everyone since him has left me feeling disappointed. No matter what kind of sex we have, it never lights me up the way I was when Luca and I were together.

Sometimes, I wonder if it’s all in my head. Did it really feel how I remember, or am I grasping at the past because I can’t have him?

“Can I use it, Mom? I love it! Pretty please?” Zara begs, batting her eyelashes.

Once again, she has me wrapped around her finger.

She has way too expensive taste for a ten-year-old.

I crouch in front of her. “Okay, but next time ask before you pack it.”

“Okay. Thanks!”

I tug her into me. “Hug me so I don’t forget you love me.”

She squeezes me hard.

I return her affection and say, “I love you so much. Come home early Sunday morning so I can see you this weekend.”

She pulls back. “If I come home early, will you tell me about my dad?” There’s so much hope in her eyes that it kills me.

I cave, surprising myself, and blurt out, “I’ll tell you something about him on Sunday.”

Her eyes light up. “You will?”

My chest tightens, but maybe my mom is right. A small detail won’t hurt. “Yes, but after I tell you, I want you to stop getting angry with me all the time. The topic is closed after we talk Sunday.”

“Okay. Thanks, Mom!” She throws her arms around me again, and I close my eyes.

“Be good,” I tell her.

“I will.” She takes my mom’s hand, and they leave.

I glance around my kitchen, realizing I’m going to be bored all weekend. I thought I’d be spending the entire weekend with Zara.

My phone rings, and I glance at it, then answer, “Hey, Pina.”

My bestie questions, “Can your mom watch Zara tonight?”

I pick up my glass of water, take a sip, and then reply, “You just missed her. She snuck in here and stole my daughter again.”

Pina laughs. “Well, guess it’s your lucky night, then.”

“Why?”

“Time to get you back in the saddle.”

“Sorry?”

“Now that Jeff’s out of the picture,” she says.

I peel a banana. “I’m not interested in a blind date.”

“Who said anything about that?” she asks.

I relax. “Okay, good. That last guy was a creeper.”

Pina scoffs. “I told you not to blame me for that. My sister claimed he was amazing.”

“Yeah, well, he gave me goose bumps, and not the good kind. I couldn’t run fast enough,” I admit.

“Noted. Put on something hot. We’re going out,” Pina orders.

I laugh. “And where are you taking me?”

“Not telling.”

“Why not?”

“Surprises are good,” she claims.

“Then why are the hairs on my arms rising?” I quiz.

She chirps, “Because you need excitement in your life, and I’m your most exciting friend!”

“Well, that’s true,” I mutter, then take a bite of the banana.

“Okay, pick you up at nine. That green minidress you have would be good to wear!” she suggests.

I swallow the banana, inquiring, “Are we going clubbing?”

“Ummm... well...”

“Pina, where are we going?”

“I wouldn’t say clubbing, but dress like that’s what we’re doing. See you soon. Bye!” She hangs up before I can ask any more questions.

A club but not a club.

Where the heck is she taking me?

I finish my fruit then toss on workout clothes. I use the gym in my building, make dinner, and eat alone. I try not to think about my predicament with Zara, but it’s hard not to.

What am I going to tell her about Luca?

I get a piece of paper and a pen. I write down a list of all the good things about Luca. When I’m done, I study the long list, surprised at how many good parts of him I remember, and fight tears.

Why does it still hurt after all these years?

He would have adored Zara.

Glancing at the time, I take the list and put it inside my nightstand drawer. Then I shower, dry my hair, and put on my makeup. I go into my closet and assess my wardrobe.

Glad Pina knows what clothes I have. It makes it so much easier.

I pull out the green minidress, along with my matching stilettos and evening bag. Then I return to my vanity and curl my hair. I'm spraying my perfume on myself when Pina calls.

"Hey, girl," I answer.

She announces, "I'm downstairs when you're ready."

"Be there soon," I reply and hang up. I put a black trench coat on and leave. As soon as I step out of my building, Pina's voice hits my ears.

"Hey, girl!" she chirps out the backseat window of a black SUV.

"Did you change your car out?" I ask, sliding next to her. She works for Massimo's brother, Dante. Years ago, she negotiated that he pay for a car and driver in her contract. She told me I should, too. I told her I couldn't ask Massimo for anything. He was already too generous to me.

Pina took it upon herself to put the bug in his ear about giving me the same perk Dante gave her. Well, I should rephrase that. When Massimo tried to steal her from Dante, she told him she couldn't leave because he didn't treat his employees as well as Dante. Of course, Massimo fell for her trap and asked her what she meant. And that's when she stated that she noticed I was still taking taxis.

That was on a Friday. By Monday morning, I had a vehicle and a driver assigned to me.

She shakes her head. "My vehicle had to be serviced. Dante loaned my driver this one."

I glance around the SUV. "It's nice, but I think your car suits you better. This is really big."

She shrugs. "I think I could get used to it."

“So, where are we going?” I ask.

She glances at her driver then shuts the privacy window. She turns toward me.

“Why the secrecy?” I nervously ask.

She leans close to my face. “Don’t freak out.”

My butterflies flutter. I admit, “Your comment not to freak out is making me freak out.”

She laughs.

“Pina, where are we going?”

She hesitates then replies, “Soooo...”

I arch my eyebrows. “Spit it out.”

She continues, “I’m taking you to a secret club.”

I tilt my head. “I thought you said we weren’t going to a club?”

She nods. “It’s not the type of club you’re used to.”

My senses are all on high alert. I challenge, “What does that mean?”

She studies my face.

“Pina!”

“Okay. It’s a sex club,” she admits.

I gape at her.

She adds, “And there’s one more catch.”

“Which would be...?”

She winces. “It’s kind of a place where all the crime families coexist. But there are rules.”

“I’m so confused right now,” I confess.

“There are VIP suites we aren’t allowed in... Well, I should say that we shouldn’t ever go inside of,” she informs me.

“Because...?”

“You wouldn’t want to hang out with the Abruzzos or O’Leary’s, would you?” She smirks.

My heart races faster. *Abruzzos? Would Luca be there?*

“You would?” she questions. Horror fills her face.

I answer, “God, no! Why would we go somewhere that they hang out?”

“That’s the thing. All the families go there. They have a pact that they leave each other alone. So we’re good to go in any Marino or O’Connor suite,” she states.

“To do what? I don’t exactly want to have sex with the Marinos watching!” I squeal.

She slaps me with the back of her hand. “Eww. No. That’s not what we’ll be doing. You’ll see.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know about this.”

“Why not? I didn’t take you for a prude,” she comments.

I’m no longer the shy little virgin that Luca took home a decade ago. I’ve seen more crazy shit from being Massimo’s flight attendant than most people would if they watched pornos. And I’ve slept with a handful of guys since Luca. I no longer feel naive. However, I admit, “This is a bit out of my league. Don’t you think?”

She huffs. “Don’t be crazy! Just stick with me.”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Just come this one time with me. If you hate it, you never have to return. Please,” she begs.

Luca might be there.

I need to stay away from him.

What are the chances of running into him?

If he fucks another woman in front of me, I’ll kill him.

This is crazy.

“Chanel! Pretty please with sugar on top,” Pina pleads.

“What about Massimo? Is he going to care if I’m there?” I question. I’ve been to the Marino family parties and restaurant openings, but I don’t normally socialize with them outside of those things.

She scoffs. “Dante lets me. Massimo is way more laid-back than him. He’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

The driver stops in front of a residential townhome. I glance outside. “Why did he park here?”

Pina points to the building. “That’s the club.”

I peek through the window again. “There’s no one around.”

She nods and looks at her watch. “We have four minutes to get in, or they won’t let us inside tonight.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Leave your coat here and open the door,” she orders.

My stomach flips. I glance back at her, unbutton my jacket, then take a deep breath. I open the door and step out.

Pina follows then leads me up the steps and knocks on the door. A huge bouncer, dressed in a suit, answers. He seems to know her and motions for us to step inside.

Another woman guides us through another door, down a hall, and into another room.

I freeze, shocked by the huge room of people and all the sexual acts taking place.

Pina laces her arm through mine. “Don’t stare.”

“I’m-I’m not,” I say, but I can’t tear my eyes off the oversized bed in the middle of the room. There’s an orgy occurring, and dozens of people sit at tables or on couches, watching it.

Pina continues leading me through the club. In some ways, I feel like a piece of meat. So many eyes are on me—male and even some female ones. And they all have a sense of freedom I can’t explain.

We roam several VIP rooms, drinking champagne, turning down offers from guys who hit on us, and dancing to different songs. Then Pina takes me to what she calls the private section.

And I no longer feel confident about anything sexual. Everything in front of me is an introduction to things I've never seen before. It's fascinating, but what surprises me is how I feel watching it.

At some point, Pina steps into a room that doesn't have a window. One of the men I recognize as part of the O'Connor clan follows her. I stroll down the hall, stopping at each room until I get to a window where no one is watching. Six people are in the room having an orgy. They're incorporating toys into their play. I get lost in their show, sipping more champagne, when a hard body stands flush to my back. A warm hand circles my waist, pressing against my stomach. The smell of white musk and patchouli, mixed with weed and a hint of scotch, flares in my nostrils, lighting up every sense in my body.

There's only one man who feels and smells like that. I don't have to look up to know it's him. I freeze, hold my breath, and try to stop my insides from quivering.

His hot breath hits my ear, sending fresh tingles down my spine. He murmurs, "What are you doing here, stellina?"

Slowly, I tilt my head and stare at the man I never stopped thinking about yet did everything I could to avoid.

Ten years have passed, doing nothing for how my skin hums against his. He's aged, proving the stereotype true that men only get sexier as they get older.

His frame is more developed, further built from years of working out. Wrinkles comb the corners of his eyes, creating a perception of wisdom. Streaks of silver run through his hair, making him look even more powerful, daunting, and taboo.

He's breathtaking, but the expression in his eyes almost knocks me over. It's haunting. Ghosts battle against so many emotions, I wonder if I'm seeing things.

Has he missed me?

I just want him to.

Is that the same regret and pain I struggle with on a daily basis?

Why did I come here knowing he could be here?

I open my mouth to speak, but nothing will come out.

Luca's hand slightly trembles as he slides it over my cheek. He swallows hard and then his face hardens. "This isn't a place for you."



Luca

SINCE MY ALTERCATION WITH THE O'CONNORS, I'VE STAYED away from the club. My ban was lifted a few months ago, but Jacopo's kept me busy redeeming myself.

As long as I stayed on cleanup duty, I couldn't get anywhere near Jacopo. So earlier this week, Angelo and Tully met with me. They fed me "inside information" on the O'Connors' newest gambling house. I told Jacopo about it and suggested he allow me to rob it then burn it to the ground.

He approved the idea, and everything got put into motion. But it cost Angelo a pretty penny—over a million dollars in cash that I delivered to Jacopo. Tully's sons added dead bodies of men they killed earlier that week, and I burned the place to the ground.

It worked, and now I'm back in Jacopo's good graces

I didn't mind not going to the club, but now that Chanel is here, I'm furious.

She doesn't belong here.

If anyone's touched her, I'll kill them.

I need to get her out of here.

When Chanel walked into the club with Pina, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. She's the same yet different.

Her hair is slightly shorter. It's now brown with blonde highlights in it. The confident expression I witnessed glimpses of is no longer slivers. She carries herself as if she owns the place. And the curves on her body...

Fuck me. I'm ruined.

The eighteen-year-old young lady no longer exists. She's come into her own. I don't need to talk to her to notice. But she's sexier than I remember. She no longer resembles a sweet, innocent, semi-naive young woman. She's a voluptuous vixen, and there isn't a man in all of New York who wouldn't notice her and think lewd thoughts.

Which is only partly why I've kept a close eye on her since she arrived. I've lurked in the shadows or crowds, waiting to make my move.

Pina finally left her side. It made me happy I could approach her, but I was also pissed. Pina had no right to bring her here or leave her alone in this cesspool. I don't know what she's thinking.

Then again, I don't understand why Dante allows Pina to roam freely inside this place.

Chanel's green eyes turn to flames, and the hard-on I've been fighting all night wins. My entire body aches. I've missed the way she wears her emotions. Plus, she still smells like strawberries.

"But this is a place for you?" she seethes.

"I hate this place," I state.

"Then why are you here?" she challenges.

I glance behind me. There's a crowd outside the window several rooms away, but no one seems to be looking at us.

Fuck this.

I spin her and move her toward the staircase.

"Luca! What are you doing!" she cries out.

"Be quiet," I order and open the door.

“What are you—”

I push her against the wall and put my hand over her mouth. Her eyes widen, and fear fills them, making me want to die on the spot. But this isn't the time to make nice. I keep my voice low, unsure if anyone else is in the stairwell, asserting, “We're leaving. You can ask me whatever you want when we get in the car. Until then, don't speak. Do you understand me?”

“I'm not leaving with you,” she argues.

“The hell you're not. Now, either do as I tell you, or I'll carry you out of here kicking and screaming,” I warn.

She glares at me.

I add, “Don't test me, stellina.”

She blinks hard. Her eyes glisten, but she lifts her chin in the air.

I trace my thumb over her lips. She inhales sharply, keeping her glare pinned on me. Resisting the urge to kiss her, I soften my tone, repeating, “It's not safe for you to be here. Now, let's go.”

Before she can respond, I guide her down the steps and into the parking garage. I stay close to the edge until we get to my silver Mazzanti Evantra Millecavalli. I open the passenger door.

She hesitates.

“Get in, Chanel,” I demand.

She closes her eyes a moment then caves.

I shut the door, get into the driver's side, and turn on the engine. We say nothing as I maneuver the car out of the garage and through the city streets. Instead of speeding through town like I normally do, I follow the speed limit and stop at all the traffic lights.

Maybe it's to extend our time together. Perhaps it's to ensure she stays safe and isn't in harm's way. It may be a combination of the two, but a fierce debate about what I'm doing fills my head.

I promised her I'd stay away. She made me vow that if I ever ran into her, I'd leave her alone and walk the other way. Yet, that was an oath taken on a night that's haunted me for ten years.

I brake at a stoplight and finally glance over.

She grips her hands tight in her lap. Her green minidress only covers a few inches of her thigh. She catches me ogling her legs, shooting me a look of death.

"Where do you live?" I ask her.

She snaps, "None of your business."

"Is that why you disappeared into thin air? To avoid me?" I interrogate.

She holds her breath, staring at me.

Not thinking about the consequences, I blurt out, "Did you think I'd forget about you? That I would be able to not come back to check on you and make sure you were okay?"

She leans her head back against the headrest and closes her eyes.

I pick up her hand and kiss the back of it. "Stellina."

She opens her eyes and gives me a sad expression, stating, "It's green."

I tear my gaze off her but keep her hand in mine and veer onto the expressway. I drive several miles and take the exit ramp.

"Luca, where are we going?" she inquires.

"My place," I state without hesitation.

She tugs her hand out of mine. "I'm not going to your place."

I lock eyes with her, challenging, "So you want to go to your place?"

"No!"

"Then we're going to mine."

"Luca—"

"We need to talk, Chanel," I sternly insist.

“About what?”

“Everything.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” she asserts.

I grunt. “Yes, there is, and you know it.”

She turns toward the window and shakes her head in small movements.

A few more miles.

We say nothing else for the remainder of the ride. I pull into my parking garage and into the car lift. I hit the remote, and it rises to my private garage. I turn off the engine. My stomach dances with nerves.

She mutters, “You moved.”

I don’t respond, get out of the car, and open her door.

She defiantly stares at me.

I reach for her, warning, “You can walk, or I’ll carry you.”

Red flushes her cheeks. She ignores my hand and exits the vehicle, brushing past me toward the door.

I take a deep breath, follow her, and press my hand on the security pad. The lock pops, and I open the door, motioning for her to go inside.

She hesitates then enters the penthouse.

I step behind her, and the lock automatically bolts.

She spins. “Am I your captive?”

That’s an idea.

Don’t ever let her leave.

I answer, “I don’t take women’s freedom away from them.”

She scoffs. “Sure you don’t.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, stepping closer.

She backs up until she hits the console table against the back of the couch. Her arms flail, and she tries to grab the wood.

I grip her waist and steady her. “Care to tell me what you meant?”

Defiance lights up her features, but she also has a hint of red in her eyes. “Forget I said it.”

My gut sends me mixed signals about whether to push her about it or not. I finally decide to table it for now, asking, “Do you want some water?”

She nervously laughs. “You aren’t going to offer me a drink?”

I peer closer, replying, “Do you need another one?”

“Excuse me?”

“You probably drank an entire bottle of champagne,” I point out.

She gapes at me then pushes my chest. She hurls, “Were you watching me all night?”

“Yes,” I answer, holding her tighter to my body.

She inhales sharply. The flames in her eyes ignite brighter. She glances at my lips then swallows hard, fuming, “Are you the alcohol police?”

Her comment strikes me as funny. I chuckle, but it seems to piss her off more.

She tilts her head and pushes my pecs again. “You don’t get to judge me, Luca. Now let me go.”

I don’t release her, replying, “I’m not judging you.”

She scoffs. “Sure sounds like it.”

I slide my fingers through her hair, palming her cheek. “I’ve never done that. I have nothing but respect for you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Don’t I?”

“No,” she claims, but her voice wavers.

“Maybe we should change that,” I suggest, tracing her jawbone.

Her breath hitches. She glances at my lips again, murmuring, “What do you want from me, Luca?”

“You,” I answer, even though nothing has changed. I’ve still not accomplished what I’m determined to do. My life still isn’t safe enough to have her in it. Yet I can’t control this pull I still feel to her after all these years. And what’re the chances we’d see each other tonight? All these years of thinking about her, and it’s like she magically appeared. If that isn’t fate, then what is?

“You made it clear you aren’t a good person,” she points out.

It’s a knife to my heart. I wish I could deny it. I’d do anything to be able to claim that I’m the man she deserves. But my selfishness can no longer sit in the backseat. Time hasn’t made whatever this is between us fade. She might be pissed, but I know the chemistry is still between us. And she knows it, too.

Before I know it, I’m responding, “Do you think any of those men in that club are good?”

She looks away.

I step back and guide her around the couch. “Have a seat.”

She glances at it and freezes. Her cheeks turn red. She jerks her head up and questions, “You have the same couch as me?”

I point around the room. “And everything else.”

She pins her eyebrows together. “Why?”

I shake my head, take a deep breath, then admit, “Are we putting all our cards on the table?”

She cocks a brow.

I point to the seat, softening my tone. “Please. Sit.”

She cautiously perches on the edge of a cushion.

“You can make yourself comfortable,” I tease.

She doesn’t move.

“I’ll be back in a second,” I say, then go into the kitchen and open two waters. I return to the living room, sit beside her, and hold a bottle to her lips.

She takes it from me, then takes a long sip.

I take a sip, too, then set our bottles on the table. I clear my throat and admit, “I have the same furniture as you because you’re all I think about.”

She looks at the ceiling, takes a deep breath, then rises, strolling to the window. Moments pass as she stares out into the blinking city skyline.

For some odd reason, I hear the ticking of her bedroom clock in my head. I go over to her and step behind her, circling my arm around her.

“This isn’t talking,” she utters.

“Then talk. I’m listening,” I state. My erection presses against her back.

“Luca—”

“There are ten years of things we can say to each other, but do you know what I think is the most important?” I ask and spin her into me.

She licks her lips and shakes her head. Her voice is softer, and she doesn’t appear angry anymore, just sad. All her new expression does is deepen my determination to not fuck this up this time. “No. Tell me.”

I drag my knuckles over her cheek then lips. I confess, “Years apart didn’t suffocate the fire between us. It smoldered, never fully extinguishing. Now, there’s fresh oxygen feeding it.”

She slowly shakes her head, but the same lust-filled, intoxicating expression I used to see in her appears.

“Don’t try to deny it, stellina,” I say.

“We’re not the same people,” she claims.

I lean closer and say, “No. We aren’t. You’re more beautiful than before. And I’m not looking for who we were. The past doesn’t interest me, only the future.”

She blinks hard but tears well in her eyes. She chokes out, “What future is that, Luca? Hmm?”

A decade of lost time swirls around us. And the hatred I feel toward myself intensifies. As much as I stated that the past doesn't interest me, I can't escape it.

What has my life been without her?

What could we have shared together?

How do I make up for choosing vengeance over a life with her when my situation isn't any different than before?

If anything, the need to kill Jacopo and take down the Abruzzos is stronger than ever. The depth of their destruction is worse than I ever could have imagined. I've seen their horror. At times, I've had to be part of it. And until they're destroyed, I'll never escape them to be able to protect Chanel from the barbarity.

I've spent my life deceiving the devil, and if the day ever comes and he finds out, there's no chance he'd not come after my stellina.

Her lips tremble, waiting for me to reply to a question she deserves an answer to. It tears me apart. There's no way I'll utter a promise I can't keep. What hurts worse is the way she's looking at me. It's as if she knows I can't deliver a transparent truth.

But she's here. After all these years, she's in front of me. And I can't let her go. Not now.

I may not know how to give her a future, but I can't stop taking what I want—what I've always needed.

My lips brush against hers as I reply, "We have the present, my darling stellina."

A lone tear slips down her cheek. The fight within her flares across her expression. She wants me, but she's trying to walk away.

Before she can, I press closer until she's against the window and my lips are on hers. She fists my shirt as if to stop me. Yet her tongue slips against mine, sparking a light I thought died when I lost her.

There are no more words to be spoken. No rationale we need to find. It's an unstoppable necessity for our existence that has to move forward. And damn the consequences.

Her fists relax. The tips of her fingers glide up my chest then dive through my hair. A tiny whimper fills the air, and it's better than I remember.

I drop my hands to her thighs, bunching the green material until her dress is at her waist. My palms grasp her ass. It's fuller, rounder than in the past, serving as another reminder about how much has changed.

But there are no strangers in the room. We're two people who mold together, seamlessly knowing exactly what the other needs.

It's tempting to fuck her right here, against the window.

I doubt she'd mind.

There's no way it would be anything but mind-blowing.

I pick her up, and she wraps her legs around me, reaching for my zipper.

Then it hits me. I take her hand off my pants.

I'm not looking for great.

What I want goes beyond a quickie against the glass.

Because what I'm looking for isn't a one-nighter. I've had too many of those, trying to find a hint of what I've had with her.

What I need is eternal redemption.

And I'm going to spend all night earning it.



Chanel

“WE’RE NOT DOING THIS,” LUCA STATES, PUSHING MY HAND away from his groin.

Rejection hits me like bricks hitting glass.

What am I doing?

He no longer wants me? He practically kidnapped me and brought me to his place.

This is so Luca. Get me in a vulnerable position then bail on me.

Anger and embarrassment tornado through me. I blink hard, turning away from him. “Put me down, Luca.”

To torture me further, his lips hit my neck. I curse the tingles rushing to my core. He murmurs, “I’ll put you down in my bed.” He starts walking away from the window.

Confusion adds to my overly emotional state. I try to pull away from him, breathing, “What?”

His arms tug me closer. He doesn’t answer, taunting me further with his lips pressed against mine.

And I’m a goner. There’s no fighting the power of him. He’s haunted me for too many years. I’ve craved his body so many nights, I lost count. And the memory of what it was like to be

his, even if it didn't last forever, stained all the relationships I've tried to have with other men.

I should have run when Pina told me about the club. The possibility Luca could be there wouldn't allow me though. I tested fate. Now I'm in the devil's lair, and there's no way out.

His tongue flicks against mine, and I don't even notice him unzipping my dress or unlatching my strapless bra. He lays me on the bed and then tugs at it and my panties, exposing me. The cool air gives my hot skin a moment of relief. Luca scans my body, as if noting every detail of what's the same or changed.

When his eyes drift to the two faded stretch marks on my lower left stomach, panic hits me.

He can't know about her.

"You're sexier than when you were eighteen," he declares, refocusing on my legs and licking his lips.

I swallow hard, knowing I'll regret this tomorrow, if not tonight.

I already am.

This one time won't hurt.

That's a lie.

God, I missed the way he makes me feel.

No matter what, I'm unable to get up and stop the destruction I know is bound to erupt in my heart.

He dips his hands, gliding them up my calves, then inner thighs. Lightning bolts of zings pummel me. I squirm, and he pins me with his dark, salacious stare. "Tell me there's no other man in your life, stellina."

I don't answer, not wanting to give him anything.

He picks up my legs, tugs me to the end of the bed, and holds them to his chest. I gasp. Somehow, he discarded his pants and I didn't even realize it. His cock grazes my entrance, and I quickly thrust toward him.

He stops me from having him, dragging his fingers above my pussy, demanding, “Answer my question.”

“It’s not your business,” I retort.

He pushes an inch inside me. I inhale sharply and try to get more, but he retreats. Hurt flickers in his expression. He adds, “You wear no ring. But I’m not naive. A woman like you would have too many men after you. And I find it hard to believe you aren’t taken.”

“Yet you still ask,” I comment, trying to move my body closer to his.

He repositions his shaft so it’s on top of my clit. Then he creates little movements of delicious friction, torturing me. I close my eyes. A whimper escapes me. He leans over me, pressing his face between my legs. His body cages around mine and my toes touch the headboard.

Hot breath lingers above my mouth. He continues stroking me with his erection. I open my eyes, and his hardened expression drills into me. He warns, “We can play this all night, my dear stellina. You answer my question, or this is all you’ll get. And I promise you, I’ll drop you off at your house, aching for me tomorrow morning.”

You aren’t coming near my house.

I could tell him I’m single, but something about Luca’s threat makes me want to defy him. So I stay silent, breath hitching, and glare at him.

He increases the friction between us.

Jesus, help me.

Heat erupts in my blood. Sweat pops out on my skin. He turns it up another notch, and I shudder, mumbling, “Don’t stop!”

His lips twitch. He slows down, demanding, “Tell me.”

I shake my head.

He slides his tongue in my mouth, and I dig my fingertips into his skull. He retreats, growling, “Tell me his name. Then I’m going to make sure you can’t remember it.”

A million butterflies flutter in my stomach. I curse myself for allowing Luca to still have that effect on me after so many years. No other man has ever said what he'll do to me and created such a strong reaction. And it's just another thing I love and hate about him.

He adds in a slightly hurt voice, "There's no way you're not seeing someone."

"I'm not," I blurt out, no longer caring to play his game. I don't want him anymore. I need him to make good on his promise. I want to shut up the voice in my head and disappear into all that's Luca.

He freezes, cocking an eyebrow. "You aren't?"

"No."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't even want to know about your whores," I mutter.

His eyes turn to slits. He claims, "There's no one who's ever meant anything but you."

Tears fill my eyes. I blink hard, replying, "Stop talking, Luca. I don't want to hear your lies."

"I've never lied to you, and I'm not lying now. It's only ever been you," he declares.

My reasoning comes back. I push at his chest. "This is a bad idea."

But, like always, he doesn't let me escape him. He murmurs, "I'm only stopping if you tell me to." His mouth owns mine once more, and I shift my hips.

He returns to shimmying his cock over me, circling his tongue in my mouth with the same speed. It only takes a few seconds before I'm trembling underneath him and clutching him with all I have. I cry out, "Luca!"

"Mine, stellina," he growls in my ear, then slides inside me in one thrust. Incoherent sounds fill the air, and the heady aroma of everything that represents us flares through my nose.

Having Luca's body in mine is another reminder of how all my attempts to forget him were mistakes. It wasn't fair to expect anyone else to fill me, or touch me, or kiss me how he does. I've had impossible expectations trying to chase down the feeling I faintly get in my dreams.

Luca isn't an average human. He's an intuitive man who doesn't have to think twice about how to please me. It's not fair, which is also why I can't resist him.

"I want all of you around me," he states, then pulls back. He moves my legs down, and I circle them around his waist. I tighten my arms, and he groans. "Fucking perfect."

Once again, he's right. Our bodies thrust flawlessly together. Within minutes, I'm crying out, getting hammered by adrenaline.

He thrusts through it then slides out of me and down my body. His mouth tornadoes through my pussy. Fast. Furious. Mercilessly manipulating me into another onslaught of ecstasy.

"Oh... oh... oh God!" I moan, gripping his hair.

It goes on and on until he flips me on my stomach. His warm frame covers my sweat-coated back. Goose bumps break out all over me. He takes his knee and shimmies my legs wider. Three of his fingers glide into my pussy, thrusting, and curling.

I blink, unsure how much more pleasure I can take.

Then his mouth hits my ear, and he asserts, "I want all of you, stellina."

I turn my head, unsure how to respond, barely seeing him from the dizziness.

He draws his fingers out of my pussy and slips one into my ass.

I arch my back into him, gasping.

He holds my chin, kissing my cheek, slowly inching his finger deeper, then retreating before starting all over.

Whimpers escape me. It's all new and taboo, but there's no drama around it. All I do is submit deeper under Luca's command, escaping into the sensations.

Satisfaction fills his expression as he studies me, then he inserts a second finger. He penetrates me the same way then slides them farther apart, stretching me. He repeats, "All of you, Chanel."

I'm unsure if it's meant to be a warning, or he's just confessing his thoughts, but he inserts a third finger.

The pressure builds, surprising me with how it doesn't hurt. He continues to kiss my face and neck while prepping me.

"Take a deep breath, stellina," he orders, removing his fingers.

I obey, feeling an unexpected loss. But it's quickly replaced.

He tugs my ass in the air then inches his cock past my hard ridge.

"Oh!" I cry out, flinching, not from any pain but the initial shock of the unknown.

"Shh," he murmurs in my ear, stilling.

I take several short breaths.

He kisses under my ear, slowly moving inside me, asking, "Okay?"

I turn my head, locking eyes with him, nodding.

He pecks me on the lips then slides his hand up my arm, stretching it toward the headboard.

And I thought I had felt it all. I assumed there was nothing left he could do to me to pleasure me.

I was wrong.

He owns my body, expertly taking me until I'm at a new high that's different from all the others. Tremors overpower me. Luca buries his face into the corner of my neck, growling, "Mine."

A new rush of heat and euphoria crashes into the tidal wave of his orgasm. Our bodies convulse against the other as

incoherent words swirl around us.

In the aftermath, our harsh breaths and beating hearts compete. He doesn't move off me, and I don't want him to.

Luca finally flips over and tugs me into his arms with him. We say nothing, and he strokes his hand over the curve of my waist.

It takes several minutes for my pulse to return to normal and my worries to return.

He confesses, "I thought I saw you in the backseat of a car once."

I freeze then ask, "When?"

He nonchalantly replies, "Long time ago. Probably not even a year after I last saw you. But the window was tinted, and the light turned. Before I knew it, you were gone again."

The hairs on my arms rise. I inquire, "Where was it?"

"Outside of a restaurant," he answers.

I close my eyes, fighting tears. The regret of what I've just done hits me.

This is reckless. Letting Luca into any part of my life is irresponsible.

I need to get out of here.

He kisses me on the head. "Let's go shower."

I don't move.

He sighs. "Stellina, what's wrong?"

I pull it together then face him. "I need a few minutes by myself. Can you stay here while I clean up?"

Hurt appears on his face, but he tries to hide it. "Sure."

I go to the bathroom and shut the door. I lock it then stare at my flushed reflection in the mirror.

This is so bad.

Shower and get out of here.

I quickly wash up then wrap a towel around my body. When I return to the bedroom, Luca's changed the sheets.

I chirp, "Your turn."

He steps in front of me, peering closely. "Everything okay?"

I force myself to smile and nod, lying, "Yes. Go shower."

He hesitates.

"Go," I order, pointing to the bathroom.

A soft smile lights him up. He dips down and kisses me, tugging me into him.

I kiss him back with everything I have. This is our last kiss. But unlike the last time I thought I was kissing him goodbye forever, I don't tell him.

I retreat and repeat, "Go."

He kisses my forehead, releases me, then steps into the bathroom.

When I hear the shower start, I peek inside the room. Water runs down over Luca's beautiful body, cascading over his muscles. Then I see the birthmark on his shoulder, forcing me to tear my eyes off him.

It's now or never.

I toss on my dress and shoes then sneak out of his penthouse. The moment I step outside, a taxi pulls up to the curb. Relief hits me, and I jump in it. When I'm several streets away, my insides start to calm.

Guilt, regret, fear, and the pain of already missing Luca all hit me. I'm an exhausted mess when the taxi driver pulls up at my building.

I pay him, get out, enter my building, then freeze.

Massimo sits in a chair, a disapproving expression on his face. He crosses his arms.

"What are you doing here?" I question.

"You want to have this conversation here or in private?" he asks.

My gut sinks... The club.

He's pissed.

Damn Pina!

"Private," I answer, then continue toward the elevator.

He follows, and we say nothing until we're in my condo.

I state, "I'd offer you a glass of something, but I'm tired, so let's get this lecture over with."

He scowls. "The club isn't a place for you."

His words ignite a fight within me. I tell myself it has nothing to do with being able to see Luca again. Yet, I'm not sure why I decide to go to bat with Massimo. It's the first time I've ever done it. Perhaps it's because I can't have the one person I want, even when he's within reach. So I retort, "Because I'm a woman and you're a man? Or because it's okay for everyone, including Pina, to go but me? Oh wait, maybe it's because I'm supposed to be a naive, boring, single mother who needs everything vanilla in her life?"

His face drops. "I never said that."

"You didn't need to," I fume.

"Chanel, it's not a safe place," he states.

"Save it! My father works for you. I work for you. I'm not innocent, and neither are you," I point out.

He scrubs his face, adding, "Look, I know there are things that happen on the plane—"

"Things! Don't even try—"

"It's not the same thing as the club!" he shouts.

I glare at him, take a few deep breaths, then assert, "I've never judged you, Massimo. Not once."

"I'm not judging you," he claims.

"No? Then why are you here?" I challenge.

"There are dangerous men in the club," he reiterates.

"Yeah. I know. And Pina told me the rules."

Confusion fills his expression. “Then why are you fighting me about this? Why would you want to be in the presence of those types of men?”

Men like Luca?

I keep my thoughts to myself and reply, “What I do in my personal time is none of your business.”

“It is when it involves your safety!” he claims.

“Then why is Pina allowed to go? Hmm?” I interrogate.

“Dante shouldn’t let her,” he mutters.

“But he does,” I point out.

“Yeah, well, that’s between them. And I’m not Dante,” he declares.

I lift my chin. “I appreciate your warning. I’ve noted your concerns. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?”

Shock appears in his expression. He clenches his jaw, scowling.

“I’m exhausted. If there’s nothing else—”

“Where were you tonight?” he demands.

My anger rises higher. “None of your business.”

He steps closer. “Tell me you didn’t leave with someone from the club.”

I erupt, “How is this your business, Massimo?”

He sniffs hard, shakes his head, then paces the room.

I stay silent, knowing I’m treading water with him right now.

He spins, asking, “Have I not been good to you?”

I scoff. “So now you’re going to throw everything you’ve ever done for me in my face?”

He holds his hands in the air. “No! That isn’t what I was getting at.”

I put my hand on my hip, fuming. “Then what were you getting at?”

He points at me. “You aren’t listening.”

“I’m listening just fine, Massimo. You want me to say I’m not going to the club again. Sorry, I’m not agreeing to that,” I admit.

“There are other clubs—”

“Just stop! I don’t have tons of friends. I’m a single mom with not a lot of extra time on my hands. Pina is my closest friend. I’m not going to some random club. I’m definitely not going alone. Is that what you want?” I challenge, still unsure why I’m fighting him on this. Would I even care to go back if I hadn’t seen Luca?

He softens his tone, asserting, “I know it has to be tough being a single mom.”

“No, you don’t. You have zero clue, and don’t you dare even try to pretend you understand what it’s like for me!” I say, then turn and put my hand over my face. It’s not like me to complain about being a single mom. I chose not to tell Luca about Zara. My statement makes me feel guilty while all the burdens of my decision weigh down on me. And the fear my daughter will hate me someday for not telling her who her father is hits me harder than normal.

Silence fills the room, and I can’t stop my tears. Massimo finally steps in front of me and sighs. “Chanel.”

I wipe my cheeks and glance up.

He hesitates then says, “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I blow out an emotional breath, answering, “I know. And I won’t.”

He shuts his eyes then glances at the ceiling.

I can’t lose access to Luca.

What am I thinking?

“Massimo,” I voice.

He meets my gaze.

I admit, “I need this. Drop it and agree to disagree with me on this one.”

He shakes his head but finally replies, “Fine. But if anything ever happens—”

“It won’t. I’ll follow the rules,” I vow.

He grinds his molars then nods. “Fine. Don’t make me regret this, Chanel.”



Luca

Six Months Later

IT'S BEEN SIX MONTHS SINCE CHANEL SNUCK OUT OF MY penthouse while I was in the shower. I've cursed myself too many times for allowing her out of my sight.

I could have known where she lived.

I could have found out who she worked for and how she got into the club.

Coulda. Shoulda. Woulda.

It all means nothing because I'm still as clueless about her whereabouts as I have been for the last ten years. There are only two additional things I learned from our night together.

My countless hours of obsessing over her weren't in vain. The chemistry between us wasn't something I imagined. If anything, it only grew more explosive as we've aged.

And she's friends with Pina. I saw them hanging out all night. They're close, so it leads me to believe she has some affiliation with the Marinos—my real family.

But what is it?

I've flown on all the private jets the Marinos have. She's not Angelo's flight attendant, nor that of any of his sons. I've been on all of them, and not once have I ever seen her.

So how did she get associated with the Marinos?

She could just be Pina's friend, but she seemed to know many people in the VIP rooms. There were a few O'Connors she spoke with, but she was comfortable with the Marinos, as if she knew them well. So my gut tells me she's somehow associated.

She's French, so she's not family.

There's no way she does dirty work for Angelo, so what is her affiliation?

The questions never stop, nor do they get answered. I assume if I asked Angelo about her, he'd tell me who she is, but I'd also have to answer a lot of questions. And I'm not willing to discuss our history with anyone.

Whenever Jacopo orders me to the club, I no longer hate it. Yet it's never the right night. She's never there when I am. Even Pina's barely been there. Every time I see her, my hopes rise. Then they fall flat after I realize my stellina is nowhere to be found.

Oddly enough, I'd feel better asking Pina about Chanel versus Angelo or his sons. But I can't. As far as the world knows, I'm an Abruzzo. Talking to Pina is strictly off-limits. Plus, she'd be horrified if she thought I touched her friend. And if she let anyone else know, it could get around. The last thing I want is any Abruzzo knowing about Chanel and me.

When Jacopo gave me an assignment tonight, I eagerly got ready and came to the club. It's earlier than I normally arrive, but it'll give me the perfect opportunity to see anyone who walks into the place.

I position myself in a sitting area on the top level, nursing the same glass of sambuca. The man Jacopo needs me to meet with arrives. I take care of the information I need to pass on to him then scan the club.

It's still early enough that the dance floor barely has people on it. I make a quick sweep of each floor then sit back in the same chair I was in earlier, barely paying attention to any

conversations and ignoring several women vying for my attention.

Several more hours pass. The club gets busier, and the desperate panic I can't escape rushes back.

Why doesn't she return?

It's because of me. She's avoiding me.

The pit in my stomach grows.

How could I have let her slip away again after all these years?

I glance at my watch. It's close to midnight, and I'm ready to lose it. I take another joint out and light it up. Four hits in, and I feel nothing.

Fuck. Even my weed won't help me relax anymore.

I need to get away from this.

I hand my joint to one of the women and rise. I walk toward the staircase and freeze.

My heart almost leaps out of my chest. Chanel and Pina walk in. My stellina's wearing a red minidress and gold stilettos. Her hair is longer than the last time I saw her, more like when we first met. It hangs in long curls, but one side is pinned back. Her pouty lips match her dress, and all I want to do is get them on mine.

She walks with Pina through the club, but unlike last time, she carries herself confidently. My chest tightens, and I realize she's been here enough that she's comfortable.

I'll kill whoever's touched her.

I grip the railing, stopping myself from rushing up to her. The thought of her spending one second in this club without me watching out for her makes me angry.

And nauseous.

They weave their way through the crowd, get in the elevator, and I move to the end of the hallway. I step into the shadows and wait.

Come on. Come to this floor.

The elevator opens, and Pina steps out. I wait for Chanel, but the doors close.

The hairs on my neck rise. *Where is she?*

I take the stairs, two at a time, and scour the floor below. She's nowhere in sight, so I go to the next level. There are only four suites, and they're a mix of Abruzzos and O'Learys.

I know most of them, and several try to get me into conversations. I push through the crowd, trying not to make it obvious I'm looking for someone. That could lead to questions.

I exit the last suite and continue down the hallway toward the private rooms. My pulse beats harder as I glance through the glass of each one.

Please don't let her be in one of these.

I pass the first six, ignoring the men and women at the windows and cringing inside at some of the scenes taking place. I'm not a judgmental person, but sex should be enjoyable. Most of the stuff that goes on in those rooms looks painful.

Where is she?

I go through the next door. It's the area where all the windows are mirrored. The people inside know they're being watched but can't see who is watching them. I step through and freeze.

My stellina's at the end of the corridor. No one else is around. Her hands grip the window ledge, and she stares intently through the glass. I lock the door and watch her.

What is it she's so mesmerized by?

Is she into voyeurism?

My strides get longer. Each beat of my heart sounds louder. I step behind her, sliding my arm around her waist, and her tiny gasp fills my ears.

I lean into her and murmur, "What are you watching?" I push her hair over her other shoulder and kiss her neck.

She swallows hard then gazes up. Her greens glow hotter. She blinks hard then states, “You shouldn’t be near me.”

“Why is that?”

Her bottom lip trembles. She answers, “I think you know the club rules about families mixing.”

My chest tightens. Of all the things that have gone through my mind, this never occurred to me.

She thinks I’m an Abruzzo.

Everyone thinks I am.

But I’m not.

She can’t know that.

Life has never been so unfair. I debate how to handle this but blurt out, “How long have you known who I am?”

She closes her eyes as if in pain.

“Stellina—”

“Since the morning after we were first together,” she confesses.

The hairs on my neck rise. So much now makes sense. I ask, “This is why you hated me so much?”

She glances back at the window. Her entire body trembles. She inquires, “So you know I’m with the Marinos?”

I press closer, holding her tighter.

She objects, saying, “We’re going to get caught.”

“I locked the door,” I admit.

She takes a deep breath.

I ask, “How are you associated with the Marinos?”

She locks eyes with me. “Why? Are you going to do something bad to them?”

Shock fills me. “Do you think I’m that kind of person?”

“You’re an Abruzzo,” she chokes out, and a tear slips down her cheek.

“I’m not—” I shut my mouth and swallow the lump in my throat. What would I say? I’m really a Marino?

“You’re not what, Luca?” she pushes.

I offer, “I’m not like them.”

She scoffs. “Sure you aren’t.”

It hurts that she thinks of me in that light, yet I can’t say I blame her. She refocuses on the room, and I follow her gaze.

A couple I’ve never seen before is on a bed. Candles are lit. Soft, seductive music plays, which I take note of for the first time since seeing Chanel. Unlike the other rooms, they aren’t using any tools or toys. It’s just them, and by the looks of it, they aren’t just having sex—they’re making love.

“Do you like watching?” I question, not taking my hands off her or backing away.

“I like watching *them*.”

“Why them?”

She stares at the couple, answering, “It’s easier to watch others have what you never will than lie to yourself that it’s attainable.”

It’s another knife in my heart. Is Chanel right? Our situation is full of hurdles we have to get over, but something deep within me believes we’ll be together. Am I only fantasizing about something that will never be?

The woman behind the glass moans, arching her back into the man. Chanel shifts, grasping the ledge so tight her knuckles turn white. Her breath quickens, and she licks her lips, leaning closer to the window.

We watch the couple in silence for a few moments. They seem to know each other well. It doesn’t look like it’s only sex, which doesn’t happen at this club. There’s intimacy, a connection I’ve never witnessed in action.

It’s something I’ve only experienced with Chanel.

My erection grows, aching not only for her but for what that couple exhibits.

The woman's incoherent sounds get louder and more prominent. Chanel takes a shaky breath, and I slide my hand to her inner thigh.

She freezes, saying in a barely audible voice, "You should go, Luca."

I inch my hand higher, stroking the wet fabric of her panties, challenging, "Neither of us wants that, do we?"

She closes her eyes.

I kiss the curve of her neck. Her body relaxes against mine, and I slide my finger under the material.

She turns her head, and the fight I saw months ago streams across her expression.

I put my other hand in her hair, hold her firmly, and press my mouth against hers. My tongue parts her lips. She resists for a split second then caves, flicking her tongue against mine. Her body releases any remaining resistance to me.

I murmur, "Open your eyes, stellina."

She obeys, her greens full of fiery lust, burning with desire. And I wonder who needs this more. Me or her?

"Turn back and watch," I demand.

She arches her eyebrows, parting her lips.

I kiss them quickly then reposition her head toward the glass. I push her body closer, so she's sandwiched between it and me, and put my cheek on hers.

Our breaths create a light fog on the window. The man flips the woman over then tugs her to the end of the bed. He positions her on her knees, then splays his hand on her back.

Her arms stretch in front of her. He holds her head on the bed, tugs her hips into the air, then enters her.

Her cries ring through the air, competing with the music. I slide my finger inside Chanel, and she gasps. I inch in and out, add another finger, and circle my thumb on her clit.

She whimpers and attempts to stay quiet, but the more turned on the other woman gets, the louder my stellina becomes.

Everything about this moment makes me feel crazy. Insanity for the love of a woman I've craved for a decade. Desperate for a sliver of what the couple inside gets to have whenever they want. And completely deranged to find the high I can't find with anyone else.

I take my other hand, bunch her dress above her hips, and tug at her panties until they rip.

"Luca!" she chokes out.

I shove them in my pocket, pull my fingers out of her, and rub her clit. I release my pants. In one thrust, I enter her, groaning as her wet heat blankets my shaft.

Her hips meet my thrusts within seconds, with no clumsy or awkward adjustments needed. She presses her palm on the window, and her mouth forms an O.

"We're better together than they are," I claim, increasing the speed of my circling thumb.

"Oh... oh...!" she breathes, trembling between the glass and my body.

The man slaps the woman's ass, and she screams, "Yes! Oh! Again!"

He obeys, screaming something in Russian.

I tug Chanel's head back so she can still watch but also see me from the corner of her eye. I thrust faster, press her clit harder, and demand, "Come for me, my stellina."

Red burns her glistening cheeks. She cries out, and her body buckles, forcefully trembling. Her eyes roll, and she presses her other hand on the glass.

An obsession to keep her in this state overtakes me. I grit my teeth, willing myself not to come and feeling high from the sheer power my body has to give her this.

"Luca," she whimpers, blinking hard as if to refocus.

I turn her head and kiss her, taking every bit of her love I can get.

It only makes me want more.

Every swipe of her tongue drives my insanity for her higher, making it harder to hold myself back from releasing inside her.

But I do. Maybe it's because I know she'll be out of my arms once this is over. I'll return to feeling empty and regretting every second of my life.

I turn her back toward the window. The couple's covered in sweat. The man's pumping wildly into the woman, and her ass cheek is red from his hand. He's returned to holding her head on the mattress, and her eyes stare at us, her face scrunched into an ecstatic expression.

"What we have isn't going to go away," I insist, inhaling the strawberry scent of Chanel's hair and slowing my pace.

"Oh God!" she moans. The window fogs so much, there's no way she can see past it.

I take my hand off her clit and swipe the window, but it's covered in her breath again within seconds.

She whimpers, "Luca... oh... oh..."

I glide my hands up her arms and press against her, wanting to be as close as possible.

Russian fills the air as the man releases inside the woman. Her shrieks get louder and compete with his words.

It's the catalyst to my own demise. A new earthquake rips through my stellina's body, and she squeezes her pussy around my cock so hard I explode.

"Fuuuck," I growl, getting hit with dizziness from the adrenaline rushing through my veins.

"Oh... my... oh...!" Chanel moans.

Heaven and hell wrap together. Every moment of ecstasy is blissful until the aftermath sets in and torture reigns. When Chanel turns, setting her glistening eyes on mine, I want to die.

We're still no closer to escaping our reality. She thinks I'm an Abruzzo. I can't tell her I'm not. No matter how much I rack my brain trying to think of ways to overcome our obstacle, it's pointless.

There's only one solution, and it's always been the answer.

I have to kill Jacopo.

I need to return to my rightful place in the Marino family. One where the world no longer sees me as an Abruzzo.

And all the years I've spent failing at killing Jacopo flash before me. The solution has never seemed so far away.

"I need to go," Chanel states, breaking my heart.

"Come home with me," I beg.

She closes her eyes and then shakes her head. When she opens them, she says, "We need to stop this before someone finds out."

"Stellina—"

"You once wrote me a letter. You said you'd never put me in a dangerous position. Is that still true?" she questions.

"Of course it is!" I insist.

She glances back at the window. Her voice shakes as she says, "Then I need to go, Luca."

My chest tightens. The couple begins dressing, and I can't deny that it's only a matter of time before someone see us. Yet I also don't budge an inch.

I can't.

She pushes against the glass, pleading, "Let me go."

The man helps the woman zip her dress, which crushes my soul. I reluctantly step back.

Chanel spins and yanks her dress over her hips. She opens her mouth then shuts it.

I reach for her cheek, and she closes her eyes. I say, "Things aren't how you think they are."

Her eyes fly open. “Meaning?”

I stay quiet, unsure how to answer her.

Her green eyes glare at me through slits. She shakes her head then firmly states, “This is the last time I’m telling you. Don’t come near me. If you meant that you’ll never put me in danger, then this has to stop. Goodbye, Luca.” She steps out of my grasp and swiftly moves down the hall.

It’s the first time I’ve ever seen her leave me. Every step she takes is excruciatingly painful. I stop myself from running after her, knowing I can’t exit that door at the same time.

She gets to the end of the hall and pauses. She starts to turn and then stops. She takes a deep breath, lifts her chin, then unlocks the door.

My world collapses around me. She disappears through the door, taking my heart. Her “Goodbye, Luca” rings in my ears.

I tear my gaze away. The couple is about to leave the room. I slip into the stairwell. It’s the same one I led Chanel through months ago, and I curse myself for giving in to temptation and not getting her out of the club when I could have.

I race down the stairs and exit the building, and the cold air slaps me in the face. For a long time, I stand in the dimly lit parking garage.

She’s right. We can’t continue to do this as long as I’m associated with the Abruzzos.

I’m putting her in danger.

The truth makes me vow to not touch her again until I finish what I need to, but it’s never been clearer. Something has to give. It’s either going to be Jacopo or me. If I need to take more risks, I will. The only thing I know for sure is, I have to make my move and stop failing at killing him.

After it’s over, I wonder if she’ll forgive me for the years of pain and deception.



Chanel

Three Years Later

“YOU’RE NOT BEING FAIR, MOM,” ZARA WHINES.

I place my hand on my hip and scrub my other hand over my face. Groaning, I reply, “I’m sick of talking about this, Zara. My answer isn’t going to change.”

She explodes, “Everybody has credit cards. Why can’t I have one?”

“You’re only fourteen,” I answer for the hundredth time.

“What does that have to do with it? I want to go shopping. I don’t want to keep begging you for cash,” she states.

I huff. “So I’m supposed to let you rack up debt?”

“You make enough,” she claims.

Appalled, I gape at her then point out, “You don’t know what I make. And what I earn isn’t yours to blow through.”

“Mom, I need a credit card. It’s not fair,” she proclaims.

I scoff. “Not fair?”

She continues, “I can’t go shopping with the rest of my friends if I have to rely on the cash you give me.”

Fed up with this conversation, I refute, “You’re not going to just start spending ridiculous amounts of money on stupid

stuff, Zara. That's not the way the world works."

She crosses her arms, throwing daggers at me with her glare. "You're ridiculous, Mom."

I lose my temper and raise my voice. "I'm ridiculous?"

"Yeah, and I'm getting my tattoo," she shrieks.

More anger fills me. "Over my dead body."

She smirks. "You can't stop me."

"Want to make a bet?" I threaten, but my insides quiver. It's no secret that there are tons of places in the city that would willingly give her a tattoo without my permission.

She gives me a challenging stare, frightening me further. We lock eyes until she finally throws her hands in the air. "Ah, you're so annoying!"

I glance at the ceiling. I'm so tired of this fight. My sweet little girl changed once she hit thirteen. Now that she's fourteen, it's only gotten worse. She's more aggressive with her demands than ever. Lately, whenever we get into one of these arguments, I curse Luca. She has so many traits of his, including his demanding attitude.

She announces, "Even Aunt Pina said my starfish is cool."

I jerk my head back, insisting, "Aunt Pina did not tell you to go get a tattoo. She said your drawing looked cool. You failed to mention it was for a tattoo."

Zara scoffs. "What does that have to do with it? It's a cool design."

"You don't even go to the beach very often. Why would you put a starfish on you?" I inquire. My heart tells me that if she marks her body up at this age, she'll regret it.

She rolls her eyes. "You're so old, Mom."

I stay quiet, trying not to be hurt, but I am.

Maybe I am old?

No, I'm not old. It's not okay for my fourteen-year-old daughter to run around New York City with a credit card and

get a tattoo.

“I’m not asking for anything my friends don’t have,” Zara states, as if that’s going to change my mind.

“They’re a bunch of spoiled brats,” I blurt out.

She glares at me harder. “No, they aren’t!”

“Money doesn’t grow on trees,” I tell her.

She tilts her head, replying, “You have all designer stuff. And we live in a nice place. Why can’t I have a credit card? We have money!”

More shock fills me. This isn’t how I raised her to be. I retort, “I earned these nice things. You’re lucky to live the lifestyle you live.”

“Whatever, Mom,” she utters.

“Zara, please stop this. You’re not getting a credit card. And you’re not getting a tattoo, so stop bringing this up all the time. The answer is no,” I state.

She picks up her cereal bowl and tosses it in the sink. She steps closer to me. “Fine. I’ll change the subject. Tell me who my father is.”

My chest tightens. It’s the only other thing I hate talking about more than the tattoos and credit cards.

Zara glares at me harder. “Just like always, right, Mom? You’re going to clam up and not tell me anything, and I’m supposed to just accept it?”

I continue to stay silent. The guilt and ache I always feel about Luca never end. I still think he’d be a great father. If only he weren’t an Abruzzo.

Over the last few years, I’ve seen Luca at the club. He’s never touched me since that last night several years ago.

I still go into that corridor, watching others, secretly hoping for him to appear, even though I know it’s not smart for either of us.

Sometimes he does.

He always keeps his distance. He's never once locked the door like he had in the past.

A lot of times, there are people in the hallway watching. It creates a barrier of safety between us. But I always feel his stare. It's the same look he's always given me.

The flames haven't died down between us. His mere presence sends a surge of tingles through my skin. I always resist the urge to run to him and somehow figure out how to escape our realities.

It's a fantasy we both know isn't possible.

He's dangerous and can't protect me. If I crossed the lines in this club and associated with an Abruzzo and he with a Marino, there's no way bad things wouldn't happen.

Plus, I can't get any closer to Luca. I have to protect Zara.

Her urgency to figure out who her father is never stops. It grows bigger with time and scares me.

I can't say I blame her. I would want to know, too. But nothing will change my mind about Luca. And I have no doubt if he knew about her, he would insist on inserting his life into hers.

Zara shakes her head at me, sarcastically laughing. "You're such a hypocrite, Mom."

More hurt fills me. "I'm a hypocrite? How?"

She answers, "Tell me again your reasons for not telling me about my father."

"He's dangerous," I state for the millionth time.

"Is it going to kill me?" she asks.

"No."

"Will he physically hurt me?"

Say yes to shut her up.

I can't lie, so I reply, "No, he would never hurt you."

"Then what is it, Mom?" she fumes.

I do everything I can to maintain my cool. “Like I said, he’s a dangerous man. You don’t need to be in his world.”

She laughs, and disgust fills her expression. “And this is where you’re the hypocrite.”

I cross my arms. “How?”

“You work for a Marino. So does Papi,” she seethes.

I take a deep breath. “The Marinos are good people.”

“They’re a crime family. What do you think they do, Mom? I’m pretty sure they hurt and kill people. Maybe Papi does it for them!” she shrieks.

I resist the urge to run out of the room and escape. I reprimand, “Don’t you dare disrespect your grandfather. And the Marinos have been nothing but kind to us.”

“You still work for the mob.” She smirks.

I clench my fists at my sides, trying to compose myself. What do I say to that? I can’t deny it. So I ignore it and order, “Change the subject.”

Her green eyes blaze. She explodes, “No! The only thing you’ve ever told me is that my birthmark is the same one my father has in the same spot. What else? Tell me more about him.”

I answer how I always do. “There’s nothing else to tell you. That’s all you need to know. This conversation is over. Go get ready for the wedding.”

A flash of hatred radiates off her. It makes me want to crawl in a hole. My little girl, who used to look at me with nothing but love, is so angry with me.

And it’s my fault. I’m the one who chose this, whether it’s in her best interest or not.

She stomps out of the room and goes into her bedroom suite.

I finish cleaning the kitchen then jump in my shower. My mind races with all the ways I’ve failed my daughter and still feel like I am, but I don’t know what else to do.

The guilt continues eating me as I dry my hair, put on my makeup, and slip into my dress.

I'm strapping on my heels when Zara yells, "Mom, Grandpa's here. He says he needs to talk to you."

The hairs on my neck rise. Why is my father here? Both he and my mother are supposed to attend Bridget and Dante's wedding. I'll see them in an hour or so. So why is he here?

I finish clasping my strap and go out into the main room. I question, "Dad, what's going on?"

His silence makes the blood drain from my face. Goose bumps pop out on my skin. It scares me.

Still, he says nothing.

I fret, "Dad? Is Mom okay?"

He nods and holds his hand out. "Yes, your mother's fine."

A tiny amount of relief hits me, but something isn't right. I repeat, "Then what is it?"

He glances at Zara.

She asserts, "I'm not going anywhere." She plops down on the couch.

He pins his dark eyes on her, ordering, "Go to your room, Zara. I need to talk to your mother."

For some reason, she doesn't fight very much with him. She always backs down. Only a few seconds pass before she gets up and stomps off to her room, slamming the door.

I sigh. "I'm sorry. We've had a rough morning."

My father steps in front of me, and my goose bumps intensify. He announces, "There's been an accident."

"With who?"

More sympathy crosses his face. "Pina and Tristano."

I stare at him in shock, not understanding why they would be together. She works for Dante, not Tristano.

He continues, “It was on his motorcycle. The Abruzzos chased then sideswiped them. They left Tristano for dead and took off with Pina.”

My hand flies to my mouth. My stomach turns so fast, bile rises in my throat. I swallow it down and fret, “Where is she?”

“We don’t know yet.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” I accuse.

“Stay calm, Chanel,” he advises.

My lips tremble. I blink back tears.

“Tristano is in the emergency room. The Marinos are all there. The wedding has been postponed. I must go. As soon as I find out anything, I’ll let you know.” He spins to leave.

I reach for his bicep, pleading, “Dad. You have to find her.”

“We’re going to do everything we can.”

“Dad, she’s my best friend,” I sob.

He tugs me into him. “I know, mon chou. We’re going to find her,” he claims.

My gut screams he won’t.

“Take care of Zara,” he orders, then leaves. I go to the window, looking out at the New York skyline, worrying about Pina and what kind of shape she’s in. Is she dead or alive?

A long time passes. Zara finally comes out of her room, pulling me out of my trance. She quietly says, “Mom, we have to get going. We’re going to be late.”

I wipe my cheeks and spin. “We’re not going.”

She scrunches her face. “What are you talking about? Why not?”

I glance over her, taking in her pink dress and high heels. She’s no longer a little girl, and it scares me. What could happen to her?

I sniffle. “You look really nice.”

“Mom, please tell me why we’re not going.”

I point to the couch. “Sit down.”

She obeys.

I sit next to her and grab her hand. “Pina and Tristano were in an accident. He’s in the emergency room.”

Her eyes widen. “What about Aunt Pina?”

I struggle with what to say. I finally decide the truth is best. She’ll eventually find out anyway. I inform her, “She was kidnapped.”

She pales. “By who?”

My heart hurts so badly, I struggle to breathe. I reply, “The Abruzzos.”

Zara gapes then whispers, “What are they going to do to her?”

I fight more tears and tug her into me. I try to sound reassuring, but it sounds flat. I say, “Nothing, honey. She’ll be okay. Your grandpa is going to help find her.”

Zara sobs into my chest. Her tears stain my dress, and it’s a long time before I calm her down. My mind spins about what Pina could be going through the entire time.

My father isn’t going to find her.

I retreat from Zara and rise, holding out my hand. “Come on. Let’s go over to Grandma’s so she isn’t alone.”

Zara doesn’t argue. We’re soon in the car and outside my parents’ building. I don’t know why I came here. But something urged me to.

When my mother opens the door, everything becomes clear.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” my mother states.

Zara throws herself into my mother’s arms. She’s still Grandma’s girl. She and my mom still have their special bond, and while sometimes it makes me feel left out, right now, I’m grateful for it.

Before I know what I’m saying, I blurt out, “I need to go somewhere. Can you watch Zara?”

“Where are you going?” my mother questions.

“I have somewhere I need to be. Watch Zara,” I demand as I leave.

I hustle through the building and get back in my car.

I give my driver directions to Luca’s penthouse. When I get there, I run to the front desk and tell security that I need to speak with him.

The man picks up the phone, but after a few seconds, he shakes his head. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but he’s not here.”

I close my eyes then pull it together. I take a seat in the lobby and wait.

For hours, I curse myself for never getting his phone number. I wait so long that it turns dark. It passes midnight. It’s not until the early morning hours, when the sun is almost starting to rise, that he finally walks into the building.

Exhaustion is all over him. His hair is disheveled, and his eyes are bloodshot. He freezes when he sees me.

I rise.

“Stellina, what are you doing here?” he inquires, moving toward me.

“I need to talk to you.”

He puts his arm around my waist and leads me to the elevator. We don’t speak until we get into his penthouse. I blurt out, “What have they done with Pina?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t you lie to me, Luca! You’re an Abruzzo,” I hurl.

He stares at the ceiling.

“Luca, tell me where she is,” I demand.

He slides his hands on my cheeks.

I push him away. “Do not touch me! Tell me where she is!”

“I don’t know,” he repeats with pity in his eyes.

Emotion gets the best of me. I sob, “She’s my best friend.”

He steps closer, and I retreat. He takes another step, and I retreat farther until my back is against the wall. He pins his forearms on either side of my head so I can't escape.

He's too close. The years I've waited for him to be this close again were agony. And all my senses perk up just as before.

I can smell his weed, white musk, and patchouli scent. The scar on his cheek somehow looks deeper. The tiny wrinkles around his eyes have exponentially multiplied. It's all a reminder of how we're both older, yet nothing has changed. He still affects me the same way as when I was eighteen and naive.

His breath merges into mine, sending tingles throughout my skin. I reprimand myself for thinking about anything besides my best friend.

Tears fall fast. "Please, Luca. If you ever cared about me," I beg.

"I've always cared about you, stellina. I love you, for God's sake," he reveals.

His words steal my breath. Love seems extra cruel at this moment.

He swipes my tears, stating, "I don't know where she is. If I knew where she was, I would tell you."

"You liar," I accuse.

"Stellina—"

"Don't call me stellina," I shriek.

He clenches his jaw. Silence fills the air. Neither of us moves until he repeats, "I'm not lying. I don't know where she is."

I still don't believe him. I try again. "Please. If you ever cared about me—"

"I care about you more than anybody on Earth, and I'm telling you the truth. I don't know where she is, but I promise I'll find her," he vows.

I want to believe him, yet I don't know if I can. I wonder how someone that I feel so strongly about could be part of a family

that's so vicious.

He repeats, "I promise you, I will find her."

More tension swirls around us. He glances at my lips then steps back.

I say nothing. I start to leave.

He grabs my wrist. "Stellina."

I spin, ordering, "Don't!" I can't handle an onslaught of Luca and all that we are and all that we can never be when this is going on.

Hurt fills his face. He opens his mouth.

"Don't!" I repeat.

He shuts his mouth and then closes his eyes.

"Let me go, Luca," I say in a softer tone.

He gives me a final sad glance then obeys.

I step outside his penthouse and into the elevator. The moment the doors close, I break down.

I knew the Abruzzos were horrible people. I was right to keep my daughter from them. Yet nothing makes me feel good about this. It only hammers home the reasons Luca should have never been in my life.

If he can side with that family, his soul has no moral compass.

I don't know if he'll make good on his promise to find Pina. Maybe he's lying and already knows where she is. And I'm sure deep in his heart, he does love me. I know I've always loved him. Yet I'll never forgive him for having loyalty to a family who sought harm on my friend.

And I've never been so scared in my life.



Luca

A Few Months Later

EVERY DAY THAT PASSED WITHOUT ME FINDING PINA, I FELT more desperate. All I saw was Chanel's eyes, begging me to find her. And the hatred that swirled in them for who she thinks I am never stops haunting me.

When I heard what happened, I knew Biagio was behind it. But nothing I did led me to where he was hiding Pina. Months passed before he finally transported her to Jacopo's compound.

The itch in me to kill both of them has never been greater. They've crossed another line. The only person on this planet I feel any true connection to is disgusted by me. If I don't find Pina and return her alive to the Marinos, Chanel will never trust me. There won't be any point in sticking around New York. I still harbor hope I'll one day get a life with her. But there's zero chance if I don't come through.

And this has to end. The decades of living a double life need to stop. I'm at a breaking point. So I have to kill Jacopo, and now Biagio is also on my list.

Tristano's secret affair with Pina shocked the Marinos. I'm unsure if he or I am closer to the edge of insanity. But right now, he's a loose cannon. When I informed him she's been drugged by Biagio so he could keep her in an induced state of

amnesia, it only increased his rage. That was before I told him Biagio was forcing her to marry him.

The engagement party is tonight. We're on our way to raid the restaurant, but the heated discussion we had in Angelo's office worries me. I've taken all precautions to set things up so nothing goes wrong, but Tristano's so angry he can't see straight. And Tully's interference that he's having the police raid the dinner party doesn't help matters.

I don't typically approve of getting the cops involved. In this instance, it'll be a good decoy. However, it'll make it more difficult for me to take Jacopo and Biagio out.

When we're almost there, Tristano asks, "How did you get access to the kitchen anyway?"

I grunt. "I know people. You have to understand, Tristano. I've been in this game a long time."

He snorts. "Yeah, you are an old motherfucker."

I chuckle, happy to relieve some tension. I point out, "Not too much older than you, so careful who you call old. Anyway, I've got my guys in the kitchen. There are two cooks, one dishwasher, and two waiters. They'll back us up."

"What about the other staff?" he questions.

I lock eyes with him. "Hopefully, they'll get out of the way when it goes down."

He stays quiet.

I add, "The hostess is on our payroll, too. She'll let the police through with no issues. I already texted her."

"So your guys are carrying?" he inquires.

"Of course."

"Hostess, too?"

"She knows how to handle herself."

Silence fills the SUV.

I break it, adding, "It's best if we don't blow their cover."

"If we blow their cover, we blow their cover," he replies.

I groan, and my eye twitches. It's something that's been happening more and more lately. I assume it's from stress or exhaustion, but there's no way to stop it. I grumble, "Yeah, well, I have other shit I have to do with these guys where the Abruzzos are concerned. And normal business needs to go on after we rescue Pina."

He scowls.

I order, "We're staying in the kitchen, Tristano. They can't see you or me. I'm already skating thin on their trust level right now."

"What does that mean?"

"We'll discuss it another time. Let's focus on this situation," I answer, not wanting to get into the bad feelings I've had lately whenever I'm around Jacopo.

Tristano opens and closes his fist a few times then snarls, "There's no way that thug will come in the kitchen. We need to shoot any Abruzzo we can. They all should die anyway."

"Stop! You know that's not the answer. Use your head. Do you want Pina to get hurt?" I seethe.

He scrubs his hands over his face, admitting, "Of course I don't. I just want my girl back."

I cock my Glock and affirm, "Yeah, and that's what we're gonna do. But you follow my lead."

The SUV pulls into the back alley of the restaurant. He reaches for the door handle, but I grab his hand, ordering, "Wait."

He better not fuck this up.

He grinds his molars and taps his fingers on his thighs. We wait until my phone buzzes.

I glance at it then direct, "Now we can go in."

We get out and meet the dishwasher at the alley entrance. He says nothing and motions for us to go through.

As planned, there are two cooks, one dishwasher, and two waiters. The waiters nod at me and takes full trays of food

through another door.

Tristano rushes toward it and looks through the square glass. He clenches his fists at his sides and seethes. "I'm going in."

"Hold on!" I command, grabbing his arm. "You do that, she's dead."

He takes several breaths, continuing to watch Pina.

I glance through the glass, waiting. Then it finally happens. A few dozen cops storm the restaurant in riot gear with their guns pulled.

"Whoa!" Jacopo shouts, tossing his napkin on the table and rising. He demands, "What the hell's going on here?"

The captain steps forward, asserting, "We're here to arrest your son."

Biagio jumps up from his seat. "What are you talking about?"

The captain continues, "Biagio Abruzzo, you're under arrest for the murder of Guido Berlusconi."

Biagio's eyes widen. "Fuck off. I've done no such thing."

"Put your hands in the air and step away from the table," the captain demands.

"Get the fuck out of my engagement party," Biagio states, then yanks Pina up next to him. She's so fragile from being starved and drugged, she can hardly stand on her feet.

Three men step in front of them. The rest of the Abruzzo men rise with their guns pulled.

Jacopo's eye catches mine, and I freeze. Then he smirks.

He thinks I'm going to save his thug son.

My cover is going to be blown when Biagio dies.

Jacopo redirects his attention to the police, stepping in front of Biagio. "Listen, boys, I don't know who you think you are coming in here and throwing out accusations, but I can assure you this is not happening. Now, get your pig asses out of this building."

Two more men form a wall around Biagio and Pina. They begin to move back toward the kitchen.

“Don’t move!” the captain shouts.

The sound of guns cocking fills the air. Biagio and Pina continue to get pushed back until they’re shoved through the door.

The chefs step in front of Tristano and fire their guns, killing the men who formed the wall. They all drop to the ground, and blood pools around them. The restaurant fills with screams.

The Marino brothers rush into the kitchen from the alleyway.

Biagio’s eyes widen when he sees Tristano, but he also sees me. He still trusts me and allows me to pull Pina away from him. I shove her into the corner, trying to shield her.

He charges at Tristano, who slams his fist into his face.

Blood spurts everywhere. Biagio’s nose moves to the side of his cheek. He takes a few steps back then regains his balance.

Gunshots and shouts fill the air from the restaurant. The Marinos fire from behind the safety of the door.

The dishwasher and I lunge at Biagio. We restrain him, and I tug a bag over his head.

Pina’s shaking in the corner. Confusion and fear fill her expression. Tristano slides his arm around her waist, and she cowers away from him. He picks her up, and her arms and legs flail, but she’s too weak to fight effectively.

Gunfire continues on the other side of the door. Massimo, Gianni, and I push Biagio outside and into an SUV. I get into the last seat and slip a rope around his neck.

He freezes but snarls, “You motherfucker! I’m going to kill you!”

I punch the side of his covered head. Bones crack beneath my hand. I think it was his cheekbone.

He grunts an obscenity I can’t understand.

I tug on the rope then snarl into his ear, “Game over.”

“I’ll kill you, you motherfucking traitor,” his muffled voice states.

I cock my gun to his temple, taunting, “Try it, you piece of shit.”

Gianni puts his hand over mine and shakes his head.

I keep the Glock pointed at his skull, wanting to pull the trigger like never before. Yet I know he’s not mine to kill. What he’s done to Pina means his fate is left to Tristano.

The SUV weaves around a semi, and horns blare.

“My father will never let you live,” Biagio warns.

I take the butt of my gun and slam it into his head so hard, he passes out. His head cocks to the side then falls forward.

“You trying to piss Tristano off?” Massimo asks.

I don’t answer. I sit back and stare out the window.

Biagio is right about one thing. Decades of deception have come to an end. My cover is blown, and there’s no going back.

Jacopo will hunt me down with every resource he possesses. And now I’m fucked.

Getting to Jacopo is going to be nearly impossible. Until he’s dead, along with all his top guys, I won’t be able to walk the streets.

There’s no way I can be anywhere near Chanel.

My gut drops further, and pain shoots through my heart so deep, I gasp for breath.

This isn’t anywhere close to being over.



Chanel

Two Months Later

“WE JUST GOT THAT IN,” THE SALES LADY CHIRPS.

I reassess the black cocktail gown, admitting, “It’s really pretty.”

Her eyes light up. “Yeah, it’s a new designer from France.”

My lips twitch. “No wonder I like it.”

“Ah! I thought I detected an accent from you. Are you from France?”

I confess, “Long, long time ago.”

“Would you like me to start you a fitting room?” she asks.

I shake my head. “No, it won’t be necessary. My daughter and my friend took up the biggest one you have. I think I’ll just slip inside with them.”

She smiles bigger, stating, “I know who you’re talking about. Your daughter is very beautiful. How old is she?”

“Thank you. She’ll be fifteen in a few months,” I acknowledge with a twinge of sadness. Before I know it, Zara will be out of the house, and it all seems to have flown by way too fast.

“I would have said seventeen,” the woman adds.

My chest tightens. “Yep. She takes after me. I was the same way.”

“Well, she’s beautiful. I’ll come check on you in a few minutes to see if you need anything,” the sales lady voices.

“Great, thank you,” I reply.

She focuses on another woman.

I pull two more garments off racks on my way to the dressing rooms then glance at the shoes before going through the entrance. The happy feeling I’ve had since Pina’s return reignites.

Since she got off the drugs Biagio forced her to take, she regained her memory. Tristano proposed, and we’re shopping for our outfits for the rehearsal dinner.

I keep waiting to see Luca appear, but then I remind myself that he doesn’t know where I am.

And as much as I’ve craved him over the years, I’ve decided I’m never going to the club again. I can’t keep putting myself in dangerous positions in order to see him. He promised me he would find Pina. But he never did. Months passed, and he did nothing. I thank God daily that Tristano rescued her.

So I’ve not seen him since the night I went to his penthouse. Some days, it takes everything inside me not to return, just to point out he never loved me. If he did, he would have rescued her.

He wouldn’t do the Abruzzos’ dirty work.

I wish I could say I don’t have feelings for him anymore, but anytime they pop up, I no longer let myself dwell on them. What the Abruzzos did to Pina proved how vile they are, and that has to include Luca.

When Pina returned, she had lost so much weight that she was down to her bones. They starved her. It’s been a few months, and she’s finally starting to regain her figure.

I’ll never forgive Luca for putting her through that.

I'm about to turn the knob on the dressing room door when Zara groans in disgust.

I freeze, eavesdropping, unable to help myself.

Pina claims, "I've always loved your birthmark."

Hints of anger fuel Zara's voice as she admits, "I hate it."

My chest tightens. She's never said that to me before. I almost step inside so they don't catch me listening, but I stay planted.

Since Pina got rescued, Zara and I have been back to our old selves. She hasn't been an angry kid or asked for credit cards and tattoos. We've spent a lot of quality time together, like when she was little. I've loved every minute of it. And our household has been calm and peaceful, with no arguing.

Zara proclaims, "It's ugly."

"What are you talking about? It gives you character. Plus, who doesn't want a guardian angel looking out for them?" Pina adds.

Zara's voice flattens. "It's just a constant reminder."

My pulse races faster, and my heart hurts.

Pina questions, "A reminder of what?"

"My mom didn't tell you?" Zara inquires.

"Tell me what?" Pina answers.

"The only things my mom's ever told me about my dad is that he's dangerous and has the exact same birthmark as me. It's also on the same place," Zara informs her.

I squeeze my eyes shut and hold on to the corner of the stall.

She blurts out, "So I want to get a tattoo to cover it."

"But it's gorgeous and unique," Pina claims.

Zara's tone fills with hurt. She admits, "I'm tired of being reminded that I don't have a father. And every day that passes, my mom only gets more and more resolute not to tell me who he is."

Silence fills the air for a moment. Guilt consumes me.

Zara continues, “So I’m never going to know who he is. I’d rather have something covering it. Then I wouldn’t have to stare in the mirror every day knowing he’ll always be a stranger.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Pina says in a compassionate voice.

Zara chokes out, “If he’s such a dangerous man, then he has to be a bad person. What does that make me?”

I hold my breath. I never knew Zara felt this way. I hate that I’ve done this to her. I loathe she doesn’t get to know who her father is, especially when I grew up with such a loving one.

She deserves the same.

I still don’t believe Luca would hurt her. But then again, I can’t trust him. The Abruzzos almost killed Pina, and he did nothing to save her.

He’s a monster, and I must keep reminding myself of the truth.

Pina suggests, “Maybe you could look at it as your father’s not a bad person. Perhaps he’s just involved in some things he shouldn’t be. What if the birthmark somehow is him watching out for you?”

Zara’s voice turns desperate, begging, “Aunt Pina! Do you know who he is? If you do, please just tell me. Please!”

Pina’s loud sigh hits my ears. She answers, “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I don’t know. Your mom’s never told me anything about him. She’s never told anyone, so she must have her reasons.”

“I’m so tired of hearing she has her reasons,” Zara utters.

“I’m sure you are. But I’m assuming it’s not easy for her, either,” Pina states.

“Please don’t stick up for her about this,” Zara asserts.

Tense silence fills the air.

Pina finally states, “Well, I hope you don’t cover it up, because I love it. I think it’s part of you. It makes you who you are.”

“As soon as I can cover it, I am. I’ll have to wait until I’m eighteen, but then I’m going to do it,” she claims.

I swallow the lump in my throat.

Have I been unfair not to allow her to get a tattoo?

Why didn’t she ever tell me this?

Pina orders, “Let me zip you up.”

There’s a shuffling sound. I wait, wondering if they can hear my guilt pounding in my pulse or my sadness weeping in my heart.

Pina exclaims, “Oh, wow! Zara! That looks amazing on you.”

“I do love it,” she says.

“You have to get that dress,” Pina declares.

Zara groans. “My mom isn’t going to let me wear this. You know how she is.”

“Yeah, but it’s a special occasion. And it’s my party, so let me handle your mom,” Pina chirps.

I roll my eyes and knock on the door, calling out, “What’s Pina going to convince me to do?”

The door opens, and my heart skips a beat. Zara’s in a hot-pink minidress. It’s off the shoulder, shorter than I want her to wear, and it fits her like a glove.

My little girl no longer exists. She’s becoming a woman, which scares me more than I ever anticipated.

“She looks great, doesn’t she?” Pina claims.

I want to kill her. What is she thinking, telling her she can wear something like this? It’s short, and now I’m going to be the bad guy again.

I carefully answer, “You do look nice, Zara, but I think we need to find something a little longer.”

“See, I told you,” Zara states, turning toward Pina.

She places her hand on her hip. “Come on, Chanel. I’m sure you wore stuff like that at her age.”

I scoff. “My father would have locked me in my room.”

“It’s not the 1950s anymore, Mom.” Zara smirks.

“I was not born in the 50s, thank you very much!” I declare.

“Whatever,” Zara mutters and rolls her eyes. She spins. “Can you unzip me, Aunt Pina? I told you she wouldn’t let me wear it.”

Pina cocks her eyebrows at me.

My gut screams I need to let Zara have this one. I order, “Turn back around.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Just do it.” I motion with my finger to spin.

Zara obeys, and there’s so much hope in her eyes. I don’t have it in me to hurt her on this one. She’s already dealing with enough.

I study her in the dress.

Pina interjects, “Okay, let’s do the test. Zara, sit on the seat.”

“Why?”

“We need to do the pervert test,” Pina announces.

Zara scrunches her face. “Eww! What is that?”

“Sit,” Pina repeats.

Zara gives her a funny look, but she sits.

“Cross your legs,” Pina orders.

Zara does it.

Pina and I stare at her lower body.

“Okay, you two are freaking me out,” Zara blurts out.

Pina turns to me. “You can’t even see anything. It’s just all legs.”

I laugh uncomfortably. “Just all legs?” The thought of anybody looking at my daughter worries me.

To my surprise, Zara stays quiet. In the past, she'd argue with me. But it's another sign that some things have changed. I'm unsure how long they'll stay like this, but I'll take it as a win.

And I need to give her a win, too.

Zara tilts her head. "Mom, why am I doing this when you're not going to let me get this?"

I cave. "You can get it."

Zara's eyes widen in disbelief. "Really?"

"Yes, this one time. Don't get used to it or throw it in my face during future shopping trips," I warn.

"I won't!" Zara jumps up and throws her arms around me. "Thanks, Mom. I love it."

I squeeze her tight. "You look really nice. But seriously, Zara. I don't want you wearing a ton of dresses like this. This is a one-off, okay?"

"Okay, thanks!" Zara's phone buzzes. She pulls it out of her jeans pocket and glances at it. She bites her lip and looks at me.

"What?"

"Grace and her cousin Amy are here," Zara declares.

"And?" I ask.

"They're going to the movies. Can I go with them? They're a block away," she informs.

"And leave us cool people?" Pina teases in an offended voice.

Zara winces. "I'm sorry. Are you going to be mad at me?"

"No, of course not, darling." Pina hugs her.

"So can I go, Mom?" Zara questions again.

"You can, but I'll text my driver. He takes you there and back home. No exceptions," I state. Since Pina's abduction, I feel I need an extra layer of security on Zara. I never did in the past, but everything feels more heightened. And I think she feels more comfortable, too.

She doesn't argue. "Okay. Thanks!" She texts her friends and declares, "They're two stores away."

"You stay inside the shop until the driver comes," I order.

"I will!" Zara hugs me. I unzip her. She throws her jeans and T-shirt on then bounces out of the dressing room.

Pina smiles. "Good decision on the dress and letting her go hang out with her friends."

"No thanks to you on the dress," I reply, but I'm not angry.

Pina smirks. "It was a good decision. Are you going to try those on?" She points to my dresses.

"Yes." I try on the black dress and love it. I put my clothes back on, and Pina and I pay for our items.

We finish checking out, and she asks, "Want to get some coffee?"

"That would be great," I state. We wait for my driver with Zara and her friends. Once they're safely inside the car, Pina and I walk down the street to the coffee shop.

I get a latte, and she gets a cappuccino. We sit down at a table, away from anyone else. I ask her, "So, how are you feeling?"

Pina gives me an exasperated look. "Are you going to ask me this every time you see me? I told you I feel fine now."

I wince. "Sorry. But you know I worry. You've been through a lot. And I've never been so scared as when you were gone."

Darkness fills her face. She softens her tone. "Me, too." She looks out the window.

I put my hand on hers. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She puts on a brave face. "Yeah, I am. Let's change the subject."

"Okay," I agree.

She adds, "Let's talk about something I'm wondering."

"Which would be...?" I ask, but I get the feeling I'm going to regret asking that.

Her face turned serious. She flips her hand on top of mine and studies me for a moment.

I shift in my seat. “What?”

She blurts out, “Don’t you think it’s time maybe you told Zara a little bit about her dad?”

“No,” I state, firm in my belief that I’ve made the best decision regarding that situation.

Pina shakes her head in little bobs.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I hurl.

“It’s affecting her, Chanel. She has a right to know something about her father,” Pina voices.

“There’s nothing I can tell her,” I assert and take a sip of my hot drink.

“Fine. Then at the very least, tell me who he is,” Pina orders.

“You know I won’t do that,” I fume, upset she’s pushing for this when we’ve had this discussion too many times.

“Why not?” she pushes.

Upset, I explode, “Are we really going to go over this again?”

She sighs and holds her hands in the air. “Look, all I’m saying —”

“It’s not your business. Stay out of it,” I warn.

“I’m your best friend. We’ve been through everything together. Over the last few months, you demanded I tell you everything about what I went through, and I didn’t want to. But I did. So I think you owe it to me to tell me who he is,” she claims.

My insides quiver. I shut my eyes and vow, “I can’t. I’ll go to my grave with it.”

Tense silence fills the air. I focus on my drink.

“Chanel, I know this is hard.”

“No, you don’t know.”

“Then fill me in. Make me understand why you won’t tell anyone,” Pina insists.

“He’s dangerous,” I state.

“That’s not an answer, and you know it,” she accuses.

I can’t handle it anymore. The years of protecting the truth are too much to bear alone. A tear slips down my cheek.

Pina slides her chair next to mine and puts her arm around my shoulder. She softly says, “You know I won’t repeat anything to anyone. And you can’t keep this to yourself forever.”

“I can,” I claim, but it feels heavier than ever.

“Why is he dangerous? Tell me that, and I’ll drop it,” she offers.

I glance at the ceiling, taking deep breaths.

“Chanel.”

I lock eyes with her. “What if I told you I went to him and begged him to find you, and he didn’t?”

The color drains from her cheeks. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

Shame fills me. I should never have slept with an Abruzzo. Yet I have my daughter, so I can’t fully regret it. Still, admitting it to anyone, especially Pina, after what they put her through, is more painful than I imagined.

She glances around us. It’s still just the two of us in the back corner. Confusion and fear fill her expression. She carefully demands, “What are you saying, Chanel?”

My eyes fill with more tears. My emotions overwhelm me.

She tightens her embrace around me, urging, “Tell me.”

I cave. “He... he’s one of *them*.”

Shock fills her face. She swallows hard then finally questions, “An Abruzzo?”

I squeeze my eyes as hot tears stream down my cheeks.

“Oh my God,” she mutters.

“I didn’t know until after I was with him. You have to believe me!” I cry out.

“Of course I believe you. Does... does he know about Zara?”

“God no! And he can never find out!”

She nods. “Of course.”

“So now you understand why neither of them can ever know?”

A knowledge that only occurs when someone has been through something so horrific that they fully understand the ramifications fills her eyes. “Yes.”

I question, “Would you tell your daughter about him?”

She doesn’t hesitate. “No.”

I lift my chin and clear my tears. I lock eyes with her, firmly proclaiming, “She can never know, Pina.”

Pina takes a deep breath. “Yes. I agree. You’ve done the right thing. Don’t ever tell her.”



Luca

I SLIDE MY KEY THROUGH THE ALLEY DOOR THEN TAKE THE stairs. It's a long haul. Brody lives on the penthouse floor, but I can't risk being seen in the elevator or elsewhere in this building.

I've been hiding out for months, barely going out in public. But I finally figured out what needs to happen.

I pull my cap down farther out of habit and continue climbing the stairs.

When I get to the top, I go into the corridor to the penthouse. I knock on the door and ring the bell.

There's a scuffling sound. Then I hear Brody order, "Go in the bedroom and stay there until I tell you to come out."

"Who is it?" a woman's voice asks.

"Just do as I say," Brody demands.

Guess I'm interrupting something.

Oh well.

A few minutes pass before Brody cracks the door open. He questions, "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk," I state.

"Anyone ever tell you to call first?" he scolds.

I sniff hard and stare at him.

He grunts then steps into the hallway. He shuts the door, moves me to the farthest corner, and asks, “Where have you been hiding?”

“Does it matter?” I respond.

He studies me then answers, “No. Guess not. How did you get up here?”

A moment of silence passes. I had a connection with a security guard who got me a key to the stairs, but I’m not ratting him out.

Brody shakes his head, pissed he’s got someone more loyal to me than him. He mutters, “You’re going to make me clean house.”

I ignore that issue and blurt out, “I need to kill Jacopo and his advisors. This all needs to end.”

He nods. “I agree. But what do you want me to do about it?”

I swallow my pride, admitting, “I need your help.”

Surprise fills his face. “Why me?”

I cautiously answer, “I don’t have your skills.”

“Meaning?”

I glance around me, even though no one is here. It’s secure. The woman in his penthouse surely can’t hear anything, but I keep my voice as low as possible. “When you were in Ireland, you had access to bombs, yeah?”

His eyes turn to slits. “Of course I did. What are you getting at, Luca?”

I take a deep breath, revealing, “Jacopo and his advisors have a meeting in a week in the west wing of his compound.”

“And?” Brody questions.

Goose bumps break out on my skin. I state, “I need you to blow the place up.”

Brody’s eyes widen. My pulse creeps higher as we continue to lock eyes. He finally taunts, “Well, you’ve thought about some

extreme measures, haven't you?"

"There's no other way. My life's been a shitshow the last few decades. Something happened every time I tried to kill that motherfucker. And now, I can't relax until his advisors are dead, too. They all need to die. Can you have my back on this, Brody?" It sounds desperate coming out, but that's the point I'm at. I've never felt so desperate in my entire life. The hiding out is driving me nuts. But if I show my face, I'm a dead man walking.

Brody continues to stay silent.

I claim, "This is the only way it'll end."

He exhales, scratches his head, and asks, "Why didn't Angelo talk to my father about this?"

I square my shoulders, answering, "You know why."

He groans. "I knew you were going to say that. My father's not going to like this. Neither will Angelo."

I exclaim, "I don't give a shit! Earth will be a better place without them on it. We all know it."

He holds his hands out. "I'm not arguing your position. The problem is, if that place goes up in flames, my dad's going to know my brothers or I are behind it."

I step closer, gritting my teeth, trying not to sound desperate. "Are you going to help me or not?"

He glances around him again. Several long moments pass. I almost turn around and tell him thanks for nothing. "Yeah, I'll help you."

"You will?"

"Don't make me recommit twice."

Relief fills me. "Thank you. How are we going to do this? The only thing I can't figure out is how to get the bombs wired in Jacopo's place."

Brody grunts. "We don't have a problem."

"Why is that?" I question.

“Better you don’t ask questions. Just leave it to me. What night are they meeting?” Brody inquires.

“Tuesday. The meeting starts at eight,” I inform.

Brody shifts on his feet. A challenge ignites in his eyes. “You know you risk women and children being casualties?”

My heart beats harder. It’s something that I’ve considered. I assert, “When Jacopo has his advisor meetings, it’s in the west wing. There are no staff members allowed in, nor women or children. They will all be on the other side of the house.”

“There are never guarantees,” Brody warns.

I nod, insisting, “There’s no other way. All of them will die. The Abruzzo family will be left in shambles. The end justifies the means.”

He studies me then agrees, “Okay. We’ll do it at nine to make sure any stragglers are gone. I’ll give you a front row seat to watch. I’ll send details where to meet.”

I furrow my eyebrows. “How will you do that? We can’t be anywhere near the compound.”

Arrogance flushes Brody’s face. “I got this, Luca. Just watch the master in action.”

I decide it’s best not to argue. “All right.”

“One thing though,” he adds.

The hairs on my neck rise. “What?”

“You’re going to owe me,” he claims.

My gut drops. I knew I would. Still, I hate owing any O’Connor. “You’re just like your father,” I sneer.

“You want to find someone else to do your dirty work?” he questions.

“No,” I grumble.

“Good. Now get the fuck out of here before someone sees you,” he orders, then returns to his penthouse.

I carefully navigate the building. I get to the bottom of the staircase, tug my hat down, and put my hood over it. I step out

into the fresh air, round the corner, then cross the street. I slide into the beat-up Chevy that I've been driving since I've been in hiding.

I should return to the safe house I've been staying at in New Jersey. Yet so much relief fills me, that I need to take a bit to contemplate what I've set in motion.

It's finally going to happen.

A million thoughts race through my mind. I finally start the engine and am about to pull out when my mouth turns dry. My stomach flips.

It can't be her.

Why is she here?

I peer closer, thinking I must be seeing things, but there's no way I'm making a mistake.

Alaina O'Leary, daughter of Jack, who heads the clan in Ireland and is Joseph's brother, steps out of Brody's building.

Why would Alaina O'Leary be here?

Was it her voice I heard in Brody's penthouse?

No, it can't be.

There's no way.

She tosses on her oversized designer sunglasses and slides into an SUV. It takes off.

I'm tempted to follow her, but my gut screams I'm too close to the end to risk being seen. Part of me wants to return to Brody's and ask him about her, but I can't be rocking the boat right now. He's the only one I think would do this for me.

So I put it in the back of my mind and decide to question him later about her.

I get home and lie low for the week. Every day seems to drag on. My curiosity about her never dies. I'm always wondering why she was there or how Brody will pull this off.

When Tuesday finally comes, I'm antsy all day. Around eight, I get a message from Brody.

Brody: *Everything's set. Meet me at Chewy's.*

Me: *Done.*

Why is he making me meet him there?

Chewy's is the nickname the O'Connors gave the run-down, brick office building that Tully purchased. It's in the middle of a deserted part of town. To the naked eye, it looks like a building that should be demolished. The true reason Tully bought it is for the cellar where he tortures men.

I get in my Chevy and pull in at the same time Brody does.

We go inside, and I question, "Why are we here? Jacopo's place is at least forty-five minutes away."

Brody's lips twitch. "You do know there's technology in today's age?"

"What the fuck does that mean?" I bark, on edge.

"Chill out," he instructs.

I take a deep breath. "Fine."

He shakes his head like I'm an idiot. "You should get up on the times."

"Brody, cut the shit. Why are we here? Don't tell me that you changed your mind," I warn.

He jerks his head back. "Of course I didn't change my mind. Like I said, it's time to sit back and watch the show."

I scrub my face, over his games. "Meaning?"

He grabs his phone out of his pocket and swipes at it. Then he motions for me to sit at the desk.

I obey, and he grabs the other chair. He sits next to me and props his phone on the desk so we can both see the screen. Excitement fills his voice as he orders, "Wait for it." He taps a button.

Jacopo's compound comes into view. He hits the screen, and it zooms over the west wing.

"How did you get this?" I inquire in shock.

He smirks. “How did you think we were going to blow the place up?”

I shrug. “Not sure, but I assumed you’d have one of your guys string the bombs inside his place.”

He scoffs. “That’s for amateurs, Luca. Do you think I’m one of those guys?”

I humor him. “No, Brody. You’re a pro. Can you fill me in now?”

His grin grows. “Let’s just say the O’Connors like to do things military style.”

Confused, I stare at him.

He adds, “Drones.”

“Holy shit,” I mutter. I knew the O’Connors were skilled in bombs from their time in Ireland. Yet drones never occurred to me.

“That’s brilliant,” I admit.

He pumps his chest. “Yeah, I am pretty brilliant.”

“Don’t get cocky,” I threaten.

He chuckles, and we make small talk, passing the time until it’s close to nine. A minute before, he rubs his hands together. “Are you ready for the show?”

Nerves fill me. I answer, “Yes. I just hope no one innocent is around.”

“Too late. You can’t worry about that now,” he declares.

“It’s only hitting the west wing, correct?” I question.

“Yep. Precision is my thing. Again, I’m not an amateur,” he boasts.

For once, I appreciate his skills.

The seconds pass slowly. My stomach flips faster until nine o’clock hits.

All of a sudden, the wing that Jacopo and his advisors are in explodes. Debris flies into the air. A blaze of smoke and fire

rages into the sky. I take it all in as a chill runs down my spine.

Brody cockily asks, “Good enough for you?”

I stare at him in shock, muttering, “It’s done.”

He doesn’t seem fazed. “Yep. There’s no way they could have survived that explosion.”

I glance back at the screen of smoke. You can barely see the outline of the existing structure.

Brody snatches his phone off the desk and rises. He advises, “You might want to stay hidden for a few more days before slowly making your way back into society. But I think you’ll be okay. There’s not going to be anyone who can pay for the ten-million-dollar bounty Jacopo put on your head.”

I rise, coming out of my shock. “Hey, before you go, I need to talk to you about something.”

“You have another place you need me to blow up? If you do, the favors you owe me will get bigger.” He smirks.

I ignore his comment, blurting out, “Why was Alaina O’Leary coming out of your building?”

The color drains from his face. He tries to cover up his discomfort and surprise. He claims, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

But he does. I can tell he does. I push, “Don’t lie to me. Alaina O’Leary walked out of your building the same day I was there. It wasn’t long after I had left.”

His eyes harden. He firmly asserts, “I don’t know what you’re accusing me of. If an O’Leary was on my property, you know they wouldn’t be allowed to leave the building.”

I continue, “If something’s going on between you and Alaina —”

“Are you really accusing me of something with an O’Leary?” he barks.

I try another approach. “I, of all people, know things can look one way and be another.”

He only restates, “I have no knowledge of Alaina O’Leary anywhere near my building, but I’ll look into it. Anything else?”

I decide to drop it for now. Eventually, I’ll find out if Brody’s got something going on with Alaina. I answer, “No. Thanks again.”

“Great. See you later,” he replies, then hightails it to his car. He peels away, and I drive to the safe house.

Within a few minutes of arriving home, I get a text.

BOSS: *Get over here now.*

Me: *On my way.*

My chest tightens. There are going to be consequences to pay. I knew it before I talked to Brody.

When I arrive, I groan inside. All of Angelo’s and Tully’s sons are in the office. They all stand, arms crossed, with hardened looks on their faces.

Tully releases his lung full of cigar smoke and belts out, “Which of my sons helped you?”

I play dumb. “Helped me do what?”

He steps closer, threatening, “Don’t mess with me, Luca.”

“Somebody want to fill me in on what is going on?” I assert, then grab a joint and light it up.

Angelo grabs the joint from me and stubs it out in an ashtray. He points in my face, demanding, “Who helped you blow up Jacopo’s compound?”

I try to appear surprised and grunt. “You’re fully aware that I don’t know anything about bombs. But is the motherfucker dead?”

Tristano answers, “Yeah. And all his top thugs.”

I nod. “Good. I won’t say I’m sad to hear that.”

Tully’s eyes turn darker. He snarls, “Do you have any clue what you’ve done?”

I toss my hands in the air. “I didn’t do anything. As stated, I don’t know the first thing about bombs.”

Tully explodes, “I want to know right now who did it!”

Tension fills the air. He studies each of his sons. They all stand with their heads held high, not flinching. He lunges at me, grabs my shirt, and spit flies out of his mouth as he demands, “Who helped you?”

I push him. “Don’t you fucking touch me.”

Dante interjects, “Everyone needs to calm down.”

Angelo spins, warning, “Don’t you dare try to make this not as big as it is.”

Tristano claims, “I don’t understand what the big deal is. Those motherfuckers all needed to die, especially after what they did to Pina. Why do you even fucking care?”

Tully fumes, “A bomb isn’t a gunshot! You can’t hide it! Who do you think the Feds are going to look at? We’re going to be tied to those bombs.”

“Who said that? I’m sure whoever did it knows how to cover their ass,” Brody states.

Tully’s rage grows. He jabs Brody in the chest. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

Brody keeps his hardened stare, responding, “I only made an observation.”

“Goddamnit!” Tully shouts.

The interrogation goes on for hours. Nobody accepts responsibility. Angelo and Tully finally dismiss all of us.

I leave and get in the Chevy. For the first time in months, I return to my penthouse.

I’m finally free. After all these decades, I’m finally free.

Once I’m in my penthouse, the shock continues to hit me. I gaze at the New York skyline, feeling like I might have a nervous breakdown.

My palms press against the glass, and I peer closer at the bustling city.

Where does my stellina live?

How do I find her?

With every breath of freedom I take, I make a new vow.

I *will* find her.

I *will* earn her love and trust.

And I will *never again* put anything above her.



Chanel

A Month Later

“ZARA, WE’RE GOING TO BE LATE,” I CALL OUT, SHOVING MY earring into my lobe.

She replies, “I’m not ready yet.”

I sigh and go into her bathroom. “Chop, chop! They won’t wait for—” I freeze.

Zara’s distressed expression grows. A semi-orange, way-too-dark foundation is smeared over her birthmark. She glances at me, snapping, “It looks horrible. I know.”

I clear my throat and walk over to her. Since the day at the store, I’ve never asked her about her conversation with Pina. I was too embarrassed to admit I was eavesdropping. Plus, I avoid all discussions about her father if possible. I ask, “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like? Making a mess,” she frets, trying to rub it in.

I take the tube of foundation out of her hand. It’s a horrible shade for her. It doesn’t match her creamy skin, and I want to ask her how she picked it, but I decide it’s best not to. I gently say, “Sweetheart, this shade will draw more attention to it.”

Fiery green eyes glare at me. She admits, “It looked right in the store when I dabbed it on my hand.”

I grab a makeup remover towelette and inquire, “Can I help you?”

She doesn’t object, nodding, and quietly watches me wipe it off her.

When I finish, I chirp, “All done. Sunday, I can take you to the makeup counter at Bloomingdales. We can get a shade that matches your skin tone.”

She cautiously asks, “You will?”

“Yes. Of course. If that is what you want?” I question, wishing she didn’t hate her guardian angel so much.

Tears fill her eyes. It kills me, but she blinks them away, replying, “Yes. Please.”

“Great.” I toss the dirty towelette in the trash can and sling my arm around her. We study our reflections in the mirror. She’s wearing her hot-pink dress, and I’m in the black gown. I declare, “Looks like we clean up pretty well.”

She beams. “Thanks for letting me get this dress, Mom. I really do appreciate it.”

I tug her into me tighter and kiss the top of her head. “You’re welcome. You can thank your Aunt Pina though.”

She laughs. “I know. I should take her shopping more often.”

I groan. “Don’t get any ideas. We talked about this.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, I remember.”

“Good. We better get moving,” I say.

We leave the condo, and my driver pulls up to the curb. The entire way, Zara excitedly talks about the wedding. It’s tomorrow, and she’s been bouncing off the walls for the last week about it.

We pull up to the restaurant. It’s already packed. I glance at my watch and wince. “Oops.”

“We’re late, aren’t we?” Zara asks.

“Yep!” I step out of the car, and she follows.

She links her arm through mine and leans closer. “Aren’t you always supposed to be fashionably late?”

I laugh, agreeing, “Definitely.”

She beams. “It’s gonna be a good weekend, Mom.”

I agree, adding, “No. It’s going to be a really *great* weekend!”

The bouncer opens the door for us, and we step inside. The restaurant is packed with Tristano and Pina’s family and friends.

I scan the room. We chat with a few people as we make our way to the back, where Tristano and Pina are standing. When we finally make it to them, I say, “Hi! I’m sorry we’re late.”

Pina tosses her arms around me, kissing my cheek. Then she does the same to Zara. She steps back, glowing, and holds our hands, gushing, “You both look amazing!”

“Thanks, Aunt Pina!” Zara says, giving Pina another hug. Then she asks, “Where’s the restroom? I’m going to pee my pants!”

Tristano steps back. “Here, let me show you.” He guides Zara toward the bathroom.

“You look amazing,” I state.

Pina beams brighter. “Thanks.”

“Are you ready for the big day?” I question, happy for her but feeling a tad bit of jealousy. I always dreamed of getting married as a little girl. I’ve given up all hope of that ever happening though. But the radiant look on Pina’s face makes my former ache reignite.

She takes a deep breath. “As ready as anyone can be!”

“You’ll do—”

“There’s the bride-to-be.” My mom’s voice rings through the air.

We spin. Mom pulls Pina in for a hug while my father tugs me into one. Then they change spots. We all finish hugging, and

Zara returns.

“Ma choupinette!” Dad exclaims, grabbing both her hands and holding them out. He glances at her dress and then at me.

Oh no. He’s going to comment on the length.

Pina interjects, “Doesn’t Zara look amazing?”

“Of course,” Mom says, then pushes my father out of the way before he can say anything. She embraces Zara and kisses her cheek. “You’re growing up too fast.”

“I’m almost fifteen,” Zara comments.

“Exactly my point,” Mom states.

Zara rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling.

We make our way around the room for the next half hour, talking to many guests.

The DJ cuts the music and announces, “If everyone could be seated, it’s time for dinner.”

“That’s my cue. Your table is that one,” I tell Zara, pointing to her table in the center of the room. Pina decided only Massimo and I would eat at Tristano’s and her table. The rest of the bridal party is scattered throughout the room.

She replies, “I’m running to the bathroom again. I need to stop drinking this.”

I take the glass and smell it then sip it.

She groans. “Mom! There’s nothing bad in it.”

“Hey, you can’t fault me for checking,” I claim.

She shakes her head and steps toward the restrooms.

I take my seat at the head table, between Pina and Massimo. He leans in and asks, “Did you write your speech?”

“I don’t need to write it. It’s all in my head,” I brag.

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“Hmm. Let’s see whose is better,” he challenges.

“Did you write yours down?” I question.

“Nope.”

“Good luck, then,” I offer as a server gives us our champagne flutes.

Massimo gets up and clinks his glass. The room eventually goes quiet, and he smiles at Pina, booming, “Pina, Pina, Pina.”

“Massimo, Massimo, Massimo,” she chirps back.

“Should we tell them all our secrets?” he asks.

She arches her eyebrows.

Tristano grins and tugs her closer to him.

“Maybe we should talk about the Maldives,” Massimo suggests.

“Oh God,” she mutters.

I rise and step next to him, grabbing the microphone and interjecting, “Since I know the bride the best, I think it’s time we discussed the real deets about her.”

Pina covers her face and groans, but she’s smiling.

Dante yells out, “I think I know her better, Chanel.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” I sing.

Massimo’s eyes light with mischief. He states, “Do tell.”

“Oh no,” Pina mutters, shaking her head.

I beam at her. “Don’t worry, dear friend. I won’t tell the embarrassing stuff. Okay, well, maybe I’ll tell you a few things.”

“Chanel,” Pina says, laughing.

Tristano tightens his arm around her and kisses her cheek. She snuggles closer.

Massimo goads, “Do tell, Chanel.”

I continue, “I thought long and hard about what I should say. I think it’s best to discuss the time—” I freeze and drop the

microphone. My knees wobble, and I grasp Massimo's arm to steady myself.

Zara's at her table. Luca stands next to her. Every fear I've ever had comes to fruition.

Massimo catches the microphone, inquiring, "Whoa. You okay?"

My insides quiver so hard, I think I'm going to get sick. I straighten my shoulders, not taking my eyes off my daughter or Luca. I barely growl, "Get away from my daughter!"

Luca's eyes flash with everything I remember. But this time, I won't fall for it. I need to get Zara away from him before it's too late. He steps to the side of the table. "Chanel—"

"Zara, go outside!" I order. Without thinking, I reach behind Massimo and grab his Glock. I point it at Luca.

Zara shrieks. "Mom! What are you doing?"

Luca tries again. "Chanel—"

Massimo lowers his head and calmly demands, "Give me the gun."

Heat rushes through my blood. I can't look at anyone but Luca. I grit my teeth, warning, "You have three seconds to get away from my daughter."

He puts his hands out as if to calm me. He claims, "We need to talk."

"I said get away from her!" I scream like a crazy woman, unlatching the safety.

My father steps in front of the table. "Mon chou, give me the gun."

I glance at him quickly then back at Luca.

"Chanel, what are you doing?" Pina frets.

My entire body trembles. Confused, I swallow hard, asking, "Why do you have an Abruzzo here?"

"An..." She rises and steps next to me. "Chanel, he's—"

"Get him away from my daughter," I demand.

“Is he... oh God! Chanel, you—”

“Now!” I scream, stepping away from the table and moving around the room.

“Ma chérie,” Mom reprimands. “Have you gone mad?”

Why is no one concerned that there’s an Abruzzo here?

I ignore her until I’m a few feet from Zara and Luca. I order, “Zara, we’re going.”

“What? Mom!” she cries out, a tear running down her cheek.

“My stellina,” Luca says in a low voice.

“Do not call me your stellina,” I hysterically assert.

Pina tries again, “Chanel—”

“Zara, if you don’t move, I’m shooting him,” I threaten and mean it.

“What? Why?” she inquires.

“Zara, do as your mother says,” Dad demands.

She reluctantly goes to the exit.

I warn, “If anyone tries to stop me from leaving with my daughter, I’m shooting this gun. If anyone follows us, I’ll shoot you. And if you ever come near my daughter or me again, so help me God, I’ll kill you,” I say to Luca.

His eyes widen. He repeats, “We need to talk. Things aren’t as they seem.”

“Save it,” I choke out and walk backward until I’m next to Zara. I order, “Text our driver.”

“Mom,” she pleads.

“Now,” I bark.

She pulls her phone out of her purse and obeys. Then she whispers, “You’re scaring me.”

The truth is, I’m scaring myself. The entire room is staring at me. Yet the only one I’m focused on is Luca.

My driver pulls up to the building, and I tell Zara to go outside and get in. When she's in the car, I back out of the building and slide in next to her. I tell my driver, "Our house. And step on it."

He pulls out and weaves through traffic.

"Mom, please put the gun down," Zara begs.

I glance at my hands and realize the safety is still off. I snap it back on and put it on my lap. I take several long breaths, but nothing calms me.

He knows about her.

Why did no one care he was there?

So much confusion fills me. I stare at the gun with a million fears rushing through me. We get to our building, and I slide the gun into my purse. I get out, and Zara and I go upstairs. We say nothing until the door is shut.

"Mom?" she questions.

I finally look at her and hate myself further.

She's shaking. Her mascara runs down her cheeks in black streaks. I step toward her, but she retreats, asserting, "Don't touch me."

"Sweetheart, please," I beg, but I'm not sure what I'll say next. If she knows Luca is her father, she'll try to find him again.

"Who was that man?" she asks.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. It's like all my years of worrying are stuck in my throat.

Her eyes slowly grow wider until she's gaping at me. She stutters, "Is-is... oh my God, Mom! Is he my father?"

I cringe then start to shake my head but stop.

Horror fills her expression. More tears fall. She questions, "He's an Abruzzo? I'm part Abruzzo?"

"No!" I exclaim. "You are *not* an Abruzzo!"

"But he is?"

I stay silent.

“Say it, Mom! You called him an Abruzzo! Say it now,” she demands.

For some reason, I can’t get the word Abruzzo past my lips.

She fires distraught daggers at me with her gaze.

My front door flies open. My mom and dad come flying through. Mom demands, “Ma chérie, what was that all about?”

I don’t tear my eyes off Zara. She looks at them and lifts her chin, stating, “That was my father.” An ocean of tears falls down her face as she glares at me.

“What are you talking about?” my father asks.

My world crumbles around me. How did I hold all this together for so long, and in one moment, everything got destroyed?

“Chanel,” my father sternly states.

I close my eyes, trying to stop the pain from shooting through my heart. My lungs seize, and I think I’m suffocating.

“Chanel?” my father asks again.

I slowly turn and look at him.

He questions, “Luca is Zara’s father?”

I swallow the lump in my throat and choke out, “Yes.”

Shock fills my parents’ faces. He questions, “Why did you not tell me?”

At the same time, Mom asks, “How did this happen?”

I can’t answer any of their questions. I just can’t. I sit down and put my head between my knees, unable to breathe.

Mom rushes over and puts her arm around my back, rubbing it. “Just breathe.”

“Are you faking an attack right now, Mom?” Zara asks.

My sobs get lodged in my throat.

“Zara, stop. Everyone just stop,” Dad instructs.

“I’m going to find my father,” Zara claims and moves toward the door.

My father steps in front of her. “No, you aren’t.”

“He is my father,” Zara claims.

“You can talk to him later. This is not the time.”

“I’ve waited long enough. I don’t care if he’s an Abruzzo. He’s my father. I have a right to get to know him,” she declares.

My father’s eyes turned to slits. He snarls, “You would be okay if your father was an Abruzzo?”

She retorts, “What do you mean ‘was’? He’s not dead.”

My father shakes his head. “No, my dear. Your father is not an Abruzzo. He is a full-blooded Marino.”

Goose bumps pop out of my skin. I inquire, “What are you talking about? He is an Abruzzo. He never even denied it.”

My father shakes his head. He lowers his voice. “No, he’s not. He was working both sides, undercover for the family. The Marino family. Not the Abruzzos.”

My gut flips so fast, bile rises up my throat. I get up and race to the bathroom. I get there in time to hug the toilet. Since I haven’t eaten today, I dry heave into the porcelain bowl.

Mom follows me inside. She tries to take care of me, but I push her away, sobbing, “I’m so confused.”

What have I done? How could this be?

Why did Luca never tell me?

“You need to sort this out,” Mom advises.

I confess, “I don’t understand how this could have happened. All these years, Mom. So many wasted years!” I sob harder.

Pity crosses her face. She tugs me into her arms, reassuring me, “Everything will be okay.”

“It won’t,” I insist. “Zara hates me. She’s always going to hate me.”

“Nonsense,” Mom claims.

The consequences of my actions haunt me. I've made a huge mistake.

The one man I've loved could have been mine and wasn't.

My sorrow is replaced with anger. It's directed at Luca for deceiving me all these years. I cry out, "He knew that I thought he was an Abruzzo. He never said anything to me."

She swipes at my tears, asserting, "He must have had his reasons."

"Like what?" I ask.

She holds my cheeks and locks eyes with me, answering, "I don't know, ma chérie, but you need to find out."

***Luca***

THE ENTIRE ROOM STARES AT ME TENSELY. CONFUSION FILLS me.

I can only think about the conversation Zara and I had outside the bathroom. I stepped out of the men's room and ran smack into her.

After apologizing, I peered closer, stating, "You look familiar. Have we met?"

She paused then replied, "I don't think so. But a lot of people say I look like my mom. Maybe you know her."

"Who's your mother?" I questioned.

"Her name is Chanel Moulin," she answered, and it was like a bomb exploded inside me.

I froze, not able to tear my eyes off Zara.

She nervously laughed, "Have you met her?"

I pulled it together, forcing a smile. "Yes, I know her. My name is Luca. What's yours?"

"Zara."

For some unknown reason, I noted, "That's a nice name. I'm surprised she didn't give you a French name."

Zara shrugged. “Only my last name is French. My middle name is Luciana. My grandparents didn’t understand why my mom didn’t give me a French first and middle name.”

Luciana? The female name for Luca?

It doesn’t mean anything. It could be a coincidence.

Still, the hairs on my neck rose. I asked, “Zara, how old are you?”

“Almost fifteen.”

I did the math in my head. My pulse beat so rapidly that I had a hard time breathing. Then I spotted it. My mouth turned dry and a lump formed in my throat.

Zara caught me staring at her shoulder. She threw her hand over it, as if embarrassed.

“Can I see that?” I said as I removed her hand and peered closer.

Her face turned red. She admitted, “I hate it. I’m tattooing over it as soon as I can.”

So much shock filled me, I was surprised I could manage to ask, “Why would you do that?”

She rolled her eyes. “My mom calls it my guardian angel. It’s the only detail I know about my father. She said he has the same one. I’m tired of the daily reminder of him.”

My gut spun. “Why don’t you want to think about him?”

Sadness passed in her eyes. She pinned them on me and lifted her chin, replying, “I wouldn’t know who he is if I pass him on the street, so what’s the point of having a reminder of him?”

Pain rippled through my heart. I stood speechless.

She stepped back, asserting, “I better go. Things are starting.” She moved down the hallway.

I couldn’t help myself and followed her to her table, with no doubts about who her father was.

It’s me.

Then I saw Chanel sitting at the head table, laughing with Massimo. My heart swirled with all the feelings I've ever had for her, along with something new.

Anger.

How could she keep my own daughter from me?

The moment Chanel caught my gaze on her, all hell broke loose.

And now, I'm left in the aftermath of the chaos.

Pierre Gagnon pins his deadly gaze on me, seething, "I'll deal with you later, Luca."

His wife shoots me daggers, and they swiftly leave the restaurant.

It confuses me further. *What does he have to do with Chanel?*

Everything has gone wrong. For months, I bided my time, knowing Chanel would be here. I didn't press Angelo or anyone else for her information. Every day, I focused on getting my life in order so there would be no issues with giving her everything she deserved. And I rehearsed too many hours to count how I would come clean on all the lies that were always between us.

I figured it was best to not draw any attention to us before I had a chance to clear the air with her. My heart assumed we'd see each other tonight, I could explain, and we'd no longer have any obstacles around us.

I was wrong.

She kept my flesh and blood from me.

Maybe I have no right to be upset, but I am. There's no way I can put the timeline, Zara's middle name, and the birthmark that's exactly the same and on the same spot as my body, together, and not know she's my daughter.

Massimo snaps me out of my haze, stepping in front of me and snarling, "What was that about, Luca?"

"I don't know," I lie.

Pina joins Massimo at his side, glaring at me. She seethes, “What have you done?”

“I need to speak to Chanel,” I blurt out and move toward the door.

Massimo grabs my arm and spins me. Pina’s quick on his heels. He demands, “You’re why she didn’t want anyone to know where she lived, aren’t you?”

A shiver runs down my spine. His accusation is painful, but my gut says it’s the truth. And I realize I still have no idea where she lives. I lock eyes with him, “I need to talk to her. What’s her address?”

Pina spouts, “You don’t get it unless she wants you to have it.” She picks up her phone and holds it to her ear.

Massimo threatens, “If you hurt her, I’ll kill you, Luca.”

I have no time to react.

Pina removes the phone from her ear and states, “She isn’t answering.” She steps closer, jabbing me in the chest, “What have you done to my best friend? Tell me!” Yet, something gives me the feeling she knows more than she’s letting on.

Massimo declares, “I’m going to get my gun.”

“I’m coming with you,” I state.

“The hell you are!” he claims.

Angelo appears. His dark scowl matches Massimo’s. He interjects, “Luca, is there something you want to tell me?”

Massimo steps outside.

“No,” I reply, then follow Massimo.

His driver pulls up, and he opens the door. He spins, declaring, “You aren’t coming.”

I pull my Glock, remove the safety, and press it to his head. “Hell if I’m not.”

His face hardens. He goads, “What? You’re going to shoot me?”

I threaten, “Don’t test me. Now, get in.”

He stays planted for a minute before challenging, “Are you sure showing up at her house is a good idea? The woman practically blew your head off. And I’ve never seen her hold a gun in her life.”

“Well, she obviously knows what to do with one because she turned the safety off. But I’ll take my chances,” I comment.

He still doesn’t move.

I count, “Three. Two.”

“Fuck you. And you’ll pay for holding a gun to my head.” He caves and then slides into the SUV.

He gives the address to her house. The driver pulls out.

I memorize it and question, “How do you know her address so well?”

A fresh scowl appears. He answers, “That’s not really your concern, is it?”

A new realization washes over me. I clench my fists at my sides, seething, “Are you with Chanel?”

Disgust fills his expression. “What are you talking about? You know I’m with Katiya.”

I continue to stare at him, unsure if he’s lying.

He adds, “I don’t screw those I employ.”

“Employ?” I question.

“She’s my flight attendant.”

I shake my head, declaring, “Barbara is your flight attendant.”

He scoffs. “No, she isn’t. Barbara fills in for Chanel when needed. Chanel is my flight attendant, you dickhead.”

I grunt. “Well, how was I supposed to know that?”

He retorts, “Apparently, there’s a lot you don’t know, because Chanel seems to hate you, but you’re acting like you’re in shock. And I know you’re not dumb, Luca. So what the fuck is going on here?”

I once again ignore answering him and question, “What’s her relationship with Pierre Gagnon?”

“He’s her father.”

“What are you talking about? Her last name is Moulin,” I reply.

Massimo shakes his head, as if he can’t believe how stupid I am.

“What?” I question.

He sighs then states, “Pierre uses Gagnon, so nobody knows who his wife and Chanel are. He’s done it since they were in Italy. It was to protect them.”

It’s another piece of the puzzle I didn’t understand all these years. I often wondered why Chanel hated the Abruzzos so much. I could never figure out her affiliation to the Marinos besides that she was Pina’s friend.

For the rest of the ride, we sit in silence. The driver pulls up to a building. Massimo nods at security, and they don’t even check identification.

My jealousy spikes again. I inquire, “Why does security seem to know you if Chanel’s only your flight attendant?”

We step into the elevator. He punches in a code and crosses his arms. “I own this building, moron.”

“Enough with the name-calling,” I threaten.

He mutters, “If she tries to kill you, I might let her.”

Enough is enough. I spin and push him against the wall. “What’s your problem, man?”

He grits his teeth, claiming, “You’ve obviously done something to her. I’m pretty sure I know what, but I want to hear it from you.”

“Mind your own business,” I warn. The doors open, and I release him. I follow him until we get outside her unit.

He knocks on the door.

Pierre answers and lunges at me when he opens the door, pushing me across the hall and into the wall. He grabs my collar, accusing, “What did you do to my daughter?”

“It’s between Chanel and me,” I state.

“No, it’s between her and her family,” he claims.

Massimo pulls him off me. He mutters, “This isn’t helping, Pierre.”

I firmly repeat, “This is between your daughter and me.”

“And me,” a voice calls out.

My insides drop. I glance at Zara.

Mascara streaks down her cheeks, staining her creamy skin. Her bottom lip trembles just the way Chanel’s does. She grips the doorway so tight that her knuckles turn white. She locks her green eyes on mine, asking, “You’re my father?”

I become speechless again. I’m unprepared for this. About an hour ago, I had no idea she existed. Now, a beautiful young woman stands before me. And all I feel is regret that I know will only deepen once I can process this.

She arches her eyebrows the same way Chanel does. More tears track down her cheeks.

I blurt out, “I didn’t know about you. I swear.”

She lifts her chin. I get the feeling she believes me. She inquires, “Are you or are you not an Abruzzo?”

My stomach churns. I answer, “I’m not, but things are complicated.”

She scrunches her face, choking out, “Meaning?”

I open my mouth then close it.

“Tell me,” she orders.

“It’s not something we should talk about out here. But your mother thought I was one,” I confess.

“You let her think you were one. My young, impressionable daughter. She was barely an adult,” Pierre seethes.

I clench my jaw and refocus on him. In normal circumstances, he wouldn't even question everyone in the world thinking I was an Abruzzo and not a Marino.

It makes me wonder if the last month of me not being undercover and taking my rightful place in the family made all the reasons disappear.

Will I be a bad guy forever because I held my cover for so long?

I utter, "You know how our world works and what my job was, Pierre."

A neighbor steps out into the hallway, voicing, "What's going on here?"

We ignore her.

Chanel's mom appears, pulling Zara inside. She returns to the door and shoots daggers at me with her glare, fuming, "You have a lot of nerve coming here."

The neighbor gets louder, threatening, "Do I need to call the cops, Sophia?"

Massimo grunts, answering, "Lady, you call the cops, and you're gonna have problems for the rest of your life. Mainly finding a new home. Mind your own business."

"Massimo!" Pierre reprimands.

Sophia steps outside, forcing a smile. "Connie, I'm really sorry for the disturbance. We're having a little family issue. Everything's fine. Please go back inside."

Connie's leer shifts between Massimo and Sophia. She claims, "This is not something that should happen in our building."

Massimo groans.

Sophia steps closer to her. "Yes, I know. I'm very sorry. Please forgive us. You won't hear from us again." She spins, points to the door, and orders, "Inside. All of you. Now."

We obey and she shuts the door. "Sit," she instructs to all of us.

None of us move.

“I said to sit,” she warns.

Massimo and Pierre take a seat on the sofa. It’s the same furniture I bought Chanel years ago. I stare at it.

Sophia declares, “You, too, Luca.”

I tear my gaze off the furniture and lock my eyes on Zara. She looks so distraught and confused. I can’t blame her. And I hate that she’s hurting so much.

I want to tug my daughter to me and tell her it’ll all be okay. The fear that I may never be able to do that ignites, and it’s more painful than I ever anticipated.

That pain multiplies. She’s so grown up. She’s almost fifteen, and I’ve missed everything. I wasn’t present for all her birthdays, special occasions, and little milestones that kids go through. She knew nothing about me the entire time, and all I see is the sorrow that caused her.

I should have been there to protect her.

I would have loved her.

I could have made different decisions in my life.

Chanel never gave me the chance.

Rage builds within me. It spins like a hurricane and makes me nauseous. I swallow down bile, not able to take my eyes off Zara.

Sophia steps next to Zara. She circles her arm around her waist and snaps, “Sit down, Luca!”

I swallow more bile.

She turns to Zara. “Ma choupinette, why don’t you go to your room?”

Zara lifts her chin, declaring, “No, I’m not going to my room.”

“The adults need to talk,” Sophia claims.

Zara’s eyes glow hotter. She explodes, “I will not be left in the dark any longer! Enough with the secrets! I’m not leaving this room!”

Sophia's eyes turn into slits. "Zara—"

"She can stay," I interject.

Sophia gapes at me then asserts, "This is not your decision."

Pride sweeps me. Zara isn't just beautiful. She's able to stand up for herself and isn't afraid of the truth.

I seethe at Sophia, "Hell, if it's not. She's *my* daughter." I lock eyes with Zara and soften my tone. "Go sit down if you want to stay."

She slowly makes her way to the couch, and more guilt consumes me.

Who protected her when she needed it?

What's her life been like, growing up without a father?

The pain of losing mine flashes in my mind. I curse Chanel for not telling me about Zara. She knows I lost my father at a young age. I never wanted to be a deadbeat dad.

But now I am.

That's going to change.

I vow to do whatever I can to have a relationship with Zara, whether or not Chanel or her parents like it.

Surely at fifteen, it's Zara's decision?

Will she let me into her life after all these years?

I lock eyes with Sophia, warning, "Don't try to come between my daughter and me. Now that I know about her, you can't hide her from me anymore."

"They didn't know," Chanel states.

My anger builds. I turn, and I scowl at her for the first time in my life.

Tense silence fills the air.

Massimo breaks it. "Can someone please get my gun? I think this is a conversation between all of you that I shouldn't be part of."

Chanel glances at him, wincing. "I'm sorry about that."

He rises, stating, “We’ll talk later. Where is it?”

She goes to her purse, pulls it out, and hands it to him.

He hesitates then tugs her into him, murmuring, “I’m a phone call away if you need me.”

She sniffles and nods. They exchange a glance, and he releases her.

He kisses Zara on the head then says, “Pierre. Sophia.” He gives me another disgusted look then leaves.

I ignore him and focus on Chanel again. “We need to talk.”

She squeezes her eyes shut.

I address Zara. “Forgive me for a moment.” I rush toward Chanel and maneuver her into her bedroom.

“Luca, what—”

I shut and lock the door then steer her into her bathroom and secure that door as well.

“What are you doing?” she screeches.

I spin her against the door and eliminate any room between us. The scent of her strawberry shampoo wafts in my nostrils. I take a deep breath then curse myself for the hard-on it’s starting to cause.

What is it about this woman?

I can’t even be pissed at her without being attracted to her.

I fume, “How could you hide my own flesh and blood from me?”

Guilt fills her expression. Her bottom lip trembles. Tears well in her eyes.

“Stellina, answer me,” I demand.

Pain fills her so much, it hurts me. Hot tears stream down her cheeks.

I soften my tone, questioning, “Why?”

“You know why,” she answers.

Several moments pass, both of us breathing hard, trying to decipher what we've done and how to get past it.

"You could have trusted me," she asserts.

I close my eyes then glance above her head. My pulse pounds loudly between my ears.

She adds, "Would you have subjected your daughter to an Abruzzo?"

It's a knife digging at an old wound and letting fresh blood pool. I can't lie and answer, "No. But you didn't give me a chance to change things."

"How would I know you would change things? Men don't leave the Abruzzos because they knock a woman up!" she points out.

My chest tightens. I shake my head. "I would have blown my cover. I would have taken my rightful position in the Marino family."

She shakes her head, and more tears fall. She sobs, "How would I have known that?"

It's a fair question. And that's our problem. There's no right in this situation.

The entire situation is wrong.

Her actions.

My actions.

All of it is a mixture of one secret after another. There's no clear answer about what decision was right.

And the power of her close to me is too much. She's all I've ever wanted. Yet now, everything is more complicated than I could ever anticipate.

I step back and claim, "I won't stay away from my daughter."

She squeezes her eyes shut.

I add, "I'll pick both of you up for the wedding tomorrow."

She opens her eyes. "What?"

I firmly state, “Let me be very clear. I will not be absent in her life anymore, Chanel. I’m going to get to know my daughter. So you can join us or not, but I’m spending the day with my daughter.”

She tilts her head. An ocean of tears falls off her chin. “Luca —”

“And tell your parents to stay out of this. They can either get past this or not. Their choice. But they won’t stop me, either,” I warn, then leave the bathroom.

“Luca!” she calls out, trailing behind me.

I go into the main room, beelining toward Zara. I pull out my phone. “What’s your phone number?”

Her eyes widen.

Sophia rises. “You don’t have the right—”

“Stay out of it, Mom,” Chanel interjects.

I glance at her, but it’s still too painful. I hate that she’s hurting and there’s nothing I can do about it right now. I refocus on Zara and ask in a softer tone, “Can I have your phone number?”

She rattles it off, and I program it in my cell. I shoot her a text.

Me: *It’s your dad. Save my number.*

I lean down and kiss the top of her head then proclaim, “I’ll pick you and your mom up tomorrow. Contact me at any time.”

She gapes at me.

I leave, trying to process everything but determined to never again disappoint or not be there for my daughter.



Chanel

The Next Day

NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES I TRY TO EXPLAIN TO ZARA WHY I didn't tell Luca about her, it doesn't lessen her anger.

She always replies, "You should have told him. He would have loved me."

"That was never the issue," I admit.

My answer only seems to upset her more. She gets emotional, choking out, "Then how could you keep him from me?"

I repeat for what seems like the millionth time, "I thought he was an Abruzzo. He confirmed it. I didn't know the truth. And I would never put you in that kind of danger."

"Oh, so this is my father's fault?" she questions, her cheeks turning redder.

My insides quiver. "No. It was both our fault."

Zara's expression tells me that she isn't going to blame Luca for any of this. Her phone vibrates, and she snags it off the table. A tiny smile lights up her face.

Jealousy flares inside me. The text messages started last evening before she locked herself in her bedroom. They've continued this morning, and I know it's Luca.

Now that I know he's a Marino, I shouldn't feel this jealousy. I've always known that Luca would have been an amazing dad. So I shouldn't be anything but happy that she's finally going to have a relationship with him.

And I do want her to have one.

Yet, I can't help feeling like she'll always hate me and never forgive me. I'm afraid that the closer she gets to Luca, the more I'll be pushed away. I'm scared our relationship will never recover.

Zara glances at me, announcing, "He's on his way up."

I stand taller, nodding, my butterflies taking flight.

She adds, "You need to add him to security. My father shouldn't have to stop at the security desk."

I clench my jaw, not saying anything. Luca having full access to my life isn't something I can wrap my head around. He may be a Marino, but the danger flags still pop into my mind.

Not that he would hurt Zara or me. That's never been the issue. It's always been about the Abruzzos finding out. Now that they're no longer a danger, the flags shouldn't be there. But all of this is more complex than I ever imagined.

And I can't help but feel like I'm the only villain in this when Luca should be, too. I accept my role. But he never trusted me enough to tell me the truth. Part of me understands it, yet the other is mad as hell. That's the demon inside me that questions if he really would have made a different choice. Would he have blown his cover and taken his position in the Marino family for Zara and me? If he had, would the Abruzzos come after us since they weren't dead at the time?

No matter how many times I ask myself these questions, there are never any clear answers.

I barely slept last night. When I did, I dreamed of Luca. But this time, it wasn't the normal dreams I typically have. It was of him and Zara. She was getting married, and he was walking her down the aisle. But I still felt like an outsider.

I woke up in tears.

So while I am happy Zara has her father in her life, I've never felt so alone or scared.

And I still want him. Last night, every emotion I ever felt for him swirled among all the new ones when he was with me. Yet, I'm not stupid. There's too much deception. How could any couple ever get past it?

Couple.

We've never been a couple.

The truth only hurts me more.

There's a knock on the door. My gut flips. I'm not ready to see Luca again, but I don't have a choice.

Zara bounces out of her seat, practically running to the door and yanks it open. She throws herself at him, "Hi!"

He embraces her back, his face lighting up with pure joy.

My jealousy flares again.

I need to stop. This isn't the person I want to be.

He steps inside with the most gorgeous bouquet of red roses I've ever seen.

Zara chirps, "Are those for me?"

He nervously pins his dark gaze on me. And damn him for doing so. Heat flickers in them as he sizes me up. He tears his gaze off me and refocuses on Zara. "No. I have something else for you. These are for your mom."

My heart swoons, and I wish it didn't.

Luca closes the distance between us and hands them to me. He quickly kisses my cheek, inquiring in a low tone, "How you doing, stellina?"

My butterflies flutter harder. Luca's wearing a black tux. He's the epitome of how a man should look in one—pure eye candy. His broad shoulders fill it perfectly. His torso tapers to his hips. And the outline of his muscular thighs is prevalent under his pants.

It's the first time I've ever seen him in a tux. A flashback of how our bodies used to fit together like puzzle pieces flares in my mind. I wonder if they still would. Then I reprimand myself because that's never happening.

There's too much between us.

His signature scent of white musk and patchouli mixed with weed floats between us, but it's lighter, as if he maybe hasn't smoked as much as normal.

Nothing has changed, yet everything has, and his stellina nickname causes a mix of joy and pain. But I don't reprimand him. I clear my throat, replying, "As good as to be expected. You?"

He offers a tiny smile. "Same."

We don't move for a moment. His gaze drops to my lips, and my heart races faster. He murmurs, "You look beautiful."

Heat fills my cheeks. I have no makeup on, and my hair isn't done.

He suddenly spins then reaches into his tux jacket. He pulls out a long box, holds it out, and declares, "This is for you, Zara."

Her eyes light up. "What is it?"

He chuckles, instructing, "Open it and see."

She cautiously pulls at the ribbon then slowly opens the lid. She gapes at it then at him.

He nervously asks, "Does the look on your face mean you like it?"

"Like it? I love it! It's gorgeous!" she exclaims.

"It was my mother's. I thought you should have it," he declares.

I don't miss the hint of sadness in his voice or eyes. My heart clenches the same way it always does whenever I think about the story he told me about his parents' deaths.

Zara's eyes glisten. She pulls the necklace out of the box. "Thank you, Dad. This is amazing."

Dad.

I fight more jealousy, continuing to hate myself for feeling this way.

Luca steps forward. "Do you want to try it on?"

"Yes, but can I wear it today?" she questions.

"Of course," he replies, then takes the necklace from her. She moves her hair over one shoulder, and he clasps it around her neck.

Zara spins, and Luca smiles.

He softly states, "Your grandmother would have loved to see you in it."

Zara furrows her eyebrows, inquiring, "What happened to her?"

Luca hesitates then answers, "Let's talk about your grandparents at a different time. Okay?"

She opens her mouth then shuts it. Then she quietly says, "Okay."

I step forward to study the necklace. It's a gold, Italian, diamond-cut beaded choker. I offer, "It's absolutely stunning."

Zara puts her hand over it. "I'm going to go look in the mirror!" She runs out of the room.

Tense silence fills the air.

Luca reaches into his pocket and takes out his phone. He asks, "What's your phone number?"

It's a question he asked me in the past, yet I'd never give it to him. My initial reaction is to change the subject. I open my mouth, but he cocks an eyebrow. I freeze.

He states, "We have a daughter together."

I wince. "I know. Old habits die hard."

His lips twitch. He nods then asks again, "Number?"

I rattle it off, and he programs it into his cell. He taps the screen, and my text alert ringer fills the air.

I nervously laugh. “Guess that’s you?”

“Yep. Can’t escape me now,” he states, then winks.

My insides turn to Jell-O.

Zara reappears, chirping, “We should go so we’re not late.”

Luca and I tear our eyes off each other. He takes the garment bags and duffle from her. “I’ve got this.”

She beams at him.

He motions to the door. “Ladies first.”

I inhale deeply, passing him and feeling his eyes on me. We get into the hall then the elevator, and Zara slides her arm through his. She announces, “This is the first wedding I’ve ever been in.”

He puffs his chest. “Glad I get to be there.”

We get through the building. Luca leads us to his SUV and we slide inside.

We travel several blocks, and the driver veers onto the expressway. He cuts someone off, and horns blare. Luca barks, “Stop driving like a maniac. My family is here.”

Zara beams brighter.

My heart swoons again.

I’m doomed.

Both of us are forever doomed. There’s no way to stop loving Luca once you know him.

Zara chats the entire way. Luca tries to pull me into the conversation, but Zara keeps redirecting me out of it. When we get to our destination, I’m relieved.

Luca escorts us to the bridal suite.

Zara shrieks, “Aunt Pina!” She throws her arms around her.

Pina laughs and hugs her tight. “Ready for your hair and makeup?”

“Duh,” Zara chirps.

Pina points to the vanity and the team of professionals standing near it. “They’re waiting for you.”

Zara claps and then sits on the bench. “See you later, Dad.”

“Dad?” Pina utters, but only I can hear. She shoots daggers at Luca.

“Be nice,” I quietly warn.

Pina arrived unannounced after the rehearsal dinner. We stayed up for hours. I told her everything, including the parts I left out when I told my parents and Zara. For some reason, it didn’t seem necessary to explain Luca’s and my relationship over the years to them.

I felt so guilty for ruining her big day by causing such a big scene. I apologized dozens of times.

Pina laughed it off, stating, “At least I have the rehearsal dinner no one will ever forget about.”

That comment only made me groan with further embarrassment. But I was relieved she wasn’t angry with me. However, no matter how much I told her not to be angry at Luca, she wouldn’t let him off the hook.

And I guess that’s why she’s my best friend. She’s always had my back. I feel like nobody else does right now, so I’m extra grateful for her.

Luca announces he’s leaving, gives me another panty-melting once-over, then leaves.

Once he’s out of the room, I relax a bit.

Throughout the morning, we get our hair and makeup done, then put on our bridesmaid dresses. Yet, it’s clear that Zara still hasn’t forgiven me.

She barely looks at me and doesn’t engage in any conversation unless I specifically ask her a question. She’s chipper with everyone else, and it doesn’t go unnoticed.

Pina finally pulls her aside and claims, “Hey, it’s my wedding. So you have to do what I say today.”

Zara puts her hand on her hip, whining, “Really? Are you going to make me do something crazy?”

“Nope. But you have to do whatever I want,” Pina reiterates.

Zara shrugs. “Okay, but someday, when it’s my wedding day, I’m going to make you do what I want.”

“Deal,” Pina agrees.

“So, what do you want me to do for you?” Zara asks.

Pina leans forward and murmurs something in her ear.

Zara’s face hardens. I’ve seen that expression over the years, and it reminds me of Luca every time.

Pina gives her a challenging stare.

Zara glances at me then refocuses on Pina. She sighs, claiming, “I’ll try.”

Pina smiles big then adds, “Do better than try. It’s my wedding day.”

Zara groans then nods. “Okay. You win.” She turns to me. “You look nice, Mom.”

I blink hard. “Thanks, sweetie. So do you.”

“I’m here,” the seamstress sings, arriving with the wedding gown.

Within minutes, Pina’s wearing it.

“Wow! You look amazing,” I state, studying the sleeveless, form-fitting, white, Italian-lace gown. My eyes fill with tears again.

“No crying!” the makeup artist orders, then steps in front of me and dabs under my eyelids.

Pina’s face lights up, and I’m so happy for my friend. If anyone deserves a happy ending, it’s her.

Ashley, the wedding coordinator, comes in and claps. “Oh my gosh, you look gorgeous!” she screeches.

“Thanks,” Pina replies, then looks at me and rolls her eyes. She’s not a fan of the wedding planner’s personality, but she

claimed she's the best in New York.

"Time to move, or we'll be late," Ashley announces.

"Isn't it good to be fashionably late?" Zara asks.

Ashley answers, "Yes, but the priest is old. Let's make sure we get this wedding done before he keels over."

"Is he sick?" I ask with concern.

She shakes her head. "No. But I don't put it past him to keel over and die during the vows."

Pina once again rolls her eyes.

"Chop chop," Ashley orders.

The wedding party follows her to the makeshift church. There are so many people in attendance there wasn't room at any church in New York. So Angelo had the priest agree to do the ceremony here, and a replica of the Marinos' church was created, just on a larger scale.

The music starts, and the bridesmaids all saunter down the aisle. Zara is in front of me, and when she gets halfway down the aisle, Ashley orders me to go.

I move toward the front, and when I get closer, Luca appears. He's the last groomsman, standing next to Gianni. Flames burn in his eyes, and my knees almost give out.

Damn him for giving me that look.

I take my place next to Zara and wait for Pina to arrive.

The music changes to the traditional wedding song, and everyone stands. Pina gets to the front. Her father lifts her veil, kisses her cheek, then says something in Tristano's ear. He chuckles then takes Pina's hand and kisses it. He leads her toward the priest, and she hands me her bouquet.

It's a full Catholic mass. It takes over an hour, and I spend too many minutes peeking at Luca. He catches me often, and when it's time for the vows, he pins his gaze on me.

The room disappears. All I see is him. And as Pina and Tristano profess their lifelong commitment to each other, it

chokes me up.

If only Luca and I could start all over.

We can't though.

The priest announces, "You may kiss your bride."

Tristano gives Pina a long, hot kiss. The room erupts in cheers, and the newlyweds exit.

Massimo steps forward and escorts me down the aisle. When I get to the end, I turn.

Luca must have jumped in front of Dante. He's proudly escorting a beaming Zara down the aisle.

We take our places with Pina and Tristano and wait for all the other guests to exit. Luca's eyes rest only on Zara and me. Several times, my cheeks heat from his stare.

Once everyone is through the receiving line, we head into the next room for appetizers.

Zara never leaves her father's side. She radiates happiness, except when she glances at me.

When it's time to sit for dinner, Luca pulls out a chair for me. I take it, and he pulls another one out. Zara sits. He takes the seat between us.

It's not how Pina assigned the wedding party, but I doubt she cares.

Massimo makes a speech. My cheeks heat as the events of the previous night come racing back. There are a lot of people in attendance who weren't at the rehearsal dinner, but I can still feel many people staring at me.

Luca must sense my embarrassment. He slides his hand under the table and places it on my thigh, gently squeezing it.

I inhale deeply, avoiding his stare, keeping my eyes on Massimo. When it's done, he glances at me, but I shake my head.

Angelo grabs the microphone and gives his speech.

When it's over, I sigh.

Luca leans into my ear, teasing, “Not as exciting as last night.”

I turn my head.

Humor lights up his face. It helps me relax a little.

I reply, “Hope I didn’t disappoint you.”

“Who taught you to hold a gun?” he asks.

“My father. I was twelve,” I confess.

He arches his eyebrows, revealing, “Part of me thought you were going to shoot me.”

I cringe. “Sorry.”

He grins. “Guess you owe me a dance, stellina.”

My flutters burst into motion again.

A server interrupts us, shoving a plate of food in front of us.

I take several cold mouthfuls of water. We eat our dinner and then the dancing begins.

Luca takes Zara on the dance floor, and they stay there almost the entire night. I mingle with the guests. Later, I step out of the bathroom and I run into Luca.

“Hi,” I say.

“Just who I was looking for,” he claims, then grabs my hand. He drags me out on the dance floor, and a new slow song begins to play.

Luca tugs me close. The world could disappear, and I’d die happy. Then he drops a bomb on me. He informs me, “I’m spending the day with Zara tomorrow.”

I glance up, fighting the jealousy rearing its ugly head. “Oh. Okay. What are you two going to be doing?”

He locks eyes with me. “We’re going to pick out her bedroom furniture.”

A cold chill runs down my spine. I freeze, gaping at him.

He gives me a challenging stare.

I accuse, “You’re going to try and get custody of her?”

He shakes his head. “No. We’ll share it.”

I blink hard, shaking my head. “No.”

“Stellina—”

“Do not try to take my daughter from me, Luca. I’m warning you.”

“I would never—”

“Then what—”

“I want both of you to live with me,” he claims.

More shock fills me. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

His eyes drill into mine with a determination that scares me. He asserts, “We were meant to be together, stellina. I’ve always wanted you. And you’ve wanted me. Nothing has changed in that regard.”

“But everything else has changed,” I blurt out.

He slides his hand on my cheek. “Yes. And now we can all be together.”

The DJ announces it’s time for the bouquet toss. He instructs all the single ladies to get on the dance floor.

Zara comes running up, excited. “I hope I catch it!”

Luca tears his eyes off mine. He states, “You better not have any ideas in your head to get married anytime soon!”

“Duh.” She giggles.

Women fill the floor. I slip through the crowd and go outside for fresh air.

I’m outside awhile before Luca calls out, “Chanel!”

I spin. “It’s not that easy, Luca.”

“Why not?” he questions.

I turn away from him, muttering, “Neither of us has ever fully trusted the other.”

He steps in front of me. “From now on, we will.”



Luca

The Next Day

IT DIDN'T MATTER HOW MUCH I TRIED TO CONVINCING CHANEL we could finally make us work. I could see the doubt all over her face.

It's my fault. Too many years of too much deceit is creating her caution.

I can't say I blame her. She's a single mother who would do anything for her child. And if I step back and think about all she had to deal with on her own at such a young age, I'm in awe—especially when she thought I was an Abruzzo.

Zara's amazing. The only complaint I have is how she's treating Chanel. But I plan to put an end to that today.

“What do you think?” I ask her, my stomach jittery. I don't usually care what people think about my place—not that I've had many people visit me over the years.

Zara glances around the suite in my penthouse I thought would be best for her. It's in a different wing than my bedroom. I thought it was best to give her some privacy since she's a teenager and soon to be an adult.

Her expression lights up brighter. “I love it!”

Relief hits me. I point to the wall, stating, “If you want, we can turn that room into a game room so you have more space when your friends come over.”

“I can invite my friends here?” she inquires.

“Of course,” I state, but I also have my reasons for wanting her to hang out here. If she’s here, I can keep my eye on her. I can ensure she’s hanging out with a good crowd and not getting into anything bad.

She throws her arms around me. “Thanks, Dad!”

I hug her tight, grateful I finally found out about her. “You’re welcome. Should we go to lunch then to the store?”

She retreats. “Sure.”

We leave the penthouse and get into my SUV. “Your mom told me you like sushi?”

“Love it,” she affirms.

“Great. I know a hole in the wall you’re going to love,” I claim.

She beams. “What’s it called?”

“Sushi.”

She cocks her eyebrows. “Original.”

I nod. “Yep. But it’s amazing. Promise.”

Her phone buzzes, and she glances at it, groaning.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Didn’t sound like nothing,” I push.

She rolls her eyes, admitting, “It’s just my mom.”

I decide to hold off on our conversation until we get to the restaurant. I ask, “Is everything okay?”

“She wanted to know if I’ll be home for dinner,” she replies.

I calculate how long we’ll be out and assert, “Tell her I’ll have you home no later than six.”

Zara tilts her head and looks at me in question.

“What’s wrong?”

She cautiously asks, “Can I stay with you?”

My chest tightens. I’d love nothing more, but I don’t want Chanel freaking out. I choose my words carefully, answering, “I have work I need to do tonight, so I won’t be home. But you can another night.”

Her face falls. She inquires, “On a Sunday night?”

I nod. “Sure. Doesn’t your grandpa work on Sunday nights sometimes?”

She takes a deep breath, but her expression looks more upset. She says, “Yes.”

I study her. “What’s wrong?”

She bites her lip then turns toward the window. “Nothing.”

I reach for her chin and turn it back. I assert, “Something is wrong.”

She hesitates then admits, “I want to live with you.”

My mouth turns dry. I reply, “Your mother would be devastated.”

She shrugs. “She’d get over it.”

I shake my head, insisting, “No, she wouldn’t.”

Zara shifts in her seat. She claims, “She’s had me almost fifteen years. I’ll be living on my own in a few years. Why can’t I spend a few with you?”

“You’d miss your mom,” I declare.

“No, I wouldn’t. Please,” she begs.

The car pulls up to the sushi restaurant, and I suggest, “Let’s continue this conversation inside.” I get out of the vehicle then reach in to help Zara out. I guide her into the restaurant, and the hostess seats us in the booth in the back.

She glances around then proclaims, “Total hole in the wall. I love places like this!”

I pat myself on the back for getting it right. “Yeah?”

“My mom and I always try to find places like this. We have a list of ones we hear about that we need to go to,” she informs me.

“Maybe we can tackle that list together,” I state.

Zara’s grin widens. “That would be fun.”

A server sets two glasses of water in front of us. “Did you know what you want?”

I ask Zara, “What do you like?”

“Everything.”

“Want me to order?”

“Sure!” she chirps.

I order a Koni and seaweed salad, salmon and fatty tuna sashimi, and four signature rolls that no one else in New York City makes. The server writes it down and leaves.

With caution, I get my thoughts in order and comment, “Let’s finish our conversation.”

“If you let me come live with you, I promise I won’t be a pest,” she states.

I jerk my head backward then reply, “That thought never even entered my mind.”

“Oh. Okay. So can I?” she pleads and bats her eyelashes at me.

I groan inside. I have no doubt the boys are going to be after her. I’m going to have to keep a close eye on things.

Another reason Chanel should come live with me.

I make a mental note to add it to the list when I talk to her about it again.

“Please,” she whines.

I take a deep breath, trying not to throw Chanel under the bus and answering, “You can live with me if your mom does.”

Confusion fills Zara’s face. She tilts her head. “You want her to live with us?”

“Yes.”

“Why? She never told you about me.”

“Your mom told you her reasons, correct?” I ask.

Zara’s face darkens. “She said she was afraid the Abruzzos would find out about me and hurt me.”

I lean closer and grab her hand. “Yes. And your mom wasn’t wrong in her thinking. They do horrible things. She did everything she could to protect you.”

“But you wouldn’t have hurt me. I asked her if she ever thought you would hurt me, and she admitted she didn’t,” Zara informs me.

Her admission makes me feel good. At least Chanel knew I would never harm Zara. I declare, “But if the Abruzzos knew about you, I wouldn’t have been able to guarantee your safety. Your mother made the right choice.”

“She kept me from you,” Zara asserts.

I sigh. “I know this is hard to understand, but I need you to trust me.”

She stares at me with a hardened expression.

I ask, “Do you trust me, Zara?”

Her face softens. She nods and quietly answers, “Yes.”

I continue, “With your life?”

“Of course!”

“Okay. You’ve known me for less than forty-eight hours. You’ve known your mother your entire life. Don’t you think she deserves for you to give her some slack?” I question.

Zara stays quiet.

“If the Abruzzos ever wanted to hurt me, they would have hurt you.”

Fear crosses her expression. She blurts out, “But my mom told me I don’t have to worry about that right now. Is that the truth, or should I worry?”

I glance around to make sure no one else is close enough to overhear. Keeping my voice low, I reassure her. “No, you don’t. Everyone who would have hurt you is dead.”

“Did you kill them?” she asks.

Stunned by her questions, I lie, “No.”

“No?” she asks.

Part of me feels pride. She’s so smart. I love how Zara’s direct and not afraid to ask hard questions. But it also concerns me. I take a minute before answering. “No, I didn’t. But you should know I’ll never discuss my work with you. It’s a hard limit I won’t cross.”

Hurt fills her expression.

I add, “It’s for your safety.”

She takes a minute to digest it then nods. “All right. That’s fair.”

I continue, “So back to your mom. She did what she should have. And if I can live with it and forgive her, so should you.”

Surprise fills Zara. She questions in a hurt tone, “You forgive her?”

I lean closer. “Yes. She dedicated her life to raising you and keeping you safe. I’ll always be grateful to her for that.”

Zara purses her lips.

I add, “Maybe I’m wrong about you.”

“Meaning?”

“I thought you were mature for your age, but maybe I overestimated that a bit,” I state, hoping it doesn’t bite me in the ass.

She scrunches her face, claiming, “You weren’t wrong.”

“No?”

“No,” she answers, as if insulted.

“Then I need you to show me you are. Holding a grudge against your mom and treating her how you’ve been is

immature,” I assert.

Zara’s face turns red. She accuses, “She told you to talk to me, didn’t she?”

“She’s done no such thing.”

“Then why are you sticking up for her?”

I don’t back down. “I’m not looking to fight with you. But did you listen to what I just said?”

She takes a deep breath, losing a bit of her attitude. “Yes.”

“Okay. Well, there’s that and another thing,” I claim.

“Which is...?”

I admit, “There’s only one woman I’ve ever loved. It’s your mother.”

“You loved her?”

“I still love her. Always have and always will.”

Zara tilts her head. “Like love her as in just basic love or *in* love with her?”

“*In* love. Madly, deeply, whatever the word you use for the greatest amount of love a man can have for a woman, that’s how I feel about your mom,” I declare.

Her eyes widen. “Even after what she’s done?”

I confess, “I’m at more fault than she is for our situation.”

“How is that?”

“I didn’t trust your mom enough to tell her who I really was when I could have. So if you want to blame someone, you blame me, not her,” I insist.

Zara stays quiet.

The server brings two plates and the salads. “Do you need anything else?”

“I’m good. Zara?” I ask.

She shakes her head then smiles at the server. “This is perfect. Thank you.”

The server leaves.

Zara stares at me.

I put equal amounts of the Koni and seaweed salad on a plate and hand it to her. Then I dish the same for myself.

She inquires, “Are you going to try and win my mom back?”

I hold back my grin. While I’m determined to win Chanel, I don’t want Zara to hold it over her head if she doesn’t come around. I cautiously answer, “Your mom and I have a lot to work through.”

“But you want her?” Zara questions.

“I want to earn your mother’s trust and see you treat her with kindness and love,” I reply.

Zara stares at her plate.

“Hey,” I say.

She looks up.

I soften my tone. “I know you love your mom.”

Her eyes glisten. She snuffles, blinking hard.

“My parents are dead. I’d give anything for another minute with them,” I confess.

She says, “I’m sorry. What happened to them?”

My stomach flips, but I decide I won’t lie about this one. I reply, “Jacopo Abruzzo killed my father when I was seven. My mother committed suicide several years later.”

She gapes at me in horror.

I continue, “So the next time you want to ignore your mom or say something nasty, I want you to remember that anything can happen at any minute. Every second we have on this earth is precious, borrowed time. And one day, I guarantee you this, if you don’t show her love and respect, you’ll regret it.”

She stays quiet.

I add, “And I don’t want that for you. Nor does your mom deserve it.”

More silence fills the air.

I point to her plate, ordering, “Eat.”

We spend a few minutes eating the salads.

Zara states, “I don’t mean to treat her badly.”

“I know. But you have been.”

She swipes at a tear.

I grab her hand again. “You can change this very easily.”

She nods. “Okay. I will.”

“Promise me?”

She lifts her chin. “I promise.”

“Good girl.”

We eat the rest of our salad in silence. The sashimi and rolls arrive.

Once the server leaves, I state, “I have a question for you.”

Zara arches her eyebrows.

My nerves reignite. “Do you ever stay the night at your grandparents’?”

She replies, “Yes. All the time. Why?”

“Can you do me a favor?”

She puts her chopsticks down. “Sure. What is it?”

“Do you know if your mom has plans tomorrow night?”

Zara thinks a minute then says, “Not unless Massimo needs her for a flight. Sometimes it’s last minute.”

I pull out my phone and swipe the screen. Then I send a text to him.

Me: *Does Chanel have to work tomorrow night or Tuesday?*

Massimo: *Why should I tell you?*

Me: *Stop being a dick. Holding a grudge doesn’t suit you.*

Massimo: *No. She’s free.*

Me: *Thanks.*

Massimo: *If you fuck with her, I'll kill you.*

Me: *Thanks for thinking so highly of me.*

Massimo: *Just giving you a fair warning.*

Me: *Noted.*

I set my phone down. I state, "Massimo says she's free."

"And?" Zara asks.

"I have another favor," I confess.

"What?" She shoves a roll into her mouth and then groans. She utters, "So good."

I chuckle. "Told you."

She chews, swallows, then takes a sip of water. She wipes her mouth with a napkin and drills her greens into me. "What's the favor?"

"Can you stay with your grandparents tomorrow night?" I request.

"Why?"

"I want to take your mom out."

"I can stay home by myself. I'm almost fifteen," she claims.

I almost blurt out overnight but catch myself. Instead, I reveal, "I'm in a dangerous line of work. I've seen a lot of bad things happen. Can you humor me and stay there for the night?"

She wrinkles her nose, interrogating, "Is this so you can sleep with Mom?"

Hell yeah.

And wake up with her.

And then sleep with her some more.

I firmly answer, "Zara, can I tell you a secret?"

"Sure." She dips a roll into the soy sauce and pops it into her mouth.

While she's chewing, I confess, "You asked me if I wanted to win your mom over. Well, I'll be honest with you. I do. And I don't blame her if she never trusts me again. But we have a lot of issues to work through, and I can't concentrate on fixing those if I'm worried about you being home alone."

She swallows and asks, "Does winning my mom back mean you'd be together?"

I hold back from telling her the truth. "I can't answer that. All I'm looking for is to earn your mom's trust at this point."

She points out, "But you said you're in love with her. Is that true?"

"Yes. It is."

Her lips curl. "So if you win her over, would we both be able to move in with you?"

I chuckle inside. I should have known she'd put two and two together. Still, I don't want her pressuring her mom. If Chanel forgives and loves me, it must be her choice. So I reply, "In a perfect world, I'd love nothing more than that. But the world isn't perfect. So I'll reiterate that I'm looking to earn your mother's trust."

She smirks. "Plus, you want her to fall madly in love with you again."

I point to her food and order, "Eat your sushi," and shove a roll into my mouth.

She obeys, and we eat in silence for a while. Then she states, "Okay. I'll stay with my grandparents. Let me text to see if it's okay with them." She pulls her phone out of her pocket and sends them a message.

Her phone buzzes, and she reads the reply. She grins. "All set. You can put the moves on my mom."

"I'm not addressing that comment," I state.

She smirks again.

I reiterate, "And you're going to return to being nice to your mom, correct?"

She rolls her eyes and huffs. “Yes, Dad.”

Dad.

Every time she says it, it feels surreal.

“Good girl,” I praise.

Her eyes sparkle. She bites her lip and stares at me.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I question.

She hesitates then asks, “Can I see your birthmark?”

“Sure.” I unfasten two buttons on my shirt and then pull the collar to the side.

Zara leans over the table and mutters, “Huh.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

She sits back, and I close my shirt back up. She states, “It really does look just like mine. And it’s kind of amazing how it’s on the same spot.”

I nod. “Yeah, it is.”

She beams. “I know what will make my mom happy when I get home.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

She grins, admitting, “I’ll confess how I don’t want a tattoo anymore.”



Chanel

The Next Day

ALL DAY, I'VE BEEN TRYING TO STAY BUSY AND NOT WORRY about tonight.

It's impossible.

Luca dropped Zara off yesterday and asked to speak with me privately. Zara ran to her room without any objection. It made me suspicious that she knew what he wanted to talk to me about, making me more nervous.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He locked his flaming eyes on mine like he could somehow see right into my soul. I shifted on my feet, trying to maintain my composure as he stated, "I want to take you out to dinner tomorrow night. Are you free?"

My butterflies went crazy. I blurted out, "Like a date?"

He grinned. "Yes, stellina. A date we should have had years ago."

My nerves expanded. Luca's the only man I've ever truly wanted, but I'm still coming to terms with who he is and that it's okay for him to be in Zara's and my life.

I must have hesitated too long because he stepped forward, circled his arm around my waist, and pulled me close to his

hard frame. He fisted my hair and tugged my head backward.

I gasped, and my knees weakened.

He held me tighter. The faint hint of weed, white musk, and patchouli hit me like a drug. His lips moved inches from mine. He glanced at them then refocused on me, asking, “Do you want me to beg? I will.”

I nervously laughed, cursing myself when my gaze darted to his mouth. I retorted, “I didn’t know begging was your thing.”

His lips twitched. He affirmed, “It’s normally not, but I’ll swallow my pride and do it if you require me to.”

All my thoughts disappeared. My brain became a mushy mess of everything Luca.

“So? Are you going to agree, or do I have to remind you about other things?” he murmured.

I whispered, “What things?”

He closed the gap between us so quickly that I didn’t have time to retreat.

Not that I would have the power to anyway.

His tongue parted my lips, and I submitted to him, pinning my fingers against his head, not wanting his mouth to ever leave mine.

But I wasn’t the only one affected. Luca’s erection pushed against my stomach, creating a deep ache in my core that made the world disappear.

Then he broke our kiss, pulling me back into reality.

Both of us were out of breath, yet he maintained his composure better. The flames in his stare burned hotter. He arrogantly stated, “I’ll pick you up at seven. Zara’s staying at your parents’.” He didn’t remove his arm from my waist, as if he knew I would fall if he did.

It was a good thing. I was still trying to regain my balance. I swallowed hard, asking, “Zara knows about this?”

“Yes.”

My maternal instincts kicked in, and I fretted, “I think we shouldn’t put ideas into her head.”

His face fell. He questioned, “About us?”

My voice cracked when I said, “Yes.”

He grazed his thumb over my lips and replied, “Don’t worry, stellina. I’ve managed this situation.”

“How?” I inquired, finding my footing and standing taller.

“I told her we have a lot we need to discuss, and I don’t feel comfortable with her staying on her own right now. I’ll see you at seven.”

“Oh,” was all I could muster.

He leaned into my ear, adding, “But make no mistakes. You’re going to be mine for real this time. Forever.”

I swallowed hard and opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

He stepped back with a determinedly clenched jaw. He winked, spun, and sauntered out the door.

What the hell?

Oh my God.

I stood in a semi-panic until Zara cleared her throat. When I turned, I winced.

She batted her eyelashes and practically sang, “What are you wearing for your date?”

“It’s not a date,” I blurted out, still cautious about giving her an impression of how the future will be without being certain.

She smirked, stating, “Sure it isn’t. You should wear the copper dress Pina got you.”

“That’s fancy,” I claimed. Pina gave it to me for my birthday right before she got kidnapped. Since I stopped frequenting the club, I hadn’t found an occasion to wear it. It seemed a little too sexy with its short skirt, low neckline, and no back, to wear anywhere else.

Zara bit her lip and arched her eyebrows.

“You know where I’m going?” I asked.

She pretended to zip her lips and throw away the key.

“Tell me,” I demanded.

“Sorry,” she chirped and refused to tell me anything.

But since she returned from her day with Luca, she’s gone back to being my sweet girl. She even hugged me several times. It’s as if she no longer held me accountable for keeping her father from her.

Earlier today, when my mother arrived to pick up Zara, I avoided her, excusing myself and jumping into the shower. It was too soon, and I didn’t want to answer the questions written all over her face.

For the last few hours, I’ve been pacing my family room in my stilettos. When six forty-five rolls around, my intercom buzzes.

I jump then go to the door. I press the button and ask, “Yes?”

“Ms. Moulin, Mr. Luca Marino is here. Should I send him up?” the security states.

“Yes, please,” I reply, then tap my fingers against my thighs.

A few minutes later he knocks.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

“Wow! You’re... Wow, stellina. You’re stunning,” he declares, eyes me over a second time, then pins his dark-fire gaze on me.

“Thanks,” I reply. Heat rises to my cheeks. Frozen, I stare at him.

“Can I come in?” he asks.

“Yes! Sorry,” I apologize, then step back.

He shuts the door and then reaches into his suit jacket. He pulls out a square box. “This is for you.”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I state.

“I wanted to.” He shakes the box in front of me. “Are you going to open it?”

I nervously laugh then reprimand myself.

Why am I so nervous?

It’s Luca.

Is this for real? Are we really going on a date?

I clear my throat. “Yes. Sorry.”

He steps closer, palms my cheeks, and presses his lips to mine. Unlike our kiss yesterday, it’s slow, as if he’s savoring me.

My heart pounds faster. He retreats, grinning, and leaves me wanting more.

He states, “You seem nervous.”

“I am,” I admit.

He strokes my cheek, ordering, “Don’t be.”

“Easier said than done,” I add.

He steps back and then nods at the box, demanding, “Open it.”

I pull the red ribbon then lift the lid. My pulse creeps higher. It’s a beautiful bracelet that matches the necklace he gave Zara. I ask, “Was this your mother’s, too?”

The faint sadness that always appears at the mention of one of his parents, flickers and then leaves his expression. “Yes. My mother would have loved you and Zara. I think you’d both have loved her, too. I want you to have it.”

“It’s beautiful,” I state, choking up.

He smiles. “I’m glad you like it.”

I pick it out of the box and hold out it to him. “Can you help me get it on?”

He nods, takes the bracelet, and clasps it around my wrist. He asks, “Ready to go?”

“Sure. Where are we going?” I ask.

“It’s a surprise,” he declares.

I groan. “That’s not fair.”

He opens the door and motions for me to exit my condo. I step into the hallway, and he follows, adding, “Sorry.”

“Even Zara knows,” I whine.

He grunts. “She doesn’t know everything.”

“She doesn’t?” I question.

He presses the elevator button. “I told her I’m taking you to my new French-Italian fusion restaurant.”

“But you’re not?”

“It’s a half-truth.”

I furrow my eyebrows in question.

The elevator doors open. We get inside and he presses the ground-level button. He adds, “She only knows about the restaurant.”

“What else is there?”

He hesitates then replies, “I had something built out.”

“Which would be…”

He chuckles, stating, “You’ll see.” The elevator stops and the doors open. He maneuvers me through the lobby and into an SUV waiting at the curb.

It only takes ten minutes to get to the restaurant. When we pull up, he quickly gets out and leads me past the line of people waiting to get in.

Luca nods to the hostess then leads me through the dimly lit, crowded restaurant. We get to the back, continue down a hall, and Luca stops in front of a door. He presses his palm on a security pad, and an elevator opens. It takes us to another floor.

We step into another corridor then a private room. One wall is glass, but everything is dark behind it. A bouquet of fresh roses and tea lights grace the center of a table. There is a set of water and wineglasses, silverware, and plates. Soft music plays, and a sitting area is in the corner.

“What do you think?” Luca asks.

“It’s beautiful.” I point to the glass. “What’s behind that?”

Arrogance washes over him. He replies, “You’ll see.”

“Oh, come on! Please!” I whine.

He chuckles then pulls a chair away from the table. “Sorry, stellina, not until after dinner.”

I pretend to pout and sit.

He takes the other seat and moves it next to mine. He sits and then leans close to my face. “You look like Zara right now.”

A server comes in, and we both sit straighter. He holds a bottle of red wine, asking, “This just arrived. I thought you’d appreciate it.” He adds a little to a glass and waits.

“Go ahead,” Luca orders.

I swirl the wine in the goblet, inhale the rich blackberry and currant scent, and take a sip. The flavors burst in my mouth. I swallow and state, “Wow. This is amazing.”

“It’s a rare Malbec from France,” the waiter informs us, then fills another glass for me and one for Luca. He asks him, “Did you want to stick with the menu you already put together, or is there something else you want?”

Luca shakes his head. “We’ll stick to what I ordered.”

“Very well. I’ll have the first course out soon.” He leaves the room.

Luca says, “Don’t worry. I ran everything past Zara.”

My fears fill me again. I assert, “Luca, I think it’s really important we don’t give Zara any false impressions.”

His face hardens. “I agree. And I told you I did no such thing.”

I stare at him.

His eyes turn to slits. He studies me so intensely, I cringe inside.

I say, “Don’t be upset. She’s young and—”

“She’s my daughter. I’m not going to do anything to hurt her,” he declares.

I release a breath.

He lowers his voice. “Tell me you don’t believe I would ever hurt her.”

I take a sip of wine, gather my thoughts, and answer, “Not on purpose.”

More hurt fills his expression. “But you think I will?”

I place my hand on his arm. “Please try to understand where I’m coming from. When Zara gets a thought in her head, she won’t let it go. I don’t want to disappoint her more than I already have.”

“You haven’t disappointed her,” he states.

“I have,” I insist. “And she gets her determination from you. I don’t want her attempting to interfere in whatever this is between us.”

Darkness overpowers his sharp features. He takes my hand, asking, “What do you think this is between us?”

My butterflies frantically flutter. I shake my head, confessing, “I don’t know.”

“Was I not clear?” he questions.

I stay quiet.

“Do you not want what I want?” he asks.

“It’s not that simple,” I assert.

“Why is that? From where I’m standing, it’s black and white. You. Me. Zara. Together. Do you not want that?” he inquires.

My insides quiver. I look away, realizing a new fear sinks its hooks into me.

He turns my chin, forcing me to look at him, demanding, “Answer me.”

My emotions lodge in my throat. I blink hard, so tired of crying but unable to control it.

He swipes my tear off my cheek, softening his tone. “Tell me why you’re crying.”

I choke out, “What if you change your mind? What if we move in and then you realize having me in your life isn’t all it’s cracked up to be?”

“That won’t ever happen, stellina,” he declares in a firm voice.

“You don’t know that.”

He tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear, stating, “You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted. You even gave me a daughter —”

“That I kept from you!”

“For legitimate reasons.”

More guilt fills me. I confess, “I hurt Zara so much.”

Regret washes over him. He claims, “I played my part in that lie, Chanel. You and I both know it. We’re both guilty of different things, but we had our reasons. Neither of us can go back in time and change anything. So we can hold it over the other’s head or move forward. And I only want to focus on the future. With Zara. With you. *Together.*”

I take a few deep breaths to try and regain my composure.

He strokes my jaw with his thumb, vulnerably asking, “Is that what you want? Do you want me?”

My heart expands so big, I think it might burst from my chest. I blurt out, “It’s all I’ve ever wanted to be possible.”

“But...?” he pushes.

I continue, “It’s hard to believe we can finally be together. I’m still wrapping my head around the fact I don’t have to hide Zara from you.”

Understanding fills his expression. He nods, confessing, “I am, too. But this is real, stellina. You and I have always been real. Nothing is stopping our happiness anymore. So I plan on embracing it.”

I take in his words.

The server interrupts us. He sets down a plate of caviar, blinis, and crackers, inquiring, “Can I get you anything else right now?”

Luca arches his eyebrows at me.

I shake my head.

He waves the server away, and once we’re alone, he puts his hand on my thigh. Tingles race to my core. He demands, “Promise me you’ll focus on the future, not the past.”

My butterflies wake up again.

Can it really be this easy?

“Stellina, promise me. We’ve wasted enough time. And nothing good will come from holding on to our mistakes. It’ll only hurt Zara,” he adds.

I can’t argue with him. He’s right. So I agree. “Okay. I promise.”

Satisfaction erupts over him. He smiles then picks up a blini and adds caviar to it. He holds it to my mouth. “Good. Let’s eat.”

I open my mouth, and the caviar melts in it. We spend the next few hours eating several courses of both French and Italian cuisine. We discuss things we kept to ourselves over the years. I admit how I almost told him about Zara when I was pregnant. He confesses how he contemplated blowing his cover multiple times. And he informs me that he never stopped looking for Pina, and as soon as he discovered her location, he helped rescue her.

It’s an emotional conversation, but we’re both happy we could finally discuss it. The server removes our plates, refills the wineglasses, and disappears.

Luca rises and holds his hand out.

I take it, and he helps me on my toes. Something crosses his expression. I’m unsure what it means, but he leads me to the glass and spins me into it. He asks, “Are you ready to see what I made for you?”

I glance at him in surprise. “For me?”

His eyes turn to fire, burning hot and singeing every nerve in my body. He answers, “Only for you, stellina.” He gives me a chaste kiss and steps behind me, circling his arm around my waist. He taps the glass.

A soft glow emerges behind the window. Only two things are inside the room—a large bed and a couple. They’re already all over each other, and the man is unzipping the woman’s dress.

I inhale sharply, placing my hand on top of Luca’s. I’ve often wondered why I couldn’t stop watching others. It was to see Luca, but I loved every minute of watching the couples who had real connections.

He murmurs in my ear, “We’re never returning to the club, stellina. From now on, you’ll watch it here. But I guarantee you, never again will you ever feel like you can’t have more than anyone behind that glass has.”



Luca

CHANEL'S SKIN WARMS. HER FACE FLUSHES LIKE ANY OTHER time I've studied her while she watches other couples. She swallows hard then turns her head, inquiring, "You built this for me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"As soon as I saw the space," I answer.

She pins her eyebrows together, stating, "But we weren't together. I would have never seen it."

My pulse quickens. I admit, "I've only had one goal besides taking down the Abruzzos. And that was to make things right between us and spend the rest of my days with you."

She gapes at me, softly breathing, a million emotions flitting over her face.

I cup her cheek and confess, "I hate the club. I only went there because of work. Then I found you again. It gave me excuses to show up, but the thought of you there makes me ill. I don't want you around dangerous men, stellina."

"I never did anything with them," she blurts out.

It's my turn to be shocked. Over the years, it's driven me nuts thinking about what she might be doing with another man

there. I never saw her with anyone, yet I wasn't naive enough to think men weren't hitting on her left and right. I claim, "I wasn't judging you. I don't—"

"I never was with anyone! I let Pina and Massimo think I did things there so they'd not ask me questions about where I went. I didn't want anyone following me. Every night I was there, I looked for you," she declares, her eyes welling again.

I tighten my arm around her, confessing, "And I was always looking for you."

Moments pass. She finally breaks our gaze and turns back to the window, uttering, "You thought I would miss watching?"

I drop my hand to her thigh, dragging my fingers in long strokes over the side of it. She inhales sharply and leans against me. I kiss the back of her neck then answer, "I've studied you and what you enjoy watching."

She reveals, "Sometimes I wondered if something was wrong with me... why I enjoyed watching when I knew I couldn't have what those behind the glass had. Or why I kept torturing myself going back when I knew I could only look at you but never touch you."

I inch my hand under her skirt, sliding it between her thighs. She shifts her ass against my hard-on, and I remind myself I can't have her here—not tonight. This is just a warm-up. She needs to be in my bed, where she belongs. I assert, "There's nothing wrong with what you like. In fact, I enjoy watching you watch."

She tilts her head, biting her lip. The green in her eyes swirls with a growing need I've studied for hours over the years from afar.

My lips twitch. I order, "Watch the show."

She obeys.

I slide my hand over her breast, slowly stroking the material over her nipple. It hardens under my touch. I move my other hand another inch, and my thumb grazes her already damp panties.

Her body submits further, fully relaxing against my frame. She shudders, her breath hitching in a tiny pattern.

The woman's dress falls to the floor. She's wearing nothing underneath, and the man steps back, taking several moments to appreciate her bare body. A deep flush grows on her cheeks under his stare.

The longer he assesses her, the more it drives her insane. Her hands and lips start to tremble. Her chest rises and falls faster.

He curls his finger, and she closes the distance between them, unbuttoning his shirt and pushing it over his shoulders. Then she moves to his pants, releasing them.

I press another button, and the sound of his belt hitting the floor fills the air.

Chanel reaches for my thigh, digging her nails into my quad. She presses her other hand to the glass.

The man takes control, kissing the woman while moving her toward the window.

"Can they see us?" Chanel frets.

"No, stellina. It's mirrored glass. Just how you like it."

She nods against my chest. Heat radiates off her body, and she squeezes her thighs against my hand.

The man positions the woman so she's against the glass, facing us. He murmurs, "Everyone's watching you."

A lust-filled, satisfied smile plays on her lips. She pins her gaze directly at us, as if she can see through the glass, but she can't.

I glide my finger under Chanel's panties and into her wet heat, thrusting slowly and swirling her clit with my thumb.

She whimpers, blinking hard. Her mouth forms an O, and her breath turns more ragged.

The man orders, "Hands stretched up, against the glass."

The woman does as instructed, pressing her palms on the window, a new look of desire washing over her.

He slowly pins her hands with one of his then circles his arm around her waist and lifts her hips. In one fluid move, he thrusts into her.

She cries out.

Chanel whimpers.

“Do you like the show?” I taunt.

The man thrusts leisurely into the woman and dips his head to nibble on her neck.

“Yes,” she chokes out.

Chanel keeps her eyes on them. She barely gets out, “Fuck me how he’s fucking her, Luca.”

It’s a torturous statement. I’m so hard it hurts, but I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize her coming home with me.

What if we do it here and she gets cold feet?

I state, “I’m taking you home to my bed and making love to you all night, stellina.”

She meets my eye. Her greens glow brighter. Her red cheeks turn darker. She asserts, “First here.”

“But—”

She tugs my head to her face and slides her tongue in my mouth so fast, I almost get dizzy. She murmurs between kisses, “I need you now, Luca. No more waiting.”

There’s no more red light stopping me. I can’t refrain from taking her any longer. I release my pants, tug her dress up, and move her panties to the side. Just like the man did, I thrust into her.

She cries out into my mouth then refocuses on the glass.

It only takes a few seconds to sync up with what the man’s doing to the woman. I keep my gaze focused on Chanel, loving every second of how she reacts to my body and the scene in front of us.

And maybe it’s another reason why we’re so good together. Over the years, her perversions became mine. Every night

spent studying her from afar while watching others have what we both wanted tortured me.

Her breasts press against the glass, across from the other woman's, so it appears they're touching. I restrain her palms against the woman's. Every thrust I make is a lifetime of nirvana.

"Oh... oh..." Chanel cries out as the other woman repeats, "Yes!"

I murmur into her ear, "You're perfection, stellina. Just like you've always been."

She looks at me from the corner of her eye, blinking hard, then stating, "We... Luca. We're... per... oh God!"

Her walls grip my cock with the force of a vise then begin spasming so forcefully, her knees lose the ability to hold her up. An earthquake rips through her, driving me to the brink of euphoria.

"Fuuuuck," I moan, doing everything I can so I don't release into her.

The other woman shrieks, "I'm coming! Oh God! I'm..." Her eyes roll just as my stellina's do.

"Jesus Christ!" the man blurts out, his face red and a bead of sweat dripping down his cheek. He breathes through his nose, determination fills his expression, and he clenches his jaw, keeping the same pace as I do.

"Luca!" Chanel moans.

I spin her into me, reaching for the back of her thighs and picking her up.

She wraps her legs around me, and I thrust back into her. Our mouths meet in a frenzy.

I slam my hand on the buttons, turning off the sound and lights in the other room. I assert, "Only us."

She nods, gripping my hair so tight I think she'll pull it out.

I press her back to the glass and palm her head, keeping her mouth firmly pinned to mine.

And there's no way either of us can hold back. Our bodies convulse against each other, letting go of years of longing and regret.

In the aftermath, we don't move, except for our ragged breaths and beating hearts. A long time passes before I lift my head out of the curve of her neck and lock eyes with her.

Several more minutes go by, then I slowly lower her to the ground. When I'm sure she can stand on her own, I escort her through the restaurant, into the alley where my driver is waiting, and we get into the SUV.

She straddles me the moment we pull out, adding fuel to the flame that never goes out.

We don't stop kissing the entire way to my place. I swiftly move her through the building and into my penthouse.

All night, we stay wrapped up in each other. When morning comes, she's peacefully sleeping in my arms. I reach into the nightstand drawer and pull out a ring. My pulse creeps up, and I kiss her on the head.

Another few hours pass. My nerves continue to escalate, not over what I'm about to do but about how she could answer.

There are no doubts on my end. She's the only woman I've ever wanted.

She finally stirs, glancing up at me with a tiny smile. She shyly says, "Morning."

I give her a chaste kiss on the lips. "Morning." I flip her onto her back.

Her smile grows larger. She laces her fingers in my hair and asks, "Am I really waking up in your bed? With you next to me?"

Happiness fills me like never before. I feel almost giddy, answering, "Yes. It's real. *We're* real, stellina."

She doesn't respond, caressing the side of my head.

I muster my courage, holding the ring in front of her.

Her eyes widen.

I take another moment to gather my thoughts but end up blurting out, “You and me, stellina. Forever. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. You and me, and now, Zara, too. Marry me.”

Her eyes glisten, darting between mine and the ring. Her silence makes me nervous. “Luca—”

“Don’t say no. Please, don’t say no,” I plead.

Her lips twitch, and she slides her palm over my cheek. She says, “I’m not saying no.”

Relief hits me. “You’re not?”

She shakes her head, and a tear drips down her cheek. “No. I’ve always loved you, Luca. From the moment I laid eyes on you, my heart was yours. And all I’ve ever wanted was a life with you.”

It’s the most important revelation besides learning about Zara I’ll ever hear. It chokes me up.

She’s finally mine. After all these years, we can finally have a life together.

And I vow to make sure I never hurt her again.



Chanel

Three Months Later

“MOM!” ZARA CALLS OUT.

I turn from the mirror, peeking around my hair stylist. “Wow! You look beautiful!”

She beams. Her black maid of honor dress fits her perfectly, hugging the curves that keep getting more prominent. She drags a chair next to the vanity and holds an envelope toward me. She chirps, “This is for you!”

“What is it?”

She smirks. “It’s from Dad.”

I snatch it out of her hand but don’t open it.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” she questions.

Happiness fills me. My dreams are all coming true. Zara has her father in her life. She’s returned to the sweet girl I raised.

I attribute it all to Luca. Shortly after we moved in with him, she copped an attitude with me about not having a credit card. When we were arguing, he came into the room and firmly barked, “Zara, my office. Now.”

Her eyes widened. He’d never spoken to her in that tone before. She opened her mouth to speak.

Luca pinned his disapproving gaze on her.

She snapped her mouth shut and went into the other room.

He stepped in front of me, kissed me, then declared, “I’m handling this. I booked you and Zara a day at the spa with Pina. My driver is downstairs. Go have fun with Pina. Zara is staying here.”

I stared at him, surprised about the spa day and about how she didn’t argue. I shouldn’t have been. He constantly spoils us. Yet he’s always firm with Zara whenever she hints at disrespecting me. It always stops her in her tracks, but her insistence she has a credit card had come back with a vengeance. And it was the first time she’d brought it up when Luca was home.

He motioned for me to leave. “Go. Have fun. I’ll have dinner ready when you get home.”

I hesitated, glancing at the office. I questioned, “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay and deal with this issue?”

He grunted. “No. I can handle this. Enjoy your time with Pina.” He kissed me again, guided me to the door, and waited until I was inside the elevator.

When I returned from my relaxing day, Zara was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is she?” I questioned.

His face hardened. He answered, “In her room without any electronics, thinking about all the opportunities and material possessions she has.”

I gaped at him.

He dumped a steaming pot of ravioli into a strainer and chuckled. “Why do you look so shocked?”

I muttered, “She’s going to be moody for a week.”

“Did you want me to let her get away with talking to you like that?”

“No. Not at all. I’m just warning you,” I stated.

He shrugged. “Let her be. I’ll put her back in her room without dinner and disconnect her cell service if she can’t act pleasant. If she wants to act like a two-year-old, I’ll treat her like one. And I’ve already warned her and won’t repeat myself.”

A grin overpowered my face. I walked around the counter and threw my arms around his neck.

He tugged me closer to him. “Now, this is a nicer thing to think about.”

“Thank you.”

He arched his eyebrow. “For punishing our daughter?”

I softly laughed. “Yeah. It’s nice that you always have my back, even though it’s selfish of me to let you be the bad guy.”

He gave me a chaste kiss. “I think you’ve had that role long enough. Let her be angry with me. Are you hungry?”

I kissed him again and replied, “Starving. It smells amazing.”

“Great. Let’s eat. I’ll go get our princess,” he commented and winked.

I added the sauce to the ravioli and took that and the salad to the table.

Luca and Zara appeared a few moments later. She sat beside me and, in a sincere voice, declared, “I’m sorry, Mom. I appreciate all you do for me and all the things I have because of you.”

I squeezed her hand. “Thank you. Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

We had a nice dinner, which was another surprise. And I added it to the list of things I was grateful for about Luca. He isn’t just a good father. He’s an exceptional one.

And after a few months of planning our wedding, our day is finally here.

Zara orders, “Mom, open it!”

I laugh. “Not with you looking over my shoulder.”

“But he said you had to read it,” she relays.

I glance at my hair stylist. “Can you excuse me for a moment?”

She nods, and I go into the bathroom. I carefully open the envelope and pull out a note card.

TO MY DEAR STELLINA,

WORDS WILL NEVER EXPLAIN WHAT IT'S BEEN LIKE WAITING FOR you. You've given me everything I could ever want, and the joy you bring to my life is unexplainable.

I woke up this morning wondering if this was all a dream—a fabulous, unattainable dream that would get snatched away from me. And the hole I felt all these years started growing in my heart again.

Then Zara called me, gushing about today. The hole quickly filled. Every ounce of love I have radiated within me.

I'm the luckiest, happiest, most grateful man in the world today. And I will always be.

You let me into your lives without holding my flaws against me. I don't deserve the love you unconditionally give me, but I could never walk away from it.

So I vow everything to you. My heart. My body. My soul. Until the day I die, I'll love, cherish, and protect both of you. To the best of my ability, I'll overcome any remaining flaws to always do what's in your best interest.

Thank you for loving me.

Thank you for giving me a second chance.

Thank you for rising above our past and giving me everything I could ever want.

FOREVER YOURS,

LUCA

I TAKE A TISSUE AND DRY MY EYES, GRATEFUL I DON'T HAVE makeup on yet. Then I reread the letter several times. I pull myself together, go out into the other room, and stick the letter into my overnight bag.

“What did it say?” Zara questions.

Pina laughs, ordering, “Mind your own business, nose!”

“Hey! I'm not nose!” Zara claims.

“You are totally nose!” Pina declares.

I kiss Zara on the cheek. She's the same height as me now, and I'm still trying to get used to it. “Not telling.”

We spend the rest of the time getting ready, laughing, and enjoying each other's company.

When I finally walk down the aisle, Luca's glistening eyes lock on mine. He grins so big, my heart soars higher.

My father and I stop in front of Luca. Dad hugs me and kisses my cheek then leans into Luca and states, “I give you my most precious gifts. Don't mess it up.”

I groan internally, but I'm not surprised. The relationship between my parents and Luca is good now. But my father will always be overly protective of Zara and me.

Luca's face turns serious. He nods, replying, “Thank you. I won't.”

Dad gives him one final look then kisses my cheek. He joins my mother in the pew.

Luca takes my hands and murmurs in my ear, “Forever, stellina.”

I gaze at him and reply back, “Forever.”

And everything I've ever wanted has somehow become my reality.

EPILOGUE



Luca

Three Years Later

“AND THIS YEAR’S VALEDICTORIAN IS ZARA MARINO,” THE principal announces.

The auditorium erupts in applause, and pride expands in my chest. I cheer and glance at Chanel. She’s beaming, as are her parents.

The applause dies down, and everyone sits. I slide my arm around my stellina and kiss the side of her head. She glances at me, and I wink.

My gorgeous daughter squares her shoulders and locks eyes with her mother then me. I swallow the emotions threatening to overpower me.

Zara is almost a replica of Chanel when she was eighteen. I’ve had difficulty keeping her focused and her mind off of boys. While supportive of my protectiveness, Chanel has to remind me every now and then that I can’t lock Zara up and throw away the key.

I always threaten I can.

My daughter decided she didn’t want a long speech. She fretted for weeks about what to say.

I kept telling her to listen to her heart and it would come.

She called me yesterday. I was at Angelo's. She informed me she figured it out and said, "Mom said I can hang out with Zach tonight."

"Who's Zach?" I questioned, the hairs on my neck rising.

"Dad, he's really nice," she claimed.

I grunted. "I'll be the judge of that."

"He's going to Harvard, too," she stated.

My chest tightened. The thought of Zach having access to her at college didn't make me breathe any easier. I replied, "You know the rules."

I could imagine her rolling her eyes. "Don't worry. I've already invited him over for dinner so you can interrogate him. He's been warned."

At least she's following the rules without begging me to change them again.

When Zara started dating, I made a strict rule. No boy can take her out unless he comes over and eats dinner with us. Then I grill him for hours about himself and his family.

I added, "Well, you just took all the fun out of it."

"Dad!" she reprimanded.

"What time is he coming over?" I questioned.

"Dinner is at six," she stated.

I got my business done and hurried home. Zach seemed like a good kid, but I'm not letting my guard down or giving Zara any indication of my thoughts. And I took him aside like all the other boys she'd brought home and instilled the fear of death in him.

Zara clears her throat and says, "I thought a lot about what to say today. The only piece of advice I have is what I've learned."

Chanel squeezes my thigh and dabs a tissue under her eye.

Zara continues, "Life is going to throw you lots of curveballs. Some are good. Some are bad. But everything happens for a

reason, even the bad. And sometimes, there are things you want in life. Things that hurt to not have. But just because you don't have what you want at that moment doesn't mean you'll never get it. You just have to trust it will eventually come to you." She locks eyes with me again.

Love and pride take over. I can't help it. I swipe at a tear.

She smiles bigger and says, "Thank you."

The audience stands up and cheers. It takes a few more minutes until we're outside and she's in front of us. After we take pictures, we go to Angelo's. All the Marinis are waiting there, along with family friends. Even the Ivanovs and O'Malleys flew in from Chicago to celebrate.

Tully is there with Bridget, Sean, and Fiona, but his four sons have returned to Ireland. They left a few months after Chanel's and my wedding. According to Tully, things are too explosive for them to leave.

I questioned him when he chose the term explosive. He just gave me his knowing smirk and took another puff of his cigar.

Zara runs off with Sean, Fiona, and a handful of her friends she invited, including Zach. We barely see her for the rest of the party.

Chanel stands by my side, and I scan the room. Kids of all ages are running everywhere. Angelo's four sons and their wives, plus Arianna and Killian, all have toddlers and newborns. The Marino family is multiplying like rabbits, and Angelo's sitting on a couch with kids crawling all over him.

Peace envelops me. I'm finally a Marino to the world. I've claimed my birthright in the family and there are no more questions.

The Abruzzos are barely in existence anymore. The bomb Brody dropped destroyed the hierarchy in their family. The fallout from the remaining members all fighting for power only disintegrated their dominance in New York further.

Chanel tilts her head and asks, "Do you regret not having more kids?"

I cock an eyebrow, inquiring, “Is that a trick question? Are you pregnant?”

She laughs. “No. The shot’s still working just fine.”

I exhale and tug her closer. “If you were, I’d be happy. But I’d feel bad for the poor kid.”

“Why is that?”

“I just hit fifty,” I say, still not believing how fast life has passed. I squeeze her ass, declaring, “Not everyone is a young pup like you.”

Her lips twitch. “A young pup.”

“Yep. And you’ll always be compared to me.”

She grins then leans into my ear. “What would you say if the young pup wanted a date night at the restaurant?” She pulls back and locks her green-fire eyes on mine.

My body hardens. Creating the viewing room was one of the best ideas I’ve ever had. Over the years, we’ve enjoyed it in too many ways. I reply, “The chef created a new menu.”

“Oh?” she innocently asks.

The “menu” is whatever scene I arrange for couples to act out.

I nod and glance around, making sure no one can hear. I lean forward, murmuring, “It involves...” I drag my fingers over the curve of her neck.

She shudders, and her eyes widen in question.

I chuckle, demanding, “Tell me you still love me if you want to know.”

Her expression turns serious. She slides her hands on my cheeks, stating, “I’ll always love you. And you know this.”

I can’t help my growing grin. I knew what she’d say before she answered. It’s the same thing she always claims, and nothing about it ever gets old. After all these years, it still fills me with more joy than I could ever have imagined.

I guess that’s one thing I’ve learned about life. The littlest things are sometimes the biggest. They can be the only thing

that really matters. For me, all I need is assurance of Chanel and Zara's love.

And I finally have it.

Are you ready for the O'Connors in

Mafia Wars Ireland?

Flip the page...

MAFIA WARS IRELAND
SPINOFF SERIES



**Are you ready for the O'Connors in
Mafia Wars Ireland?**

Cover Reveals and Titles Coming Soon!

[Book One \(Brody\) - May 1, 2023](#)

Book Two (Aidan) - June 1, 2023

Book Three (Devin) - July 15, 2023

Book Four (Tynan) - Sept 1, 2023

But before MW Ireland....I've got some other goodies for you...

Holiday Hoax (A Fake Marriage Billionaire Romance - Stand Alone and all new characters) - Nov. 15

Club Indulgence Duet - A Dark Billionaire Romance

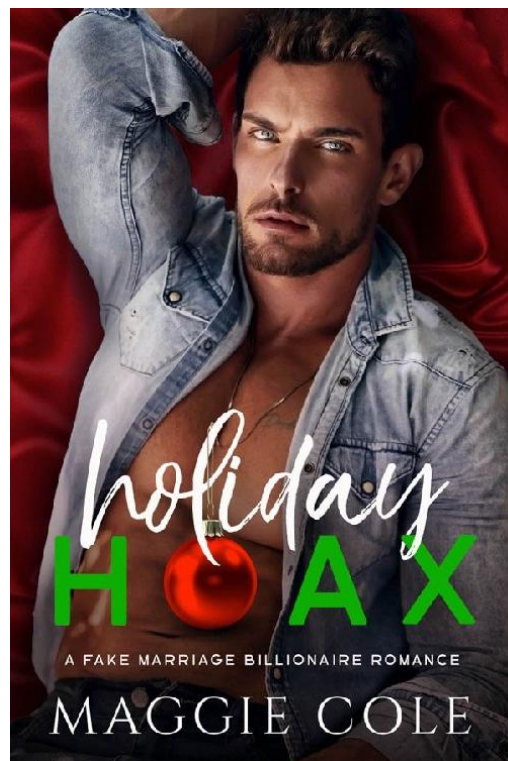
Schemes Unleashed (Book One) - Feb. 1

Hearts Unleashed (Book Two) - March 1

Keep flipping for sneak peeks!

HOLIDAY HOAX

A FAKE MARRIAGE BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE



Little Miss Sunshine will make the perfect fake bride to take home for the holidays... who cares if I'm her boss?

She's going to drive me nuts.

Nevertheless, her perky everything, endless legs, and innocent eyes will come in handy.

It'll stop my family from pushing every country girl turned wanna-be Dallas socialite on me.

The town gossips will be disappointed she's not another one of my fiancées that'll never make it down the aisle. And they'll

be jealous when every man falls in love with her.

I'll ignore everyone and work... except when she's fueling my warped needs.

Although she did surprise me and negotiated a higher prenup for her silly cupcake bakery.

Too bad for her, I'm not a reckless billionaire—my attorney will find the loophole.

Once January 2nd arrives, I'm divorcing her.

Except the more we're together, the more she's infiltrating my heart... in ways that have me second guessing our secret arrangement...

Holiday Hoax is a billionaire fake marriage, enemies to lovers, office romance. It's a slow-burn steamy standalone novel with a grumpy hero who has a broken past and a good girl spitfire heroine who keeps him on his toes.

[Click to download Holiday Hoax!](#)

HOLIDAY HOAX CHAPTER ONE

Please note this is currently in editing so if there are grammar errors please excuse them!

GEORGIA PEACH

“EXCUSE ME,” A DEEP VOICE STATES IN ANNOYANCE. A HARD frame pushes past me.

“Whoa!” I cry out. My right heel skids on the slick floor, and the four boxes of cupcakes I’m carrying wobble. I grab his arm to catch my balance, barely saving the treats I baked for my new co-workers from falling to the ground.

He spins, tilts his head down, and pins his blue eyes on me. As if irritated further, he clenches his chiseled jaw.

Praline and a hint of citrus mixes with sandalwood, stirring something deep in my core. His broad shoulders fill out the designer, custom-made suit jacket. Biceps you’d only get with hours in the gym, but not over the top, sculpt the sleeves. Thick, wavy chestnut hair, still slightly damp, perfectly grooms his face, matching his short-trimmed goatee and mustache.

“You good now?” he asks.

I gape at him.

What a jerk!

Why does he look like he's having a dying duck fit so early in the morning?

Kill them with kindness, my grammy says in my head.

I force a smile, doing my best, so it doesn't look fake. In my most cheerful voice, I reply, "Got my balance back."

"Great." He narrows his eyes further.

Confused why he looks angrier, I ask, "Do you want a cupcake?"

His head jerks back a bit before he catches himself. He squares his shoulders and cocks an eyebrow. "Cupcake?"

I nod toward the boxes. "Yes. I baked them. It's my grammy's secret recipe. It's my first day at my internship. I wanted to do something nice for my new co-workers and boss."

He scoffs, "Well, it can't be a secret if you have it, now can it?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

His eyes drift to my yellow sundress and matching button-down sweater. Heat fills me as he slowly moves his leer up, as if he's imagining what I look like naked. He lingers on my breasts, then gives me a challenging stare, uttering, "Well, aren't you, Little Miss Sunshine?"

I don't think I've ever encountered anyone so boldly nasty upon first meeting, yet so sinfully seductive at the same time. My insides quiver, and I lift my chin, willing the fire to leave my cheeks. I reply as cheerfully as possible, "Bless your heart for noticing."

He grunts, then glances at my hand, still digging into his forearm. "If you can stand on your own two feet, I've got important things to do."

Horried, I release him. I smirk, "Balance is good now. Have a great day."

He gives me a final disproving look, shoves his security card through the scanner, and pushes through the metal bar. I ogle his toned ass even after he steps into the elevator, then

reprimand myself. He spins, catches me, and a new smug expression reignites the zings flying through my core. Neither of us breaks our gaze until the doors are completely shut.

What an arrogant, miserable man.

I can't let him ruin my first day.

I take several deep breaths, continue through the gate, and go up to the top floor. The doors open and I step out of the elevator. A woman with curly red hair, emerald eyes, a form-fitting navy dress, and a matching jacket smiles. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Georgia, the new intern," I answer.

Her face brightens. "Ah, yes! I'm Victoria, Mr. Cartwright's Director of Operations. You'll be working with me."

"You're so young to be a Director," I blurt out in awe. Then I cringe for my outburst. "Sorry."

She laughs. "No apologies necessary. You're right. I'm thirty, but Mr. Cartwright prefers to promote employees within the corporation. I started as an intern like you, so work hard, and the sky's the limit." She winks.

I won't be here that long. Only a few years of saving and I can open my bakery.

Best to keep my thoughts to myself on the first day.

I hold the boxes out to her and inquire, "That's great to hear. I baked some cupcakes for everyone. Is there somewhere I can put this?"

"Oh, that was sweet of you. What kind?" she eyes the boxes.

"A variety." I take four steps, set the boxes on the receptionist's counter, and open one lid. Motioning to each row, I continue, "These are chocolate raspberry, caramel coffee swirl, vanilla madagascar, and strawberries and cream. Do you want to pick one before the others choose?"

She snatches a chocolate raspberry one. "They all look delicious, but this one is calling my name."

Joy fills me. It's what my grammy always claimed she felt whenever anyone ate hers. I beam, "Guess it's yours then. Where should I put this?"

"Let me show you where the break room is, and you can leave them there," she replies and leads me through the office.

I set the cupcakes on the table, then follow her on the tour. My interview was with human resources personnel and on a different floor. And it's night and day different.

Everything about this area screams an exclusive vibe. Almost as if you're lucky just to be permitted to step foot on it. Plus, it's quieter. There's several private offices and way more men in suits, whereas the human resource floor had mostly cubicles and women.

Victoria introduces me to everyone as we make our way around the different work suites. Even though the spaces are enclosed, each is visible through the glass except for one. She stops in front of the closed door and states, "Ready to meet the big boss?"

Tinted glass covers the entire room, so you can't see inside. A gold-plated sign reads, *Mr. Sebastian Cartwright, Vice-President.*

My stomach flips. I don't know why I'm suddenly intimidated. Everyone I met on the tour has been friendly. Maybe it's because of the stark contrast between his office and the others. Perhaps it's just first-day jitters reappearing. Regardless, I hesitate.

Victoria must sense my nerves. She offers, "He's always really busy, so if he doesn't have a lot of time, don't take any offense, okay?"

I square my shoulders and nod. "Sure."

"And he's really a big teddy bear underneath his persona," she asserts.

Her statement only makes my butterflies flutter harder.

Why would she need to say that?

She knocks.

A muffled, “Come in,” hits my ears.

She opens the door and announces, “I wanted to introduce to you our new intern who’ll be working closely with us.” She steps inside.

I follow and freeze. My heart pounds harder. Goosebumps pop out on my skin while I squeeze my thighs closer together.

No, no, no!

Not him!

The Dallas skyline makes a breathtaking backdrop, competing with the exquisite eye candy sitting in front of it. But it’s the rude man from the lobby.

He looks up from his desk. Shock fills his expression, mirroring my own. He quickly catches himself, hardening his features and grinding his molars. A beam of sunlight streams through the window. It hits his chestnut hair and outlines his chiseled body as if he’s somehow an angel.

Disguised as the devil.

“Sebastian Cartwright, meet Georgia Peach,” Victoria declares.

He rises, furrows his eyebrows, and questions, “Georgia Peach? Is that a joke?”

Embarrassment mixes with pride. I’ve heard every joke under the sun growing up about my name. But it’s mine, and I’ve come to accept it. Now that I’m an adult, I thought others would be more mature about it, but apparently, Mr. Grumpy Pants only looks like he has class and maturity. I pull it together and beam, “No, it’s not.”

“Georgia Peach, the cupcake lady,” he mutters.

“Do you want one? I can go to the breakroom and get it before they’re all gone,” I retort, in an even chipper voice.

He stares at me as if I’m crazy, replying, “No.” He turns quiet, assessing me, and tension grows thicker with every breath we take.

Victoria clears her throat. Unable to hide her uncomfortable tone, she asks, “So you two have met?”

He snaps his leer at her. “Yes. In the lobby. Ms. Peach didn’t introduce herself.”

I blurt out, “I was supposed to know it was you?”

“Yeah. Everyone knows me. You’re no different so don’t pretend to be.”

I argue, “I had no idea who you were. Why would I know you anyway? I doubt we hang out in the same circles.”

He scoffs, “Of course we don’t. But I’m sure you did your homework researching our company?”

My pulse races. I retort, “Yes, I did. But only the CEO’s photo is on the website. It only mentions your name, along with other heads of the corporation.”

“I’m all over the internet. Let’s not act like you didn’t search me,” he accuses.

Appalled at his audacity, I insist, “I did no such thing.”

He grunts. “Sure you didn’t.”

“I didn’t,” I claim again, glaring at him.

Tense silence fills the air.

Victoria glances between us, then clears her throat. She interjects, “Not everyone cares to know you Sebastian.”

He acts like he doesn’t hear her, not tearing his scowl off me.

She continues, “While we have your attention, are there any additional documents you’ll need this morning for your meetings?”

He crosses his arms, and his biceps strain against the expensive fabric. I curse myself when my eyes drift to them. He catches me and fixates his sexy yet lewd gaze on me. If anyone else looked at me like that, I’d slap them. But something about his is irresistible. It creates an uncomfortable ache in my body. He finally shakes his head. “Not that I’m

aware of. As of now, everything is adequate, Victoria.” He glances at her then repins his intimidating stare on me.

Why does he have to be so hot?

He’s not.

I’m a liar.

I do everything in my power not to appear scared of him and announce, “I look forward to working with you, Mr. Cartwright.”

His lips purse in an expression I’m unsure how to take. My pulse quickens as he replies in a dry voice, “Welcome to Cartwright Enterprises.”

“Thank you,” I cheerfully state, then spin and leave, exhaling deeply the moment I step out of the room. I go to the desk Victoria assigned to me and turn.

“Like I said, he’s a teddy bear once you get to know him,” she states.

“Sure he is,” I reply.

She offers a smile then points to a pile on my desk. “If you can start with those files, I’d appreciate it.”

I nod. “Sure.”

She starts to leave, then stops and adds, “He really is great once he drops his guard. He’s just a bit aloof when he first meets people.”

“Aloof?” I challenge. It’s not exactly the word I would have chosen, but I guess it’s more politically correct.

She nods, claiming, “Underneath the hard exterior is a brilliant, very generous man.”

“Sure,” I reply, then sit in my chair. “Should I tell you when I’m finished with each file or the entire pile?”

“If you can send me the individual files, that would be great.”

I give her a little salute. “On it!”

She grins and leaves.

I turn on the computer and punch in the passcode written on a sticky note. It prompts me to create a new one, and I stare at Sebastian's closed door, thinking for a minute, then type in, *KillHimWithKindness4Ever*.

There. That will remind me to stay calm.

A message in the portal pops up.

Mr. Cartwright: *I need the spreadsheet for Gulf Oil updated for the ten o'clock meeting.*

Victoria: *Georgia, it's in your pile. Can you focus on that first?*

Me: *Absolutely.*

I pull the correct folder and study the notes on the spreadsheet. I find the correlating sheet on the computer and update the formulas. When I finish, I email it to Victoria and Sebastian, then click on the message box.

Me: *I finished the spreadsheet for Gulf Oil. Would you like paper copies?*

Mr. Cartwright: *Yes, that is how we do things around here.*

My stomach clenches. I shake my head, press print, then type another message.

Me: *How many copies would you like?*

Mr. Cartwright: *Victoria, please inform Georgia where she can find pertinent information.*

Victoria: *Will do.*

I breathe through my anger, and my grammy's words fill my head. *No one is responsible for your feelings except you.*

Hard to say when Mr. Grumpy Pants is your boss.

Her voice claims, *He can only affect you if you let him.*

I shake it off as Victoria approaches my desk.

"Sorry," I quickly state.

"No worries. It won't take long before you know these things," she claims, then takes control of my mouse. She clicks a dropdown box on the schedule. "This is where you'll find

Mr. Cartwright's upcoming appointment notes. If you select the description, it'll state who is attending the meeting. You'll always make copies for each person in attendance, plus two extra in case there are any surprises."

"Great. Thanks for showing me," I say.

"No problem. You'll need to add them to the presentation folders," She adds, then returns to her office.

The meeting with Gulf Oil has five people listed. I make eight to include Sebastian and the two extras. I take them off the printer, then knock on his door.

"Yeah?" he calls out.

I open the door and approach him at the desk. He doesn't look up, and I wonder if it's just to be a bigger jerk and add to his intimidation factor.

In a condescending tone, he finally states, "Is there something you need, *Ms. Peach?*"

I try to ignore his obvious jab at my name and reply, "I'm here to add the spreadsheets to the presentation folders."

"Do you want a reward for doing your job?" he questions.

I gape, then catch myself. "No, of course not."

He demands, "Then why are you bothering me with this?"

Unsure how to respond, I don't answer him.

He sits back in his chair and arches his eyebrows. "Well?"

"Don't you have the folders?" I quiz.

He sighs. "No, Ms. Peach. I do not have the folders. Those are in the conference room, which is where I meet people."

I point to the huge table in his office. "You don't meet with people there?"

He snorts. "Of course not. How would I ever exit the room when I'm ready if they're in my office?"

Stupidity washes over me, but then I catch myself again. I force another smile and chirp, "It's my first day, Mr.

Cartwright. Excuse my ignorance. I'll make sure these are updated. I won't concern you over this issue ever again."

He refocuses on his computer screen, muttering, "Good."

I high-tail it out of his office, go to the conference room, and find the folders in a stack. I position the spreadsheets in the same spot as the sample folder and glance around the room.

A buffet server has a pitcher of water, glasses, coffee, mugs, cream, and sugar on it. It seems cold to me. Surely if this is the room where clients meet, there should be a bit more life to it, right?

I go to Victoria's office and knock.

She looks up from her desk. "Hey, Georgia. What can I help you with?"

"I added the spreadsheets to the folders."

"Great."

I hesitate.

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

"Gulf Oil is an important client, correct?" I quiz.

"Yes. They're one of our largest," she admits.

I step closer, confessing, "I don't want to be disrespectful, but the meeting room looks a bit...um...cold."

Surprise fills her expression.

I quickly add, "I was wondering if I could take one of the vases of fresh flowers from the break room and put it in there? Also, maybe add a plate of my cupcakes?"

She shrugs. "Sure. That would be nice."

"Great. Thanks. I won't take a long time to do it," I state. Then I go into the breakroom. I look for a platter and find it and several empty vases.

It gives me another idea.

I take one set of flowers and cut the stems. I position them in a glass globe, so they're the perfect size for the conference room

table. Then I pick up the other vase and take both to the conference room. The big one I put on the buffet server.

I return to the break room and place a dozen cupcakes on the platter. Then I take them to my desk. I find a package of colored sharpies in my desk drawer and make four signs with the flavors of the cupcakes on each. I go back into the conference room and place the platter and signs on the buffet server.

Satisfaction fills me when I assess the room. The Dallas skyline is just as impressive here as Sebastian's office. But now, the flowers and cupcakes added a touch of warmth that wasn't present.

I return to my desk and get lost in the pile of folders. Sebastian steps out of his office and states, "Follow me."

I glance up, "Where are we going?"

He huffs, "To the meeting with Gulf Oil."

"Oh. You want me in the meeting?" I ask, surprised.

His eyes turn to slits. "Are you not Victoria's intern?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell me, *Ms. Peach*. Why did you choose to apply to Cartwright Enterprises?" he interrogates.

The hairs on my neck rise. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

His arrogance grows. "Let me guess. You heard how we have more young professionals in the C-suite than any other company in Dallas, and you want to climb up the career ladder as fast as you can?"

No, I wanted to earn money for my cupcake bakery.

"I-I..." I swallow the lump in my throat, suddenly needing a glass of water to quench my dry mouth.

"I didn't promote more young professionals than any other corporation by letting them sit at their desks. Hands-on experience—that's what Cartwright Enterprises is about and

why people excel here. You have an MBA, but that isn't going to get you where you want to be without learning," he lectures.

He knows I have my MBA?

He undresses me with his eyes again and lowers his voice, adding, "Isn't that what you want? Hands-on experience?"

Every inch of my skin flushes. My gape only grows.

A level of arrogance so powerful it radiates around him appears. He keeps me in his heated stare another moment, then orders, "Let's go." He motions for me to go ahead of him.

I rise and stroll down the hall, knowing he's checking out my booty the entire time. No matter how much I tell myself not to strut, I can't help it. I sway my hips to torment him, not for more attention, I tell myself.

I'm a liar again.

I glance behind me and catch his gaze right where I felt it. I stop walking, shift on my feet, and arch my eyebrows.

His eyes dart to mine. He challenges, "Is there a problem, *Ms. Peach?*"

"You can call me Georgia," I blurt out, tired of hearing him say my last name like it's a joke.

He takes my words the wrong way, and I curse myself. His smug expression tells me he's clueless about why I don't want him to call me *Ms. Peach*.

There's no doubt. Sebastian Cartwright, my new boss, thinks I'm into his attention on my backside and any other part of my body.

I am.

No, I'm not.

Liar!

He steps closer, eliminating the gap between us. His intoxicating scent annihilates me for the second time this morning. His lips twitch as he says, "Well, then, Georgia, is there a reason you're making our clients wait?"

My words jumble in my head. I stutter, “N-no.” I spin and walk into the conference room.

There are four men and Victoria in the room. They all have coffee and a cupcake in front of them, except Victoria, who states, “I already had one for breakfast.”

“Where did you buy them? My daughter would love these for her birthday party,” one man asks.

Victoria rises, motioning toward me. “Georgia made them.”

The men stand too, and the one who stated he wanted them for his daughter’s party steps in front of me. He gives me a one over, lingering a bit longer than I’d prefer, then holds out his hand. “Ben Eiler. Nice to meet you. Any chance I can get a few dozen of these by Saturday? My ex-wife thinks I can’t plan my daughter’s party without her help, and I’m on a mission to show her she doesn’t know who she’s messing with.”

“Umm...I...ummm...”

“Georgia’s our new intern,” Sebastian interjects, stepping so close to me his body heat radiates into mine.

Ben glances at Sebastian, then back at me. “Tell me you aren’t too busy to help me out, Georgia? It’ll go a long way during our contract negotiations today.” He winks in a flirtatious way.

“Are we dealing with cupcakes instead of oil prices?” Sebastian states in a disapproving tone.

Ben’s eyes light up further, as he continues to study me. “Well, yes. We sure are. What do you charge for these?”

“I haven’t sold them yet,” I confess.

“Why not?” he asks.

“I’m saving up for my own bakery someday,” I declare.

“Is that so?” Sebastian mumbles.

I cringe inside. *Why did I announce that?*

“You want a partner? I’ll back you,” Ben claims.

I gape, then compose myself. “Thank you for your offer, but this is something I need to do on my own.”

He chuckles. “Can’t argue with that kind of entrepreneur spirit. But what do you say, Georgia? Can you help me out?”

Something tells me that I’m in a no-win situation. Sebastian moves even closer to me, and I assess his forced smile.

“Well?” Ben asks.

I try to contain my excitement about my first client, confirming, “Sure. I can make that happen.”

“Perfect. I’ll give you my number so you can get all the details,” Ben declares.

“I’m sure your assistant can handle this,” Sebastian suggests.

Ben challenging stare says otherwise. He proclaims, “I think I’ll handle this one.”

Sebastian’s face hardens.

Ben takes another bite of his cupcake and mumbles, “Remind me to take one of these for the road.”

“Georgia, have a seat,” Sebastian orders, pulling out a chair, his commanding eyes full of irritation.

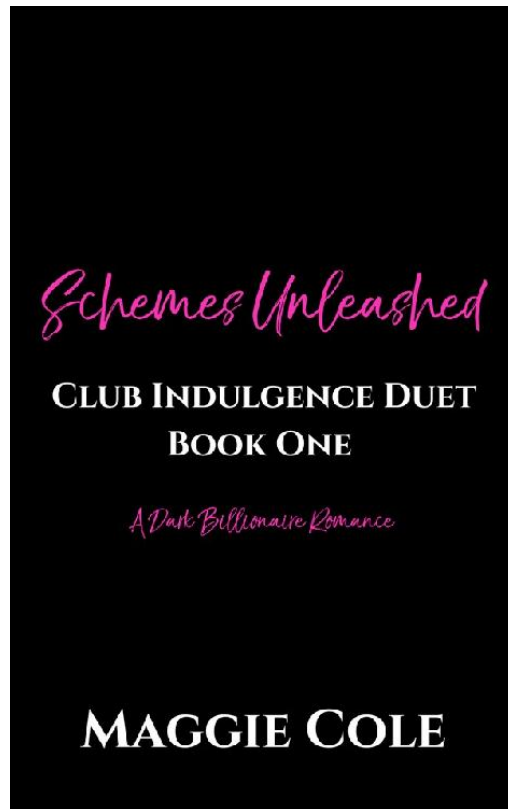
I obey, trying to contain my giddyness. Sebastian Cartwright is not going to rain on my parade. I have my first client.

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SCHEMES UNLEASHED

CLUB INDULGENCE DUET: BOOK ONE

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Destroying my partner became sweeter when his daughter stepped on stage at a charity auction.

But I don't want her for a month.

I'm upping my bid to make her sign for a year.

Her strong will, independence, and defiant attitude toward her family indulges my carnal desires and need for revenge.

I'll break her, train her, and turn her into the compliant woman she didn't know existed within her.

Every second, she'll be my pawn in the secret game of retaliation I'm going to win.

Then I'll present her as my pet to all of L.A., including her father.

After our year is up, the damage will be done.

She'll be free to go, and I'll move forward with my life without her father, or anyone associated with him in it—including her.

Schemes Unleashed is the first book of the Club Indulgence Duet. It's a forbidden love, age-gap, dark billionaire romance with forced proximity.

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SCHEMES UNLEASHED

PROLOGUE

Please note this is currently in editing so if there are grammar errors please excuse them!

RIGGS MADDEN

7 Years Ago

“RIGGS?” HUGH GALLOW NUDGES ME, PULLING ME OUT OF MY trance. I’ve barely heard a word of my business partner’s stifling conversation for the last few minutes.

It’s his daughter Blakely’s fault. She stepped into the garden wearing a nude slip dress and matching four inch designer stilettos. Her blonde hair cascades her shoulders in long curls, and when her blue eyes met mine, she quickly broke our stare as if she were caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Since then, I’ve been too captivated to tear my eyes off her, pleased every time I catch her gazing my way and trying to pretend she’s not looking at me.

The attraction between us started three years ago. She turned eighteen and was no longer Hugh’s little girl. It didn’t take long for me to notice the little flush in her cheeks when she glanced at me, or her nervous finger tapping on whatever she could find to torment. Her usual victim consists of a table or her thighs, the latter of which I’m dying to get between. Right now, her champagne flute is taking a beating.

Hughes demands, “Riggs, confirm my numbers.”

I clear my throat, recover from my absence, and answer, “That’s right. We’re up over thirty percent.” I down the rest of my Scotch and add, “Excuse me. The men’s room is calling.” I escape Hugh and the circle of his stuck up friends he’s always trying to impress, hightailing it to the restroom, glad to exit their presence.

Blakely’s father and I have been partners for over a decade, and while his mentorship influenced many things in my life, there’s one thing he couldn’t change about me—I just don’t care about impressing people like Hugh does. I could give a shit about what anyone thinks unless I need to impress them to sell one of our companies for a huge profit.

After growing up on food stamps in Compton, where most adults didn’t have a job and addiction was rampant, you’d think anyone with business acumen would have impressed me. I’d escaped the gangs and pitfalls of poverty in the absence of anyone molding me into a successful young man. Yet most of the entrepreneurs I came across didn’t strike me as anything special.

Then I met Hugh. I was in my late twenties and he was in his forties. Our first discussion led to a six-hour meeting. I impressed him for my age, and I was craving a business mentor even though I didn’t realize it at the time.

Hugh was different. He would speak of things I hadn’t heard of, or show me new ways to manipulate others to get deals done. When I told him the story of how I got scholarships and put myself through school to get my MBA in finance, he instructed me to never speak of it again. He claimed successful people—rich people—wanted to know you were born with money. So I listened to him and he created a backstory about me growing up in Northern California, which was just far enough away that no one ever questioned it.

Within a few months, we created an investment capital firm. Hugh had money and I had grit along with an unquenchable work ethic. Slowly, I’ve earned my shares and we’re now fifty-fifty partners. And even though I’ve always done more work than Hugh, including finding and closing almost all the deals over the last five years, I wouldn’t be here without him.

You have to have money to make more, and Hugh had plenty at a time when I had none. The combination of his startup resources and my overzealous determination to be the best, allowed us to create a dynamic partnership. Our startup firm is now the largest in the country and a global name.

It's the exact reason why nothing can happen between Blakely and me. I'll forever be loyal to Hugh for giving me the chance and knowledge to create my life. So she's off limits. And the last thing I need is to have daddy's little girl run to him crying about how I broke her into submission and didn't marry her afterward.

Plus, she's sixteen years younger. I don't normally even think about women who aren't at least thirty. The things that quench my appetite are considered a bit taboo. Full consent is required, and I don't need a woman claiming she didn't know what she was getting into. You go below thirty, and you're asking for a wishy-washy woman who's still trying to find herself and can't be relied on to understand what she's dipping her toes into.

But my rules aren't helping my predicament everytime I see Blakely. The desire to have her at my fingertips only gets harder to ignore. Hell, I knew before I arrived at the party and laid eyes on her that I would be in agony the entire time. And everytime she sneaks a glance at me only reiterates that I should have given Hugh an excuse about why I couldn't attend. So my time here is up and I need to go before my partner realizes his daughter is giving me a hard-on.

I do my business in the bathroom and make my way through the mansion, determined to return to the backyard and say my goodbyes. Halfway there, I turn the corner and run into Blakely.

Her champagne splashes on my shirt, and she frets, "Oh my gosh! Riggs, I'm so sorry!" A pink flush crawls up her cheeks, her doe-eyes widen, and she swipes at my shirt.

I grab her hand, and she freezes, her palm an inch from my pecs. My heart pounds harder in my chest and I curse myself for reacting like a teenager. It's another thing that's been

happening when I'm with her and it makes me feel exposed, instead of my normal controlled self. I state, "It's okay. It's only champagne. It'll dry."

She stays silent, her cheeks growing hotter, and I can only wonder if her ass would turn the same color after a good slapping.

I have to stop these thoughts.

Blakely lifts her chin, and the remaining room in my pants disappears. My cock painfully strains against my zipper. I scold myself again, but it's pointless. Her expression is another reminder how different she is, yet exactly what I look for in my conquests.

She doesn't have the snotty Beverly Hills air about her that most women at this party have. Her little gesture is a confident stance. It indulges my cravings further. I love nothing better than Dominating a woman with a backbone, and Blakely's always had one. It drives Hugh and his wife Madelyn nuts. I'm one of the few they don't put on a show for when it comes to their daughter. Over the years, I've heard them complain too many times to count about their daughter's stubbornness, or how she forged ahead with something they forbid her to do.

Attempting to regain some control of this situation, I nod to her half-empty glass, questioning, "So you're legal now?"

She glances at it, then locks eyes with me again. Her lips curve into a small smile. She answers in a low voice, "Yes. Totally legal as of today." She inhales deeply then licks her lips and her cheeks turn redder.

I clench my jaw, keeping my breathing controlled, trying to convince myself she doesn't mean anything by that admission, but I can't. There's a tornado of lust and hope swirling in her blues and no matter what lie I tell myself, it's impossible to ignore.

Christ, she's young.

I bet she's tighter than any woman I've been with in years.

She'd look good on her knees, with her hands bound and those plump lips around my cock.

She opens her mouth then snaps it shut. She glances behind her, then refocuses on me.

More visions of her in positions I can never have her in appear. Several moments pass before I state, "Happy birthday."

Her face lights further as her lips curve into a bigger smile. She shifts on her feet. "Thanks."

"Twenty-one is a big occasion. I assume you're going out and getting crazy with your boyfriend later?" I question, prying for information.

It doesn't matter. She's Hugh's daughter.

She shakes her head, and a blonde curled tressle falls over her eyes. She replies, "I don't have a boyfriend."

Thank God for that.

Not that he'd have anything over me.

Mesmerized, not thinking clearly, and unable to stop myself, I reach for the lock. She holds her breath as I slowly drag my fingers over her forehead, then even slower over the side of her head, pushing her strands behind her ear. Just as I suspected, her hair's soft, unlike the typical overprocessed blondes roaming all of L.A. I've always known she's a natural blonde, but finally feeling it only fuels my thoughts further. I have to stop myself from wrapping all of it around my fist.

She arches her eyebrows, waiting for me to answer, the heat from her cheeks radiating past the inch of air between her and my hand.

We've never been this close, nor have I touched her before. Now that I breached my self-control, I step closer, studying the flecks of blues in her eyes. I admit, "Your eyes remind me of the favorite part of my morning surf."

Her voice falters as she inquires, "How so?" She swallows hard, but doesn't flinch or retreat.

Her ability to stand in front of me, and not break our heated gaze, challenges me. It stokes a deep-seated craving I can't seem to shake. I contemplate taking her to my house, not the club, which is another surprise. I don't bring my play things

home. They stay at the club and out of my private life. Yet the thought of breaking her into submission in my personal environment, somewhere she can't come and go from, with no one else around, takes root.

I trace the edge of her ear, and she shakily inhales, her lips parting enough I could slip my tongue between them if I attempted. My blood heats to the point I might sweat, and I curse myself for putting myself in this position. Yet I can't stop. Now that I have her attention, I need to keep going. I answer, "When the sun rises over the water, and the light hits it just right, there's calm chaos."

She furrows her brows. "Calm chaos? That's an oxymoron. It doesn't make sense."

I clench my jaw, trying to contain my pleasure that she's not just a pretty face. She has a brain and uses it, which is another thing I don't often see with many beautiful women in L.A. I flip my hand and lightly graze my fingertip over her chin, enjoying how her eyes quickly shut then reopen. I answer, "When the tide's rolling away, barely giving way to any waves, and the water looks like it's full of sparkles trying to jump into the air, that's calm chaos."

She ponders my statement for a moment, her expression morphing into a soft smile I assume she'd make after I wore her out with my demands. She asserts in approval, "I suppose your oxymoron works."

It's all too much. I might as well be a reckless teenager unable to control his urges instead of a sexually experienced, normally always in control thirty-seven-year-old man. I reach behind her, grab a fist of her hair, and firmly tug her head backward. It's nothing like what I've done to women in the past, but it's enough to make her gasp and get an idea of what I'd do to her if I had the chance.

Whatever her perfume is flares in my nostrils. It reminds me of the surf along with something else I can't put my finger on besides the combination of sea salt and driftwood. I lick my lips, studying hers, then pin my gaze into her widened one,

murmuring, “There are many things I do that perception would claim don’t work, but do.”

Her bottom lip quivers, but she catches it and takes a deep breath. Her chest rises higher, and I give it a lewd glance, then pin my most challenging stare on her. She opens her mouth, tries to speak, but nothing comes out.

I tug her head further back, leaning so dangerously close to her mouth her breath hits mine.

She whispers, “What kind of things?”

I don’t hesitate, taunting, “Things that would make your father despise me.”

Her plump lips part again, but her mother’s voice calls out, “Blakely!”

Goddamn it!

I release her and step back just as Madelyn turns the corner.

She beams, “There you are! We’re about to cut the cake.” Then she turns to me, bats her eyes, and puts her hand on my bicep. Vodka overpowers Blakely’s sea salt and driftwood scent, and Madelyn coos, “Riggs. I didn’t know you’d arrived.”

I groan inside. Madelyn and Hugh are no saints. They both fuck whatever walks, and for years, she’s made it clear she’s into me. But I’d never do her for two reasons.

One, she’s my partner’s wife. I don’t need that kind of drama in my life.

Two, I’m not interested. She’s another product of Beverly Hills, overindulging in alcohol and prescription pills, and void of anything interesting. The only difference between her and the people I grew up with is she has money. She’s as predictable as they come and might as well be a junkie on the corner.

All of it bores me.

I step out of her grasp and nod. “Madelyn. Good seeing you. Please give my regards to Hugh. Something’s come up.” I

hightail it down the hallway, ignoring her questioning calls after me. I move to the front door, step outside, and get into my Porsche, racing out of the subdivision and driving directly to Club Indulgence in L.A.

Something has definitely come up.

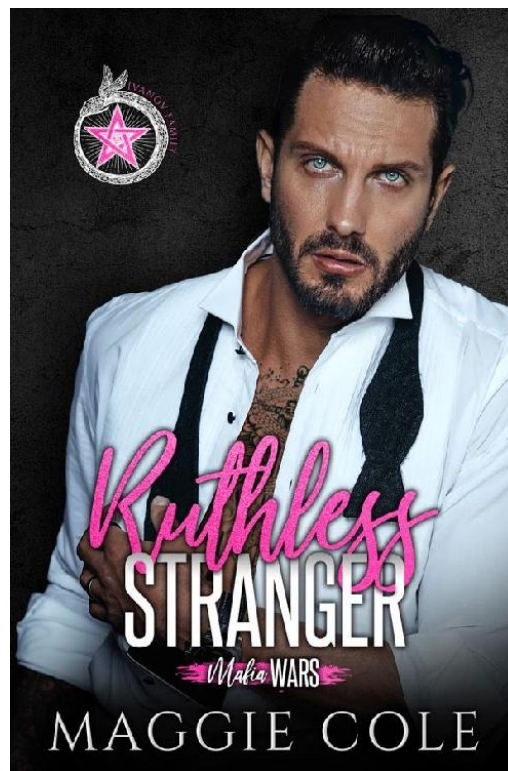
Yet it's not anything the Gallows would expect.

As I pull into the club's secret parking garage, I already know I'll be here well into the night, trying to get Blakely out of my head. It won't be the first time I've dealt with my frustration here, but this time, I curse myself for stepping over the line that I know I can never cross.

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He's a Ruthless Stranger. One I can't see, only feel, thanks to my friends who make a deal with him on my behalf.

No names. No personal details. No face to etch into my mind.

Just him, me, and an expensive silk tie.

What happens in Vegas is supposed to stay in Vegas.

He warns me he's full of danger.

I never see that side of him. All I experience is his Russian accent, delicious scent, and touch that lights me on fire.

One incredible night turns into two. Then we go our separate ways.

But fate doesn't keep us apart. When I run into my stranger back in Chicago, I know it's him, even if I've never seen his icy blue eyes before.

Our craving is hotter than Vegas. But he never lied.

He's a ruthless man...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amazon Bestselling Author

Maggie Cole is committed to bringing her readers alpha delicious book boyfriends. She's an international bestselling author and has been called the "literary master of steamy romance." Her books are full of raw emotion, suspense, and will always keep you wanting more. She is a masterful storyteller of contemporary romance and loves writing about broken people who rise above the ashes.

Maggie lives in Florida with her son. She loves sunshine, anything to do with water, and everything naughty.

Her current series were written in the order below:

- All In (Stand alones with entwined characters)
- It's Complicated (Stand alones with entwined characters)
- Together We Stand (Brooks Family Saga - read in order)
- Behind Closed Doors (Read in order)
- Mafia Wars
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