

A man with short dark hair and a light beard, wearing a white tank top, is shown from the chest up. He is looking down and to the right with a serious expression, his right hand resting on his left shoulder. The background is dark with abstract yellow and orange brushstrokes.

HIS SINFUL

Need

WEST COAST MOBSTERS 4

LEIGHTON GREENE

HIS SINFUL NEED

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Cover: [Natasha Snow](#)

Beta reading and consultation: Leslie Copeland

Content Warnings: gun and knife violence, murder, crime, abusive parents, bank robberies, armed hold-ups, homophobia.

HIS SINFUL NEED

Two men. Two Families. Too many secrets.

When Castellani security specialist Max Pedretti is reluctantly loaned out to the Esposito Family, he's thrust into close quarters with their youngest Capo, Bricker Soldano. The magnetic pull between them is undeniable, but Bricker is strictly off-limits, for multiple reasons.

For one thing, he's an Esposito.

For another, he's half Max's age.

But most of all, because Max shares a hidden criminal history with Bricker's father—a secret that could shatter the tentative trust building between them.

So Max vows to focus on the job instead, and finds his old skills as a bank robber are put to the test as he works with Bricker and his crew on a heist that could change the power dynamics in Los Angeles.

But when a tragedy reveals a mole in their midst, Max and Bricker must investigate together to uncover the truth, blurring the lines of loyalty and desire.

Can Max and Bricker uncover the traitor and find their way to love, or will past sins cost them everything?

CONTENTS

1. [Max](#)
2. [Max](#)
3. [Bricker](#)
4. [Max](#)
5. [Bricker](#)
6. [Max](#)
7. [Bricker](#)
8. [Bricker](#)
9. [Max](#)
10. [Max](#)
11. [Bricker](#)
12. [Max](#)
13. [Bricker](#)
14. [Bricker](#)
15. [Max](#)
16. [Bricker](#)
17. [Bricker](#)
18. [Max](#)
19. [Max](#)
20. [Max](#)
21. [Bricker](#)
22. [Bricker](#)
23. [Max](#)
24. [Max](#)
25. [Bricker](#)
26. [Max](#)
27. [Max](#)
28. [Bricker](#)
29. [Bricker](#)
30. [Max](#)
31. [Bricker](#)
32. [Bricker](#)

33. [Max](#)
34. [Bricker](#)
35. [Max](#)
36. [Bricker](#)
37. [Bricker](#)
38. [Max](#)
39. [Max](#)
40. [Bricker](#)
41. [Bricker](#)
42. [Max](#)
43. [Max](#)
44. [Bricker](#)
45. [Max](#)
46. [Bricker](#)
47. [Bricker](#)
48. [Max](#)
49. [Bricker](#)
50. [Max](#)
51. [Bricker](#)
52. [Max](#)

[Dear sinful sweethearts...](#)

[Also by the Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER 1

THE BOSS ISN'T HAPPY. That's the first thing that strikes me when I walk into the grand salon at Redwood Manor.

The second thing is, he's got a visitor.

An auburn-haired, hard-eyed, smiling visitor who smells like honeysuckle and rain in these close quarters.

"Ms. Esposito," I say carefully, and *after* I've nodded respectfully to Sandro Castellani.

"Maestra," she says, "is what my sons and daughters call me."

Far as I know, she's got no kids. Guess she takes the concept of *Famiglia* to a whole new level.

"Sit down, Pedretti." The Boss isn't in the mood for pleasantries, so I take a seat and I steel myself. It's my job to make sure the Boss is happy. If he's not happy, I'm not doing my job right.

And it's not just the Boss. On the way in Darian, the butler, was acting all strange—stranger than usual. And on my way downstairs I overheard what sounded like a distraught Julian Castellani being soothed by his Lion, Leo Bernardi.

Nice to have someone like Leo on our side now. Nice to have him to keep Julian in check.

"The Maestra, here," Sandro continues, sounding a little too ironic for my taste, "has come to collect."

I wait. She smiles.

It's the kind of smile that suggests motherly attention, but I'm about her age and I buried my own parents a long while back, so it doesn't do much for me. Besides, I know the kind of person who rises to the top in organizations like ours.

Like hers.

And a woman, too. She must be tough as nails under all that red lipstick and dewy honeysuckle.

Neither she nor Sandro say anything, so I ask the question I guess I'm supposed to ask.

“What have you come to collect, Maestra?”

Her smile gets wider.

CHAPTER 2

MAX

“PEDRETTI, your departure is a great loss to the Family,” Sandro Castellani sighs a week later, shaking my hand over his desk.

“It’s not forever, Boss.”

It doesn’t seem to reassure him, so I just clasp both my hands behind my back when he lets go and wait for him to show me the door. No point making a fuss. Today’s the day.

Today I leave the Family I’m sworn to, and enter...not enemy territory, not exactly, but *new* territory.

It’s all wrapped up in delicate language. Guest. Envoy. Emissary. But the truth is, I’m a hostage. A trading card handed over to Anna-Vittoria Esposito as an apology for certain sins of our Family.

If I was the kind of man to have opinions about things, I’d have a strong one about this. But opinions are for rookies. I’ve been a Castellani for twenty-odd years, located at Redwood for a decade of those, and with the big 5-0 right around the corner, I’m now head of security for the whole estate. I like to think of myself as experienced enough to understand my role.

Unfortunately, it’s my experience that put me where I am right now: about to be handed over to the Espositos for an unspecified period of time.

“You know your mission inside-out,” the Boss says, half-sitting on the edge of the large desk still stained with the blood of his father. “But I want to stress: our relationship with the Esposito Family is delicate, to say the least. It is crucial that

we do not upset them further. And you know, Pedretti, I prefer having friends to enemies, particularly after gaining our Lion.”

He’s not wrong; Leo Bernardi leaving his own Family and pledging to ours sent shockwaves through the LA underworld, and the Bernardis are still tearing themselves apart in a not-so-civil war after the killing of their Don. Hard to tell which Bernardi brother will come out on top: AJ or Gino.

Leo turned his back on all that, and I admire his pragmatism, even though it puts the Castellanis in a difficult spot.

We’re in a difficult spot with the Espositos, too. And I’m proud to know the Boss feels like he can count on me to make things right.

“I want you to embed yourself into the Espositos as quickly as possible,” the Boss says now, like he hasn’t already said it a million times before, “and make yourself useful.”

“So they trust me,” I supply. I know this speech.

He gives his now-familiar smile, the one made crooked by the scar running down his face, but it’s still a genuine smile. “I know I’ve said all this before. I don’t like sacrificing you, Pedretti, so it makes me feel a little better to go over it and over it. Yes. So that they trust you. And of course, I also expect you to keep your eyes and ears open. Any information you bring back will be gratefully received. I know that you will be a great representative for the Family.”

“I appreciate your faith in me.” I give my own crooked smile. “But this mission—it isn’t just a way to get rid of me, is it?” I raise an eyebrow, so he knows I’m joking.

Mostly.

“Believe me,” he sighs heavily, “I would have preferred to send almost anyone else. But Anna-Vittoria asked for you specifically.”

I should probably feel flattered. And when she was here, Anna-Vittoria did her best to make it *sound* flattering. All it does is make me worry that I’m building up a rep. In our world, men with reps are a target, not an asset, and I prefer to lay low. But I can’t let my worries compromise my work.

The stakes are too high.

“And remember,” Sandro goes on, “you have my support if you need it. Anything at all. Cash, weapons, tech, information—just let me know.”

“And just so I’m clear on it, Boss, still no idea why the lady wanted me specifically?”

Sandro shakes his head slowly. “All she would say is that she’s heard good things. You are talented. Practical. Loyal. Perhaps that’s what she’s seeking. Or perhaps she thinks you have information to share.” He holds up his hand at the sight of my face. “Of course I know you won’t. But she does not know you.” He hesitates, then goes on, “And Pedretti—if there’s any danger to you personally, you have my permission to use deadly force. But remember, everything you do reflects on the Castellani Family. Never forget who you are, or where your loyalties lie.”

“No question of that, Boss.”

With a final nod, Sandro ushers me out of his study walking behind me like a reluctant shadow. I pause at the grand salon, where melancholy music streams out the door, and poke my head in. Julian Castellani is in there, Sandro’s brother and resident assassin, and he’s playing the grand piano—but his eyes are on the doorway.

As soon as he sees me, the tune changes to a funeral march.

“Not dead yet,” I call over. He stops playing and heads my way, his usually cold expression uncharacteristically softer today. Julian was surprisingly upset at the idea I’d be leaving Redwood awhile. Was downright rude to Anna-Vittoria Esposito the day she turned up and asked for me as payment for the debt Sandro owed her, or so I heard from Leo. Julian’s rudeness tends toward aggression, so it’s lucky Leo was there to smooth troubled waters.

“Your car has arrived,” Julian announces now, unblinking gaze fixed on me. In the early days I found it unnerving, until I got used to it. Used to Julian. He’s not bad once you get to know him, so long as you keep him in eyesight when he’s in the

same room. So that—like now, when he flings himself at me—you can be aware of the attack before it happens.

But this is no attack. His arms are tight around me and he squeezes me hard, like a child with a teddy bear. I stand there and let him hug me, awkwardly patting his back.

“Take care of yourself, Pedretti,” he murmurs. “Or I’ll have to do it for you.” He lets me go just before it gets uncomfortable to breathe.

“Don’t worry about me. You take care of your big brother, eh?” I offer a wry smile to the younger Castellani. “Make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble while I’m gone. The way things are heating up with the Bernardis...”

“Oh, there won’t be any trouble,” Julian says, but there’s a gleam in his eye, and he smiles. “Leo says goodbye, too,” he adds. “And then he told me not to forget to tell you.”

“Give him my thanks. I better get moving.”

In the foyer, Darian Thornfield-Hayes and Raffi DeLuca stand there pretending to ignore each other. I don’t know what’s going on there, and it irks me a little that I won’t be able to keep watching the show. Some of the men have been laying bets. I didn’t approve.

Officially, at least.

Darian is a relative newcomer to Redwood, and he was Julian’s pick. A strange choice for the new butler, but Sandro left it up to Julian, and here we are. Pale, fair-haired, and unusually good-looking, Darian gives one of those quick little bows of his as I stop before him, heels clicking together. Always makes me feel like royalty or something, and I smile now just like I always do. He’s been good for Redwood, can handle Julian alright, too.

He just gets real weird around Raffi DeLuca.

“I’ll be seeing you,” I tell Darian.

“Safe travels, Mr. Pedretti.” I offer my hand, and after only a moment of hesitation, he shakes it.

When I turn to Raffi, he grabs my hand hard, pumping it up and down, brown eyes widening despite himself. “Hope I can do you proud, Pedretti.”

“You’ll do great.” DeLuca was my pick for head of house security while I’m gone. He was a good gate guard, with the kind of broad physique that keeps people behaving themselves when he asks to see their ID. When I bumped him up to the house, he proved himself further. He knows how to be discreet. Knows how to make an impression, too, when it’s needed. He’s young and he’s a little green, but the other men respect him. They’ll fall in line.

“I’ll try not to fuck it up,” DeLuca says with a grin, but he’s a little too jittery for me to think it’s just a joke.

“I know you won’t,” I tell him, squeezing his shoulder. “And hell, we’re due for a quiet spell.”

“Don’t jinx it!”

“Any issues, you call me. But you won’t have issues.” I pat him one last time on the arm, and then I turn to the door and walk out of Redwood Manor.

The Castellani brothers flank me like a pair of sentinels as we make our way down the stairs outside, and the house guards all give me somber nods, as though I’m heading off to my execution.

Maybe I am.

I pause at the bottom of the steps and take a moment to appreciate the beauty of the sprawling estate, or at least as much as I can see here. I was real happy when the Boss himself promoted me to head of house security. Redwood Manor feels like home, and the Family—not just Julian and Sandro, but the rest of them, too—feel like brothers. That sense only grew after Sandro took over and got rid of some dead branches that were twisting the Family tree.

For a man like me without his own blood ties, being a Castellani has given me a sense of security. Of *roots*. And I don’t much like change. Don’t much like the Espositos, either.

But for the Boss, for the Family, I'll do anything. Even join another clan for a while.

A dark-windowed car waits for me a few yards away, its sleek black exterior waxed to a mirror shine. The driver steps out and opens the back door so that, as the three of us approach the car, Giancarlo Barone emerges from the back seat.

The Esposito Consigliere was sent to pick me up? I'm starting to feel like a celebrity.

"Don Castellani," he addresses the Boss with a respectful nod, his voice smooth and confident. "Mr. Pedretti will be well taken care of. You have nothing to worry about."

"See that I don't, Barone," Sandro replies, his tone firm but devoid of malice. He knows now how to assert his authority without resorting to aggression—a skill he's developed since taking on the top job. He wouldn't thank me for feeling proud of him, but I do.

I packed a suitcase just in case, and it's already been loaded into the trunk. So with one last glance at the Castellani brothers, I climb into the car, settling into the soft leather seat as the door closes behind me. The Espositos, like the Castellanis, have some serious money.

Barone reclines in his seat across from me, studying my face. "Comfortable?" he asks as the car begins to pull away from Redwood Manor.

"Sure."

"Massimo Pedretti," he says, as though he's tasting my name. "Quite the reputation you have in your Family. Don Castellani always speaks highly of you."

Now how the hell would Barone know what the Boss says about me? But all I say is, "It's Max. Or Pedretti. Choose your flavor, just not Massimo, eh?"

"*Max* Pedretti," Barone continues, undeterred. "A skilled security expert, fiercely pragmatic, highly intelligent. And a man who has...reinvented himself." That rings a few alarm bells, but I make no reply. "Tell me, what drives a man like you to serve a Family like the Castellanis?"

The chess match has begun, apparently. No matter. I intend to keep my king well-guarded.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I ask. “Same thing I bet drives you, Barone. Loyalty. I protect the people who protect me.”

He gives a yellowed smile. “Loyalty. A rare commodity these days.” He leans back, fingers tapping idly on the armrest as he stares out the window. “How did you first come to work for the Castellanis?”

“I’d rather keep those cards close to my chest.” May as well be upfront about it. “I might be an envoy to your Family, Barone, but I ain’t no rat. And I assume you, of all people, understand the importance of discretion.”

“Of course, of course.” He chuckles, a knowing glint in his eyes. “We all have our secrets, don’t we? Some of us have secrets currently serving time in Chino.”

If I was uneasy before, I’m on guard now. The old Don, Sandro’s father, paid a lot of money to have my past painted over when I joined up. But I guess that’s why Giancarlo Barone is the Esposito Consigliere. He knows things he shouldn’t, like any good Consigliere.

We don’t talk anymore, and soon enough we arrive at Anna-Vittoria’s house, if you can call it a house. It’s not what I pictured. She’s a woman of refinement, but this estate—a grand, sprawling reimagining of a Roman villa built on top of one of the gentle Bel Air hills—is not the style I would’ve picked for her. Carved sandstone mimics marble columns, and there are little mock temples here and there as we drive through the gardens, themselves vibrant green, dotted with bursts of color from carefully arranged flower beds.

It’s an impressive sight, sure. But it’s not Redwood.

The house guards at the door eye me, but don’t touch me. No pat-down. A show of faith, maybe.

Barone leads me through the front door and into the interior of the house. Polished floors gleam underfoot, reflecting the recessed lights overhead. We pass by room after room, each as beautiful as the last, until we finally reach a well-lit sitting

room covered in chartreuse leaf-patterned wallpaper. Green raw silk curtains hang from the tall windows. A large fireplace is set into one wall, and twin golden-framed mirrors hang above it. The floor is covered with a huge, thick rug patterned after some Pompeii mosaics.

“Take a seat,” Barone says, and walks off without bothering to see if I’ll do as I’m told.

But I do. I’ll sit and stay and bark on command, if that’s what they want.

I’ll do whatever it takes to further and protect the interests of the Castellani Family.

CHAPTER 3

BRICKER

“YOU STARTED THE PARTY WITHOUT ME?” I ask, throwing my keys in the communal bowl by the door.

The grimy windows of the Lair battle with the light trying to get through, which is just as well, since nothing could make the worn-out furniture and threadbare rugs in here look any better.

This is our nest, a throwaway place out in one of the seediest neighborhoods in the Valley. But I’m in my element here, surrounded by my crew, laughing and joking as we start the day. The air might be stale with old, ingrained cigarette smoke and the smell of strong coffee, but it’s home to us.

Tony the Pony emerges from the kitchen, munching on a cold slice of pizza for breakfast. “We got tired of waiting around for your lazy ass.” He punches me on the arm in greeting, the blow cushioned by the leather of my jacket.

Grinning, I go into the kitchen and grab out my stained coffee mug from one of the open-faced cupboards—open-faced because all the cupboard doors were ripped off long ago, pre-us. It doesn’t seem to have been a stylistic choice. I head straight to the coffee machine; at least *that* I can’t complain about. It’s probably the most expensive thing in the house. “Lazy?” I call back over my shoulder. “I’ve been working overtime to keep *your* ungrateful asses out of trouble with the Maestra.”

“Trouble is my middle name,” Van quips from the ratty armchair in the corner.

“Yeah, and Dumb and Dumber are your first and last.” I take a sip of coffee, and wink at Honeybee over the rim, who chortles along with Giddy and Nico at Van’s expression. Tank snorts, and even Jazz gives a slight smirk, which for her is practically a guffaw.

“Ouch,” Van says with mock hurt. “Handing out the burns early this morning, Cap. What’s with the mood, your one night stand’s beer goggles wore off too fast last night?”

Before I can even flip him the bird, Pony’s piling on. “Hey, Bricker!” he calls out. “Remember that time you almost got taken in by that cop because you were so hell-bent on flirting with him?”

“Shut up, asshole,” I say, kicking out at him as I walk back into the living room. “We all have our vices. Mine happens to be men in uniform.”

I laugh at the chorus of *ewws* and *traitors* that follow and a warm sense of contentment fills my stomach along with the coffee. These people are more than just my crew. They’re my family.

“Alright, enough about my amazing sex life,” I say, leaning against the old table in the living room. “What’s the news?”

“Tank said something about a shipment coming in this morning,” Pony replies, glancing at the silent Tank in the corner. He’s already cleaned two shotguns and is dismantling a third. “Might be we should get down to the docks, make sure we get hold of it before those fucking Bernardis stick their noses in.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say. “A few of you can scope it out, bring the goods back here. The rest of us can keep doing what we do. And tonight we’ll hit up the bar. First round’s on me if that shipment comes in without the Bernardis squeezing extra out of us.”

“Deal!” Rook agrees enthusiastically. “Who’s driving down to the docks?”

“Me, numbnuts,” Pony says. “Who the fuck else?”

I don't like the edge of condescension in his tone. Rook's green, but he's enthusiastic. But I don't have to say anything, because Jazz gets there first. "Hey, Pony, what's the difference between your driving and a drunk squirrel on roller skates?" she asks. "The squirrel has a better chance of getting to its destination in one piece."

"Hey!" Pony protests. "Don't do your wheelman dirty like that!"

This time, I hear even Tank's chuckle from the corner.

"Okay, okay," I say, waving my hands to shush them, though I still smile. "Seriously, we've got work to do."

As the crew settles down, I take a moment to look around at their faces, some weathered by age, others younger than I am. They're the definition of a motley crew, but they're *mine*, and I wouldn't trade them for the world. Our jokes might be sharp, but they keep us connected.

The sound of my phone ringing breaks through the quiet. I check the name and clear my throat, standing up straighter. "Duty calls."

Van narrows his eyes. "What's the old lady want now?"

"Watch it," I say. No one talks about Anna-Vittoria that way. Van holds up his hands, backing off, but I can tell he's still worried. So am I, but I try to shrug it off. "It's the Baron," I tell him. "Nothing to worry about."

But the crew has sensed my sudden shift in mood, and the room falls silent.

"Maybe they're finally sending us a real Capo to lead this ragtag bunch of misfits," Van teases, trying to lighten the mood.

"Very funny," I reply with a forced chuckle. But I walk out the back door before answering the phone. "It's Soldano."

"The Maestra wants to see you. Now." Giancarlo Barone's tone brooks no argument.

"Did she say what about?" I ask, trying to keep my voice level. If Anna-Vittoria's sending for me so abruptly, it can only

mean trouble. We have a regular meeting each week that she could talk to me at, if it wasn't something urgent. And given the crew's track record lately, I'd like a heads up from the Baron if I need to brace myself.

But I might as well have saved my breath.

"What kind of man do you think that I am, Soldano, that I would discuss Family business over the phone? Don't keep the Maestra waiting." He ends the call.

I hang up too, my mood soured. What kind of man do I think he is? A slimy weasel. I don't like Barone, or any men who act like they know it all, which is basically the Baron's calling card.

"Everything alright?" Pony asks as soon as I re-enter the house.

"All good," I say, forcing a smile to sell the lie. "Just got called in for a meeting. Tank, Jazz, Pony, Rook—you go on now and follow up on that shipment. Van, Giddy, Nico and Honeybee can keep working on things here. I'll be back later."

"Sure thing, Cap," Pony says, though I can tell he doesn't quite believe me.

"Take care of yourselves at the docks," I add. "If the Bernardis make trouble, don't be heroes. We'll go back stronger. Van, you're on point here while I'm gone."

"Ten-four, Cap," Van replies at once, but the worry in his eyes is unmistakable.

Hell, I'm worried, too. Whatever this meeting with Anna-Vittoria is about, it's not a social visit. My crew is working on something big. Something *important*. If the Maestra wants to see me, and it's not bad news, maybe she'll have the extra funds I asked for.

Or maybe she's calling it all off. It's a big play, after all. One that we can't afford to fuck up.

One that *I* can't afford to fuck up.

At twenty-eight, I'm the youngest Capo in the Espositos, not just right now but *ever*, and I can't help feeling like there are a

bunch of people who don't think I *earned* my position.

I have a lot to prove.

Before I know it, the Villa rises up before me, and even after all these years, the sight of it still stuns. It sure is a change from the rundown house in the Valley where my crew and I spend our days. The front door of *that* place could get taken down with a hard kick. But we chose the Lair for its location and because the neighbors know how to look the other way.

By contrast, at the Villa, stone pillars hold an iron gate, pillars carved with mythical creatures that seem to come alive, silently judging those who dare enter the domain of the Esposito Family. I pull up at the guard house, but security waves me through after a glance in the window at me.

I'm expected.

What is this about? I make my way up the winding drive, turning it over in my mind. But whatever it is, I need to stay calm. Keep my head. Prove to Anna-Vittoria that I'm the right man for this job, that I deserve the chance she's given me.

That my age doesn't make me a liability.

The house guards take me straight on in too, faces expressionless behind their dark sunglasses. And then I'm escorted to the sitting room, but I stop dead as soon as I enter, surprised to see a man I've never seen before waiting there too.

Damn.

Daddy as hell.

Salt-and-pepper hair slicked back from a face that speaks of hard-won experience. His dark eyes hold an intensity that pierces through me as he glances up. He seems...out of place here. Not because of how he's dressed—impeccable dark suit, white shirt open at the collar—but because he's so completely unknown.

Unknowable, maybe? There's a stillness to him that unsettles me.

Those dark brown eyes have me pinned in place. I feel a responding pull in my gut, but I don't look away; I stare straight back at him. He gives me a nod but he doesn't say anything.

Friend or foe? Hard to tell.

I take a seat opposite the stranger and study him openly, trying to place him in the hierarchy of our organization. Who the hell is he? A new recruit?

And why does he have to be so goddamn sexy?

I joked about men in uniform this morning, but the truth is, my *real* weakness is older men. I know that says something about me, so I keep it quiet. But in the privacy of my own thoughts, I drift into dangerous territory as I picture myself with this guy here, tangled together, bodies slick with sweat and—

Ugh, it's been too long since I had someone in my bed. Working on The Plan occupies my mind from dawn to dusk, and has done for the last six months we've worked on it.

But...yeah. It'd be nice to have this guy's strong hands roaming over my body, fingertips tracing out where he plans to put his tongue. Would he play rough? Maybe open up my ass gently but then—

The door opening cuts through my fantasies like a cold shower. The Shadow stands in the doorway of Anna-Vittoria's inner salon with his usual air of menace. I rise from my seat, eager to get underway. But the Shadow raises his hand and gestures toward my chair with a firm "sit" motion.

With a sigh, I sink back down, feeling like a scolded child as the Shadow motions for the other guy to follow him.

On his way out, the man gives me one backward glance. I think I see curiosity in his eyes.

CHAPTER 4

MAX

I FOLLOW STEVIE FALCO, sometimes known as the Shadow, as he leads me into the next room. Anna-Vittoria's closest and most ruthless bodyguard is well known for his willingness to do whatever it takes to protect his Boss. I have a lot of respect for him, but he's less interesting somehow than the guy who showed up while I was waiting.

I give one last glance back at him from the door, that young man with an oddly familiar face I can't quite place. He stared hard at me, too, while we were waiting there silently, and I let him do it without staring back. It was almost flattering, the way he showed such brazen interest.

And he sure is attractive, based on the few times I glanced over at him.

But there's no more time to ponder as I'm ushered into the inner sanctum, a kind of salon, much more intimate than the grand salon at Redwood, but just as luxurious as every other room in the place, with maybe some extra gold leaf here and there.

Anna-Vittoria rises from a silk-embroidered settee, smoothing down her designer skirt, and offers a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Signor Pedretti. Welcome to my home. Thank you for agreeing to act as envoy between our Families."

I give a curt nod. After twenty-plus years under the Castellani standard, just being in the same room alone with another Don unsettles me. "The pleasure is mine, Donna Esposito."

"Maestra," she reminds softly. "My Family calls me Maestra."

When in Rome, I guess. “Maestra.”

“I hope our customs won’t be too strange for you,” she adds, resuming her seat. I take the chair opposite when she gestures to it.

“I’m adaptable, Maestra,” I tell her as I sit. “I’m sure I’ll manage.”

“*Bene*,” she says coolly.

The Shadow moves to stand behind me, an old trick to keep visitors on guard. Barone is in the other corner, watching with a smile. Guess he came in a different way.

There’s a coffee table between Anna-Vittoria and me, with a few small but heavy-looking bronze casts of some of those bodies from Pompeii. Well, not bodies, but the space left behind when they were cased in the lava of Vesuvius.

Gruesome sort of thing to have as an ornament.

Anna-Vittoria sees me looking at them. “A *memento mori*,” she tells me. “It is always good to remember one’s mortality, don’t you think?”

I don’t know what the hell to say to that, so I just nod.

“Now,” Anna-Vittoria goes on, “to your new assignment. You will be working with a team of financial acquisition specialists.”

I know exactly what she means.

Bank robbers.

I wasn’t sure exactly what to expect in coming here, but it sure as hell wasn’t this. *Ciro Castellani* muddied up my past after I took my vows—part of his protections, and I was grateful for it. These days, *Sandro* and some of the higher-ups are the only ones who know about all that, but there’s no way they’d spill. If Anna-Vittoria knows about that time in my life, she’s dug real deep.

I clear my throat to play for a little time. “I’m not sure how much help I could be with something like that, Maestra.”

“But old dogs still know old tricks, yes? I know this because we are of a similar age, I think, Signor Pedretti. And there’s plenty of life in this old bitch yet.” She gives a soft laugh at my startled reaction, then goes on. “Fabrizio Soldano will be your new Capo while you work with us. They call him Bricker, I believe?” She glances at the Shadow, who gives a nod that I catch from the side of my eye. “You may have seen him while you waited. But you seem perturbed, Signor Pedretti. I trust this won’t be a problem, working for someone younger than yourself?”

If only it was his age that was the problem.

Bricker Soldano. Fabi’s son. No wonder his face looked familiar.

I stare at Anna-Vittoria, willing myself to remain impassive while my mind reels. I abandoned that world and everyone in it by choice.

Including Fabi, my heist partner, rotting in prison to this day thanks to a job gone wrong.

Now his son is to be my new partner in crime? Fate has a twisted sense of humor.

But this isn’t fate, clearly. Not after Barone’s crack in the car, and Anna-Vittoria’s plans for me.

The heists Fabi and I pulled off, the money we made, the risks we took...it feels like a lifetime ago. And now I have to work with his son, who grew up fatherless while Fabi languished in prison.

“No problem at all, Maestra,” I say steadily. No point making a fuss while Barone and Falco are still hanging around. If I decide to object, I’ll do it in private. “I’m committed to fulfilling my role and serving the interests of both our Families.”

Anna-Vittoria’s gaze sharpens, assessing. “I’m glad to hear it.” She turns to her two men and says, “Give us the room. Yes, you too, Stefano,” she adds, when the Shadow doesn’t budge. Then and only then does he follow Barone, but he gives me a long stare as he closes the doors to the salon behind him.

With a smile, Anna-Vittoria says, “I hear you are a clever man. So you must have realized by now why I called for you, specifically.”

She wants to play, I can play. “So what’s the story? You an old friend of Fabi’s, hoping to get me killed?”

With a pitying smile, she shakes her head. “This isn’t about past contacts. I need this job done and I need it done *right*.”

“I don’t run other people’s jobs. I need to have control.”

“Unfortunately,” she says softly, “it doesn’t matter what you need. You are here at your Don’s request, yes?”

I change tack. “I don’t run jobs where innocents are likely to get hurt.”

“Good. Because I don’t want any innocents hurt, either. That is why I want you on this crew. In all your jobs, no one was ever killed. Not even hurt. I want you embedded with my people to be the voice of experience, of reason. To keep them in line.”

I’ve about had it now. “I’m some outsider from a different Family. They *have* a Capo, this Bricker guy. Tell him to keep them in line.”

“Are you refusing to comply?” She doesn’t shift her tone of voice at all, but there’s a warning there nonetheless.

“No, ma’am,” I say at last. “I’m here to make friends.”

“Good. Then you will join this crew led by Soldano and you will teach them how to be better at what they are attempting to do. The rest of the details will be given to you by your new Capo, when he decides it is important for you to know.”

I contemplate throwing in the towel right here. Telling her thanks for the fun car ride with her Consigliere and the peek inside the Villa, but I’ll head back to Redwood now. And there’s one thing that could actually make me do that. “Does he know? This Capo, Soldano. Does he know I worked with his father, too?”

She gets serious then, like I finally touched on something important. “No. And I do not want you to tell him, Signor Pedretti. There is no need for him to know.”

I'm not keen on lying, but I'm less keen on revisiting my past. Still, I do wonder if this is a setup. "Can I ask why?"

"It won't do anything but make him more suspicious of you. As you say, you are an outsider. I want him to *trust* you. And I want you to make sure he and his crew are kept safe. Any more questions?"

"A thousand. But I guess they'll wait."

"Then I'll have Soldano join us." She leans over to press a discreet button on the table next to her, and Barone and the Shadow return moments later with the man from the waiting room.

Oh, yes. It's him. Unmistakably Fabi's boy, though his hair's a little lighter than Fabi's, but he has the same eyes. And even from our brief and non-verbal acquaintance, I can tell he inherited his old man's charm, too.

A sense of responsibility washes over me. I owe it to Fabi to look out for his son, even if it means diving headfirst back into a world I'd rather leave behind. Bricker's father won't see daylight until he's a much older man, after all.

Thanks to me.

"Soldano, this is Massimo Pedretti," Anna-Vittoria says. "He comes to us from the Castellani Family. A guest."

Bricker's eyes narrow, raking over me before he bares his teeth in a parody of a smile. He strides forward, hand extended, and I stand to take it. His eyes are cold. "A pleasure."

I take his hand and find his grip punishing. "Likewise."

We size each other up and then Bricker releases me.

"Signor Pedretti will be joining your crew during his time with us."

A silence follows her words, but I can just about hear what's going through Bricker Soldano's head. "With all due respect, Maestra," he says at last, in a strangled sort of voice, "I don't need reinforcements. My crew is more than capable."

“Consider Signor Pedretti an insurance policy,” Anna-Vittoria says smoothly. “He’s well-versed in the finer points of your work, Soldano.”

Bricker’s jaw clenches, but he holds his tongue. Smart. He knows not to cross the Maestra.

“Signor Pedretti will accompany your crew as you work operations,” Anna-Vittoria goes on.

“But we’ve been planning for months,” Bricker bursts out. Maybe he’s not so smart after all. “Throwing in some outsider at the last second—”

“Are you questioning my judgment?” Once again, her tone doesn’t change at all, but the temperature in the room seems to drop ten degrees.

“Of course not, Maestra,” he says at last. “I’m just concerned about compromising my crew with a new member at this...late stage.”

“Your concern is noted. It is also irrelevant.”

When Bricker speaks again, his tone is clipped. “Understood, Maestra.”

Anna-Vittoria’s smile is a knife’s edge. “Signor Pedretti, would you give us a moment? I have other matters to discuss with Soldano that are private Family business.”

It takes a second before her instructions compute, and it’s only when the Shadow goes over to open the door for me that I nod. “Of course. Excuse me, I’ll...” I leave the room, head still spinning. There’s a guard out there to make sure I behave myself, but sneaking around the Villa is the last thing on my mind. I try not to sag against the leafy wallpaper and go about processing the cascade of revelations over the past five minutes.

How the hell do the Espositos know about my past? And should I tell Sandro that Anna-Vittoria expects me to rob a bank?

What if it *is* a setup?

No one robs physical banks these days; they just hack into accounts and drain the numbers out, and that's a specialty well outside my own. Besides, it's been decades since I've been involved in heist work, and my skills are undoubtedly rusty.

And that surge of attraction for Bricker I felt when I first saw him—every time I look at him—I need to stamp that out *damn* quick. He's the son of my former friend, for God's sake. It's *wrong* to feel this way, and yet...

Fabi's kid.

He looks so much like his father, now that I know. The same unruly hair, same strong jaw, full mouth. But where Fabi was always jovial—right up until the end of our friendship—Bricker seemed annoyed. Even sullen, if anyone is ever really *sullen* in front of a Mob Boss.

Does he know who I am?

I know Fabi held to the code and kept his mouth shut, because I'm still a free man. So no, he never turned anyone in, but maybe he let something slip to his own son? But—no. Now that I think about it, my name meant nothing to Bricker.

It was the Castellani mention that made him turn on a dime. Espositos like to keep to their own clan.

A rising voice—Bricker's—from inside the salon jerks me from my brooding. I can't make out the words, but the tone is clear enough. Quite a surprise to hear some low-level Capo talk like that to the Boss—the Maestra, since she insists on it.

When the door flies open, I school my expression to neutrality. Bricker storms out, nearly bowling me over in the process, and radiating fury, but he jerks to a halt, turning to stand at attention.

“Signor Pedretti.” Anna-Vittoria stands in the doorway, unruffled. “I trust I've clarified the chain of command for you?”

“Perfectly.” I fold my hands behind my back, every inch the obedient soldier. “I have no problem taking orders.”

“Even from a woman?”

I suppose that was going to come up eventually. “Can’t say I feel much one way or the other about that,” I tell her. “But I gotta be honest, ma’am. The way I see it, I’m still working for Don Castellani. His orders were to make friends, and that’s what I plan to do.”

“Loyalty,” Anna-Vittoria says with a small smile, “is valued very highly in the Esposito Family, too. I think you’ll fit in well here. Don’t you agree, Soldano?”

“Sure,” the kid says, after a long pause.

Anna-Vittoria’s smile thins. “Then I’ll leave the details of your assignment to your discretion, Soldano. Do not disappoint me. Nor you, Signor Pedretti.”

I bow my head. “Maestra. Always a pleasure.”

Sarcasm is a dangerous game, but she doesn’t bother to call me on it. She just twists the knife a little harder.

“By the way,” Anna-Vittoria adds, dropping her last bombshell in a casual tone, “while you work with us, Signor Pedretti, you’ll stay with Soldano at his home. I find picking up a new culture is easiest when one is forced, head-first, into the new situation. And I prefer you not to have any contact with your old Family while you’re with us. If you would hand over your phone, please?”

And she holds out her hand.

CHAPTER 5

BRICKER

THE CASTELLANI STANDS there staring at Maestra's outstretched hand while I replay the last few minutes in my head.

"You want a goddamn Castellani meddling in Big One? Are you kidding me?"

It came out of me as soon as the door shut behind the outsider. An audit from another Esposito would've been bad enough. There are enough ambitious assholes in this Family gunning for me already. But now the Maestra wanted me to work with the enemy?

The Shadow took a step forward at my explosion, and the Baron gave a scoff, about to tell me off—but Anna-Vittoria raised a hand. "Let his tantrum wear him out," she said lightly. "Like all toddlers, he'll exhaust himself eventually."

Ouch "The crew won't go for it," I warned her.

"Are you admitting now that you do not control your crew?"

"Of course I control them," I snapped, going a little further again with my tone than I should have, because the Shadow took another step forward, a silent reminder that there was no choice in the matter. I paused, took a breath. "I'll take him," I said through gritted teeth, trying to contain my frustration. "But I don't like it."

"It doesn't matter whether you like it, Fabrizio. This is my desire." Anna-Vittoria leaned back in her seat, crossing her legs. "All *you* need to do is carry it out. You are to treat the Castellani like any other member of your team." She looked

pointedly at me. “That means no special treatment, understood?”

“Understood.” She meant no special *mistreatment*, of course. I clenched my fists by my side in an effort to keep my mouth shut. Some Castellani bastard waltzing into my life, threatening everything I worked so hard for—and he had no damn right to be so attractive while he did it.

“Take a seat,” she said, her voice still infuriatingly calm. “We do have other business to discuss.” I dropped into the chair the Castellani had just vacated, wiping my palms on my jeans. “You’ve had a string of fuckups recently,” Anna-Vittoria continued bluntly, tapping a manicured nail on the arm of her settee. “Jobs gone wrong. Shipments disappearing. I’m starting to think there is a mole in your crew.”

My gut twisted. “There’s no mole.”

“Are you sure? If there’s no mole, it suggests poor leadership instead.”

I swallowed hard, meeting her stare. “We hit a rough patch, that’s all. It won’t happen again.”

After a long moment, she inclined her head. “See that it doesn’t.”

The problem is, I’ve had the same thought myself: a mole. Things keep going wrong. No one has had bad luck like *we’ve* had these last few months, and it’s not for lack of planning, either. I fucking love my crew, and I hate to even think it, but...

Her expression softened. “You know why I’m hard on you, Fabrizio. I want to see you succeed.”

“I know.”

“Do not let your heart overrule your head.” She had my number. I can’t bear to think someone close to me might be betraying me. I just nodded. She turned to the side. “Barone?”

Giancarlo Barone slithered up with a folded-up piece of paper in his hand. “A brief,” he told me. “On your new crew member.”

I took it without thanks and tucked it into my inside pocket.

“Keep me informed,” Anna-Vittoria said, her tone indicating a dismissal, “and make sure you are polite to the Castellani.”

I rose and strode from the room, spine rigid, and then I had to stand there and listen to Pedretti brown-nosing. *Then* Anna-Vittoria let drop that he’d be staying at my place. This Castellani snake not only invading my crew but my personal space, too? But I knew better than to argue with her.

Pedretti, it seems, does not.

“Staying out of touch wasn’t part of the deal,” he says now, a hint of irritation in his voice. He hasn’t even moved to take out his phone.

“I will inform Don Castellani of my preference,” Anna-Vittoria says in that calm, no-arguments voice that I hate hearing directed at me.

“Alright, then,” Pedretti replies after a moment, the casual shrug not masking the tension in his shoulders. He hands her his phone.

“So you understand, Signor Pedretti? You will have no contact outside the Esposito Family. I will see any attempts to do so as a betrayal. And then our little friendship will come to a rather sad and abrupt ending.”

“I hear you.” Pedretti looks straight into Anna-Vittoria’s eyes without a hint of fear. It annoys me. Does he think he can macho-man his way through this assignment?

“Thank you, gentlemen. That will be all.”

She closes the door on us, and I stalk down the hallway after the house guard, Pedretti trailing behind like an unwanted shadow.

But as much as I hate the idea of having him around, I can’t deny that there’s something magnetic about him. Something that pulls on my attention as much as my irritation. I shake my head, trying to banish the thought.

“Welcome to the Esposito Family,” I mutter over my shoulder. “You’re in for a wild ride, Castellani.”

“Looking forward to it,” Pedretti replies. “But the name’s Pedretti. Or Max. Your choice, Fabrizio.”

“It’s Bricker,” I tell him right back. “Or Capo.” Might as well get him in line early. Because I have no idea what Anna-Vittoria’s game is here, but I can only assume Pedretti is going to be looking over my shoulder and interfering every damn step of the way.

“Get in,” I say, pointing at my Charger as we reach the front of the Villa. The sleek black vehicle gleams, its tinted windows hiding the interior.

Pedretti grabs his bag from the back of the town car and transfers it into the Charger. “Nice wheels,” he comments as I close the trunk, his gaze skimming over my car appreciatively.

I hate him completely. Dammit, why does he have to be so good-looking?

“Thanks, I stole it myself,” I shoot back, as I walk round to the driver’s side. He grins, unfazed, and slides into the passenger seat with a grace that irks me further. “Fuck you,” I mumble over the top of the car, where he can’t hear me, and then I get in myself.

With no further conversation, I start the engine and pull away from the Villa. But the whole ride home, I’m hyperaware of his presence beside me, like a stone in my shoe pressing into the tender part of my foot. But one thing’s clear in my mind: if we’re working together, *I’m* the one in control. Max Pedretti will follow my lead whether he likes it or not.

“Ground rules,” I say flatly when we’re halfway home. “You do as I say, when I say. No questions. No arguments. Got it?”

In my peripheral vision, I can see Max looking me over with those cool, dark eyes. Calm. Unruffled. “Understood. You’re in charge...Capo.”

“Damn right I am.” I stare him down as we stop at the lights, searching for any hint of defiance.

But his expression remains politely detached, giving nothing away.

CHAPTER 6

I GET IT.

I wouldn't be happy with this situation either, if I was him. I'm not happy with it, and I'm *me*. Instead of handling a house security gig for Anna-Vittoria, like I did for the Castellanis, I'm helping in a heist run by my old partner's kid.

Really not where I saw myself at this time of life.

"And let's get one last thing straight," Bricker says as he takes off again when the lights change. "I'm not your damn babysitter."

"That's great, since I don't need one," I say mildly. "Look, I don't like this any more than you do. But I'm just here to do my job. So how about we try to make the best of it?"

Bricker scoffs, glancing sidelong at me. "You're asking me to play nice with a goddamn Castellani? You're lucky I don't throw you out of my car right now."

"And back up over me?" I ask. I don't miss the unwilling smirk he gives. He sends me a narrow-eyed glance, and I feel another unwanted spark of attraction. His eyes are thick with lashes, pretty as a woman's.

I shift in my seat and turn my attention back to the street. "Let's just get to your place so you can fill me in. No need for conversation."

"Couldn't agree more," he growls, pressing down on the gas pedal as if to emphasize his point.

Bricker's house is a modern two-story nestled in an upscale, but not flashy neighborhood, just outside Bel Air. The lines of its architecture are modern and bold—just like its owner.

“Welcome home,” Bricker says with false cheerfulness as he steps out of the car and gestures for me to follow him. I ignore the unnecessary theatrics as I step out and take in the surroundings. No grass. No plants. Just neat stones and pavers, nothing that requires maintenance beyond occasional weedkiller.

Bricker has taken my bag out of the trunk and hands it to me like he can't wait to get rid of it. “Come on, let's get you settled and then get the hell back to work,” he says, leading the way to the front door.

Inside, Bricker pauses to put his keys in a glazed bowl on a side table by the door. He raises his voice a little to say, “I'm home,” in a way that suggests not a roommate, but a smart house. And I hear the faint hum of the air conditioning start up, along with the automatic turning off of the alarm.

“Voice control,” he says, turning to me with a smug smile.

The walls are muted colors and hung with paintings—not the challenging kind Sandro Castellani prefers, but the kind that makes you relax when you look at it, earthy tones and shadowy curves, impressionistic seas and mountain ranges.

The furniture in the living room, when he leads me in there, looks comfortable but not particularly expensive; he has a huge TV and modern sound system. Obviously he prefers to spend his money on electronics.

Well. We have that in common.

Bricker points out key features of his security systems as we move through each room during the walkthrough, subtly testing my knowledge and expertise, asking my opinion about brands, or the latest tech. But I'm impressed by the attention to detail in the setup.

“Motion sensors, reinforced doors, bullet-resistant glass,” Bricker lists off, his tone too-casual in a way that suggests he’s still gauging my reaction. “And of course, camera coverage of every inch. Outside *and* inside.”

“Thorough,” I concede. “I assume you have backup generators for power outages?”

“Of course. We wouldn’t want our defenses going down over something as trivial as a blackout, now would we?”

“We would not,” I reply dryly, and I decide to change tactics. “So what about you, Bricker? You an Esposito legacy, or a sign up?”

“Already trying to dig up dirt?” Bricker chuckles. “Since you ask, I was born and raised right here in Los Angeles. I wanted to be a superhero, but alas, the call of supervillainy proved too enticing.”

There’s something about the way he deflects questions, using humor as a shield, that makes me want to push further. “Siblings?”

“Maybe, maybe not. You planning on giving me *your* autobiography, Pedretti? No? Then that’s enough about me. We should get you settled in, and then we’ll head over to the Lair and I’ll introduce you to the rest of the crew. They’ll be *real* happy to meet you, I’m sure.”

As we continue through the house, I make a mental note of the security measures Bricker points out. Despite our rocky start and his hostility, I feel an undeniable respect for the man he is beneath the sarcasm and bravado.

Fabi can be proud of him.

Is Bricker in touch with his father? Hard to know.

And speaking of keeping in touch, what the hell am I going to do about that myself? If the Boss doesn’t hear from me, he’ll go ballistic—or worse, Julian will—and I have no faith in Anna-Vittoria’s assurance that she’ll speak to Sandro herself. But Bricker’s security really is top-notch, which will make everything a little more tricky.

Finally, Bricker leads me to a spare bedroom upstairs. It's right opposite his own room, and the closeness isn't lost on me. He'll be keeping me under observation.

"Look, Bricker," I sigh, as one too many side-eyes finally gets to me, "I'm here to help, that's all. I'm not looking to cause trouble. You won't have any problems with me."

Bricker snorts derisively. "We don't *need* help, and especially not from a Castellani. And just so you know, I'll be watching you closely, Pedretti. Any hint of betrayal, I won't worry too much about putting you down."

The words are harsh, but they don't surprise me. In our line of work, trust is hard-earned and easily lost, and that's the way it should be. "Like I told your Boss—excuse me, your Maestra—I get it, and I'm ready to play ball."

I begin to unpack in silence. Bricker stands there watching me like I'm about to pull out a bomb. But his cologne lingers in the air behind me, and I keep thinking about the way his muscles flexed under his shirt as he showed me around his home, pointing here and there.

Get it together, Pedretti. He's Fabi's kid and he's half your age and—

"Need any help?" Bricker's voice breaks through my thoughts. I've been standing still, staring unseeing at the contents of my bag.

"I'm good." He's standing closer than I realized, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body as I turn to face him.

Our eyes lock for a moment, and something flickers in his gaze. He moves, and I move, trying to get out of each other's way, but all we do is bump straight into each other.

"Maybe you don't need to keep quite such a *close* eye on me," I suggest. "You want to check my guns, my case is over there." I nod at the carbon-molded gun case that I set down on the chair in the corner.

"Yeah. Let's see what you're carrying."

Bricker steps away, giving me space to breathe, and I cross the floor to open it up for him, then return to unpacking. He stands there looking down at my pieces without comment. Nothing much to comment on, anyway, but the distance between us feels necessary, somehow.

“Well,” he continues, clearing his throat, “I’ll leave you to finish unpacking.” Bricker turns to leave the room, pausing for a moment in the doorway. “Get settled, take five, then meet me downstairs. We’ll go meet the crew. I’m sure you want to make a good impression—right, Pedretti?”

I take a deep breath once he’s gone and mentally go over the security cameras discreetly positioned throughout the house. Not an inch of this place is unwatched. And I bet that means this room, too. With a subtle glance around, I locate the camera—top corner, staring at me as I stare at it.

For now, I’ll behave. Keep my head down and find a way to earn Bricker Soldano’s trust. Make friends, like Sandro wants me to do.

What would it be like to truly get close to Bricker? Not physically, but to understand what drives him, what makes him tick, what lies beneath that charismatic exterior. Because there’s charisma there, that’s for sure.

I bet his crew would drink his fucking bathwater.

With the last of my clothes neatly folded and tucked into the drawers, I close the suitcase and store it in the closet. Then I make my way downstairs.

“Remember, Pedretti,” Bricker tells me as I reach the bottom step, “we might have to share this house, but it doesn’t mean we’re going to be buddies. And my crew likes questions about as much as I do, so you might wanna keep a lid on it.”

“I get it. I’m not invited to your reindeer games,” I tell him. “Reminding me about it every five seconds will get old fast.”

He studies me for a long moment, and I wonder what he’s thinking. “Let’s go meet the crew,” is all he says. “You carrying?”

“Always, unless my new Capo tells me otherwise.”

It's the right thing to say, showing deference to him, reminding him who's on top. I can tell it's hit home by the way his shoulders relax. "Good to hear," he says. "And your new Capo approves. Come on."

On the drive to what he keeps calling "the Lair"—I wonder if that's a call-back to the supervillain crack from before—my thoughts keep drifting back to the security measures around his house. The cameras are first rate, covering every possible angle. But like everything else, there must be a weakness. Something I can exploit once Bricker lets his guard down.

I'm not even sure why I'm so determined to find it. Maybe if I can crack the house security, it'll prove to me that I can find a way to crack the man.

Why is that important? Because I want to know the kid is okay, really okay. I owe it to his father.

I owe his father a hell of a lot more than that, but this is one thing I *can* do.

For today, though, I need to focus on making connections with the crew. Maybe they can provide me with a few leads to learn more about Bricker and the Esposito Family, intel I can bring back to Sandro when this is over.

"Pedretti," Bricker's voice cuts through my thoughts, "word to the wise: play nice. My crew doesn't take kindly to outsiders."

"I'm here to make friends." I repeat my mantra steadily. Maybe eventually I'll believe it myself.

"Right," Bricker says skeptically. "We'll see how that goes."

We're coming into a neighborhood a lot less pleasant than the one Bricker lives in, and he pulls up in front of a house that looks like it demands the adjective "crack" before it. "Here it is," he says. "Center of operations."

As we walk up the broken concrete path to the front door, I sense we're being watched. Correction: *I'm* being watched. Bricker puts his hand on the doorknob and pauses. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

And he pushes open the door, gesturing for me to go in first.

CHAPTER 7

BRICKER

THE MINUTE I open the door, a familiar wave of stale pizza mixed with fresh cigarette smoke greets us. Max walks in first at my invitation, eyes scanning the room like a hawk; most security guys have the same attitude, and I wonder what he thinks of us Espositos so far. I follow behind, observing him instead of my crew as he takes in the rundown living room.

The walls, white once upon a time, are now a murky gray with peeling paint, and the linoleum floor is uneven. Old, odd furniture is clumped here and there, including our battered couch, covered with an old quilt that was here when we moved in, and an armchair that's seen better days. An old television, too old to bother stealing, sits in one corner of the room, topped by an overflowing ashtray—that's Tony the Pony, damn him. It's not even the fucking stink of it that I object to, but the smoke interferes with some of our most delicate equipment.

I'll bitch him out later, though. I don't want to tear them down in front of the Castellani.

And speaking of my crew, they're scattered around the room, each working on their own tasks. But all eyes are on Pedretti.

"Alright, boys and girls," I call out. "We got ourselves a guest." I make a sweeping gesture at Max, who stands tall and unfazed, despite the seven pairs of eyes boring into him. "This is Max Pedretti. He comes from the Castellani Family. He's a security expert. Let's give him a warm welcome."

"Castellani?" Van says.

"Security expert?" Pony scoffs right after.

I'm interested to see if they'll succeed in shaking Max's stoic facade. Because that's all it is, I'm sure: a facade. No one can possibly be so damn chill, not after getting traded to an enemy Family the way he was.

"Pedretti," Jazz repeats.

"That's me," he says.

"Huh," she says. "I've heard of you." She says nothing more, going back to her task.

"That lovely lady is Jasmine Gavino," I tell Max. "We all call her Jazz. Ex-marine. Their loss is our gain." That earns me a dark glance from Jazz, but she doesn't contradict me.

Max nods, still assessing her. He makes no mention of her being a woman, which I kind of hoped he would, just so I could stomp on him for it. Women make up a decent percentage of the Esposito Family—something that must be very different from the Castellanis.

"Good to meet you," he says, and he actually sounds as though he means it.

I motion for him to follow me as I introduce him around. "Rook and Giddy, our tech guys." Or trying to be. They're pretty fresh. They both grin happily at Pedretti, and then cut the wattage by half when they glance my way.

"How you doing?" Pedretti asks, shaking their hands.

"Over there is Tank Tauriello, our weapons specialist. Tony Palombino, that guy glaring at you, he's our wheelman. We call him Pony. And over there—"

"I'm Beatrice!" she says, jumping up with a big smile. "But everyone calls me Honeybee."

"Cause she's so sweet," her companion says.

"And that's Nico," I finish, pointing at him, and hoping my face doesn't give anything away. But Max doesn't seem to notice anything as he nods at the two of them. "Honeybee is tiny enough to fit into just about any little nook or cranny," I say, smiling at her.

“I spent time in a circus,” she tells Max, and she does a backbend to show off her contortionist skills. She moves into a tall, steady handstand before coming upright again, perfectly controlled. “Ta-da!”

For the first time, I see Max smile. “That’s some skill,” he says.

Honeybee beams, and I can’t help feeling glad that Max likes her as much as the rest of us do. She’s hard *not* to like, that bubbly exterior always there despite her darker history before she joined the Family.

“And you, Nico?” Max asks, turning to him. “What’s your story?”

“I’m the brains of this whole operation,” he says with a nonchalant shrug. “Right, Bricker?”

“Nico’s the one who thinks he can get away with anything,” I say drily. “But he’s got a lot to learn.”

I usher Max over to have a word with Tank and Pony, who greet him with varying degrees of suspicion and curiosity, but Max maintains his composure, nodding politely at each of them.

“And this is Van,” I say, raising my voice to get Van’s attention. “Van Delligatti. Tactics, and my second in command.” Van is also my closest friend and I hoped he might show a little more interest in the proceedings. But he stays where he is, standing in the doorway from the kitchen, glaring at Pedretti as though he could get rid of the interloper with the power of his mind alone.

“Nice to meet you all,” Max says, showing not the slightest hint of discomfort under their scrutinizing gazes, some curious, some hostile.

“Alright, now that we’ve got the pleasantries out of the way, let’s get back to work,” I say.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Van asks sharply. “What the hell’s going on, Bricker? You drag some Castellani in here—”

“Anna-Vittoria invited him over from the Castellanis to help us out,” I say. “That’s what’s going on. So we’re all gonna be nice and friendly and definitely not be assholes to the new guy. Right?”

Van doesn’t reply. The crew returns to their tasks, but I can tell they’re still keeping an eye on Max. “How about you work with Rook and Giddy,” I suggest to Pedretti, gesturing to them. “They’re trying to figure out how to block a wireless alarm system.”

Max takes a seat near them. I watch him, trying to gauge if my crew’s reaction has affected him in any way. He seems as stoic and unruffled as ever.

Let’s see how long that lasts.

I head to the kitchen and get myself a coffee. I don’t bother to offer Max one, but he doesn’t seem to notice, either. I watch him as he assesses the room. He’s got an air of confidence about him, a man who knows his worth and isn’t afraid to show it.

Do I want him, or do I want to *be* him?

“You’re Rook, right?” I hear Max ask, as he leans in to look at the system they’re working on.

“That’s what they call me,” Rook says glumly. “But my name’s Rocco.”

“Rookie,” Giddy snickers, and Max raises an eyebrow as Rook scowls.

Giddy was the one who dubbed him Rookie. Pot calling the kettle Rookie, as far as I was concerned, since Giddy arrived only a month before Rook. But somehow it stuck, so I shortened it to Rook, which he seems to like better.

“So that makes you Giddy?” Max asks.

“Guido, Guido Tauriello,” Giddy sighs with a grimace. “Everyone calls me Giddy.”

Max raises his eyebrows. “Okay, well—Giddy. You see that bit you’ve got your thumb on?” He points to the instructions

the two kids are hunched over. “That’s the bit you want to be looking at.”

“I *told* you,” Rook hisses.

“There’s no shame in being new to something,” Max says, as Giddy scowls. “No shame in being a rookie,” he adds with a glance at Rook, who gives a small smile. “Mind if I take a closer look? I’ve seen one like this before.”

With a shrug, Giddy hands Max the instructions, eyeing him warily.

I watch as Max reads over the sheet, asking questions and offering suggestions. He knows his stuff, and I see Rook and Giddy slowly warming up to him.

Back at the house, while I was waiting downstairs for Max to unpack, I read over the brief Barone gave me. It lived up to its name of “brief.” But it had some interesting background information. Apparently this Castellani was once part of a bank-robbing syndicate. It calmed me down a little, reading that. Maybe the Maestra really does mean him to help instead of hinder.

Even so, I keep a close eye on the situation. Max might be good at what he does, but that doesn’t mean he has *our* best interests at heart.

I’m about to return my focus to my own work when Tank and Pony’s voices rise above the din of the room. They’re arguing again, this time about the last heist, which didn’t go as planned.

“Fuck off, Pony!” Tank snaps at last, his face red with anger. “You can’t just fuck around with the plan! That’s how we end up in situations like the one we ended up in!”

We’ve been picking off the occasional armored cash transport cars along with tracking their schedules, holding them up here and there as practice runs for the big job. Last time we did it, we all nearly got our heads blown off, thanks in part to Pony, who went off-script and left his vehicle to—as he put it —“help”.

“Maybe if you weren’t so damn cautious all the time, we wouldn’t have missed our window!” Pony retorts, slamming his fist on the table.

“Hey!” I bark, drawing their attention. “This isn’t getting us anywhere.” I can tell that Max is listening hard, even though he hasn’t even looked over. “New guy,” I call over. “Yeah, you, Pedretti. What do you think, huh?”

“Think about what?”

“Tank knows that planning is crucial. But the Pony here, he prefers more flexibility in our approach. So who’s right?”

Max looks at Tank, Pony, back to me. “Neither. And both. Sometimes you follow the plan. Sometimes you go off script. Depends on the context. And since I wasn’t there, I guess I can’t help with that.”

God *damn* him. He knows exactly what to say to defuse the situation and make Tank and Pony feel a little foolish for arguing in the first place. *And* he’s right. Planning is important, but so is being able to adapt.

It’s exactly what I’ve said myself to these two chuckleheads every time they argue about it.

Tank grumbles under his breath, crossing his arms over his chest. Pony just sneers, gets back to his work.

I glance over at Van, who watched Max intently through the whole exchange. I catch his eye and jerk my head slightly, signaling for him to join me in the corner of the living room, away from prying ears.

“What do you think?” I ask Van quietly when he wanders over, glancing toward Max as he leans over the table covered with wires and components, deep in conversation with Rook and Giddy.

“He’s a plant from the old—from A-V,” Van replies, his eyes narrowed. “Guy is way too smooth. And what’s with all this peacemaking crap? The Castellanis are looking for a war with the Bernardis; we all know that. If he’s here, he’s looking for recruits. That scar-faced bastard sent him to poach our best.”

I rub a hand over my stubbled chin. “Can’t deny he knows his shit, though.” Van grunts, clearly unhappy, but says nothing more. “Don’t worry, he won’t be here long.”

I hope.

“Hey, Bricker,” Van adds, catching me back as I turn away. He drops his voice to a murmur. “You decide about your dad?”

I give a shrug and Van, thankfully, lets it go. Van’s the only one who knows about it, but my dad had a health scare recently. I only found out after the fact, and I was mad about that—for a few hours, anyway.

I haven’t seen my father for a long time, but the whole incident made me think about visiting him again. I confided in Van one night after too many beers, and he told me I should go. Said he’d give anything to talk to his parents again. They were killed when he was a teenager in a clumsy, vicious hit ordered by Aldo Bernardi, the old Bernardi Don. No one celebrated as hard as Van when Aldo got taken out recently. I went with him to his parents’ gravesite and watched him tell them, tearfully, that the guy was finally dead. The only downside as far as Van was concerned was that he hadn’t been holding the gun himself.

But things were different for Van and his parents. A lot different from my situation.

As I turn back toward the rest of the crew, I see Rook and Giddy eagerly firing off questions at Max, their curiosity about the Castellani Family barely contained.

“So this Julian Castellani,” Rook snickers, “he must suck a mean dick if he snatched the Bernardi Lion. You ever have a go, Pedretti?” His laughter is crude, and Giddy chuckles along.

Max puts down the sheet of instructions. “Maybe I better be clear about something up front. I don’t appreciate hearing that kind of bullshit. And if I were you, I wouldn’t risk talking like that about Julian Castellani *or* Leo Bernardi. They’re not as forgiving as I am.”

The laughter dies at once, and Rook’s face turns pale. Beside him, Giddy looks sheepish, glancing at me like he hopes I

didn't overhear.

I'm surprised to hear Max shoot them down so instantaneously, especially as the new kid on the block. I even appreciate it. But a rat will still bite you, even if it's got a smile on its face.

"Thanks for clearing that up, Max," I say, wandering over. "These two jackasses know better than that most of the time. Right?"

"Right," they chorus, but they can't look me in the eye. They forget, sometimes, that *I'm* gay. I've stamped down on their homophobic horseshit the few times I've heard it, and Jazz kicked both their asses over something they said about women once, but they're young and dumb and they run their mouths sometimes.

A tense silence stretches across the room, broken only by the faint hum of the coffee machine in the kitchen and the steady tick of the wall clock. The rest of the crew very deliberately ignores the situation.

"Sorry, Max," Rook mutters, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "That was out of line." Giddy nods in agreement, and mumbles a *Sorry*.

"Apology accepted," Max says evenly. "Let's forget it and focus on what we're here for."

"Agreed," I chime in, nodding in approval as I watch the crew get back to work. But my eyes linger on the Castellani. Wondering.

If only *I* could focus on what we're here for.

CHAPTER 8

BRICKER

I SPEND some time talking with Jazz and Tank, but my mind keeps working over the problem of Max Pedretti. Maybe he might prove himself to be an asset? Still, the world we inhabit is not one that rewards misplaced trust.

My eyes keep finding Max of their own volition, and this time when I look over, he stares right back at me. There's something in his face—appreciation, perhaps, or maybe just a shared understanding, or—

Ah, shit.

He's gay.

Well, that's all I fucking need.

After a second, I realize Van is watching me, so I pretend I'm looking at Rook and Giddy instead. "I want that tech built today," I call over before turning my back on them.

I sit down with Tank and help him with inventory from the shipment they collected this morning, adding to our stock of weaponry. Tank keeps everything clean as a whistle but I need something to do with my hands, so I take them apart along with him, clean them down, check that the serial numbers have been sufficiently filed off. The Feds just get better and better at recovering them. As we work, I listen to Max make suggestions to Rook and Giddy. There's not even a trace of resentment in his voice after their dumb crack about Julian Castellani, and the air clears fast.

"I think I see your problem," Max says after hinting around it for about twenty minutes. There's a slight smile tugging at the

corner of his mouth when I glance over. “Mind if I have a go?”

“I guess,” Rook replies hesitantly, looking unsure of what to expect from Max. Giddy just shrugs, his curiosity piqued.

Max takes up the screwdriver and changes a few wires around. “Okay,” he says. “That’s it.”

“That’s *it*?” Rook snorts. “We’ve been working on this for a week, my guy. I call bullshit.”

Max takes the pushback in stride, offering the screwdriver back to Rook. “You think I messed up? Be my guest, change it back.”

Rook stares suspiciously at the gadget, and Max explains the ins and outs of the wiring. He *seems* genuinely invested in helping the two of them improve their skills. He’s intent on explaining, and I find myself wondering what it would feel like to have Max’s attention fixed that hard on me...

Knock it off.

“If you’re right about this,” Giddy says, eyeing the device with interest, “it could really come in handy.”

“That’s the idea,” Max says. “I’m here to help.”

“Are you helping out next week?” Giddy asks with excitement. “That’s when we’re taking our next run at an armored car.” Giddy gives me a nervous look, realizing too late that he’s running his mouth.

But at least he knows better than to mention the Big One.

“Depends on our Capo,” Max says. “Maybe.” He doesn’t look my way, but he must know I’m listening.

Tank, polishing up a shotgun barrel, watches the scene unfold with hard eyes. He doesn’t seem happy to see his brother, Giddy, warming up so fast to Max. But Tank has never been one to embrace change easily.

“What do you think, Jazz?” I murmur, turning to her as she works.

“Pedretti?” Jazz shrugs, her gaze flicking over to where Max is demonstrating the device to Rook and Giddy. “Solid rep. He

knows his stuff, that's for sure. Plus anyone who can shut down those two clowns is okay in my book."

I chuckle.

"Castellani," Tank says under his breath. "That's all there is to it."

Neither of them were very happy when I introduced our new guest. Hell, *I* wasn't happy about it. But as I watch Max work with Rook and Giddy, I marvel at how easily he's ingratiated himself with the younger members of the crew.

That's the problem, though. Trust should not come so easy in our world. I'll have to watch out for Rook and Giddy, and Honeybee too, make sure those lips stay tight about our business.

For now, though, I'll let things play out. If Max proves to be an asset, then so be it. But if he shows any signs of betrayal or disloyalty, well...

We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.

We work hard until I get hungry enough to call for a lunch break, and everyone stretches out with relief. Tank calls out for pizza—there's only one place that'll even deliver to this neighborhood—and I pull out some beers for everyone from the fridge in the kitchen.

"No, thanks," Max says when I offer him one. "But I think we're ready for a test run on this blocker, if you're interested."

"Alright, let's see what you got." I give Rook a nod and he flips a switch on an elaborate setup of wires and blinking lights meant to mimic a wireless security feature. A low electric hum fills the air, and I can feel the tension in the room building.

A few seconds later, an alarm sounds—a shrill, piercing noise that leaves us all wincing. But before anyone can shout about turning it the hell off, Giddy presses a button on the gadget

they've put together this morning, and the cacophony is silenced as quickly as it began.

"Holy shit," Nico says. "You two fucknuts finally got it."

"Fuck you," Giddy shoots back, and then adds grumpily, "It was Pedretti, anyways."

Max shakes his head. "You two were almost there. Sometimes you just need a fresh eye."

"Nice work," I tell Rook and Giddy. "And nice fresh eye, Pedretti."

Max just nods at my acknowledgment.

When the pizzas arrive, the crew sits around the one table in the place we keep clean. We do our eating and our strategizing there, and I like the way it brings us together like one big noisy family. Honeybee makes sure Max gets the biggest slice of pie, slapping Nico's fingers away from it, and I have to hide a smile as I head to wash the gun oil off my hands in the kitchen.

"Bricker." Van's voice snaps me out of my reverie. He stands close, watching the group, his expression tense. "You really think we can trust this guy?"

I shrug, keeping my voice low. "I don't know yet. But he's got skills, that's for sure. And Anna-Vittoria seems to think he'll be an asset."

"Anna-Vittoria." Van scoffs, rolling his eyes. "She just wants to keep an eye on us. Or maybe..." He trails off, glancing over at Max with a mixture of jealousy and suspicion.

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe she sent him here to distract *you*, Cap," Van finishes, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Van is getting pretty damn close to crossing a line. "You think my dick's that desperate?" I snap.

He holds his hands up, palms out. "Nah, man. I'm just saying, don't get too close to him. He's an outsider. Maybe A-V's testing you."

“It’d take more than a pretty face to make me trust a Castellani.”

Van glares mutinously over at Pedretti again. “He’s not so pretty. And we’ve got enough trouble without adding another wildcard to the mix.”

“Go get some fucking food before Tank eats it all,” I tell him, dismissing his concerns with a wave of my hand. “And let me handle Pedretti.” Van doesn’t move. “That’s an order, soldier,” I tell him, letting the steel into my voice, and he walks away.

When I was made Capo, I was worried that Van wouldn’t take it well. But he was just as proud and excited as if he got made Capo himself, and he always has my back. Today is the first time in a year that I felt like he’s shown anything close to disrespect, and that’s down to Max fucking Pedretti, apparently.

Pedretti’s calm demeanor, his competence, his undeniable attractiveness...even his age.

Yeah. He’s just my type.

Could Anna-Vittoria have sent him in here as a honeytrap, as Van suggested?

Or maybe my first suspicions were right, and she just wants an inside man to report back on how I run my operations.

I sigh, scratching the tickle at the back of my neck, the one that always tells me that something’s wrong. If the Maestra wanted someone to keep an eye on me, she has a lot of men and women within the Family who’d do it gladly.

So why send in a motherfucking Castellani?

It suggests some hidden agenda I can’t see yet. And I don’t like being kept in the dark.

CHAPTER 9

BY THE TIME Bricker calls the day done, I have a crick in my neck and my eyes are bleary from staring at tiny wiring and parts. I clean the grit and grease off my hands with a touch of nostalgia; it's been a long time since I worked so hands-on. Maybe there's a part of me that misses it.

Rook and Giddy pack up the electronics as I wipe down the workbench, and I cast my eye over Bricker's crew again. They're a tight bunch, only a few sharp edges among them, but every crew has that. There's eight of them, including Bricker, and it took a minute to get them all straight in my head. I've spent most time with the younger ones today: Rook was eager and interested, tall and skinny with a look in his eyes that suggest he hasn't yet seen much of the darkness that this job can bring. Giddy was also happy to learn, once he got out of his own way and cut the attitude. Tank is his big brother, and I can see a faint resemblance in the face. But where Giddy is sandy haired, a jokester, loose-limbed, Tank is shaved bald, serious, and built like his namesake.

Nico and Honeybee spent most of their time focused on each other, which I think annoys Giddy and Rook. They'd obviously like a little attention from the tiny, electric-blue-haired girl with the bright smile. But Nico's been monopolizing her today, drawing her eyes back to him with a charming, lopsided grin and easy jokes whenever Giddy or Rook called over to her.

As for the older crew members, they're all more hardened. Van Delligatti, with his intense glare, seems to like me the least. His collar-length, shaggy hair makes him look like a

seventies reject to me, but the way the younger crew all seem to think he's amazing tells me that whatever look he's sporting, it's currently "cool." He and Bricker have an easy camaraderie, the ability to converse in a glance. And Van keeps the kids in line, giving out instructions when needed. He makes a good second, even if he hasn't taken much of a shine to me.

Dark-haired Pony is skinny and shorter than most of us, except Honeybee, and all he's talked about today is cars. He also spent a lot of time getting sent outside to smoke, after trying to light up in the house. Bricker's exasperation suggested it's a common occurrence. Only when Jazz snarled at him did he quit trying to push his luck.

I was surprised to see women among them when I walked in, though I hope I didn't show it. Honeybee is a nice kid, and although Jazz is much more reserved, I don't mind that at all. Her fingers are dirty and calloused, her black hair buzzed short and unstyled. Her attitude seems to be a firm *No bullshit*, and I like that in a team member.

Given that the Esposito Boss—Maestra, whatever—is a woman, I suppose I should have expected women in the front lines, too. The Espositos originated in a different area of Italy. They're not Sicilians and they've always kept themselves separate over here in the States. Women running the show is not uncommon among their clans, and I'm interested to see if that makes any difference in the culture—or the work.

"Hey." A nervous Rook has shuffled over to me. "Thanks for that today."

"No problem."

"And...please don't tell Julian Castellani what I said before," he adds in a whisper.

I grin. "You got it." Rook and Giddy tried hard to redeem themselves today after a rocky start. They need more experience, sure, but everyone starts somewhere.

"Hey, Bricker!" Pony calls out, his voice cutting through the clatter of tools as we all clean up. "You promised, man—first

round tonight on you if we sidestepped the Bernardis on that shipment, and we sure did. Making good on your word?"

"Not tonight," Bricker says with regret. "Need to make sure our guest is comfortable."

Tank re-enters the room from the hallway, wiping down his bald head with a rag. "Come on, it's been a while since we all went out. Jazz? You in?"

"Only if you losers are buying."

Van grins and looks over at Bricker hopefully. "Come on, Cap. Don't leave us hanging."

Bricker leans against the doorframe, arms crossed over his broad chest. His gaze flicks between Van and Tank before finally settling on me. "Nah," he says, shaking his head. "I want to keep an eye on Pedretti tonight. Make sure he's settling in alright."

I keep my grim smile to myself. My first day with the Espositos has gone reasonably well, considering, but I have a long way to go before they trust me. And apparently, Bricker has no plans to let me integrate with his crew on a personal level.

Yet.

"Suit yourself," Van says with a shrug, but the disappointment is evident in his eyes as he heads for the door, Tank trailing behind him.

"See you tomorrow," Bricker calls after them, his voice casual, but I see the tension in the set of his shoulders.

The room empties out, leaving just Bricker and me. I wipe down the already-clean workbench again, trying to ignore his gaze on me. He watches my every move. Assessing. Calculating.

I wonder what he sees when he looks at me.

"Max," Bricker says, his voice low and steady, "you rub down that bench much more, it'll wear through. You done?"

I glance up at him, nodding slowly. "I'm done."

“Then let’s hit the road.”

I follow him out to his car, watching the way his long legs swing out. He’s a cowboy, this Bricker Soldano. His crew worships him. And I can see why.

But I’m curious about him in other ways. Does he ever see his father? How’d he get into the Family? Fabi flirted with the Mob from time to time, but stayed out of it so far as I know. Unless he made some contacts in Chino, looking for protection for his son.

And what lies underneath all of Bricker’s playful banter and calculated bravado?

The drive back to Bricker’s house is quiet, but an amiable quiet this time, the silence after a hard day’s work. “Make yourself at home,” Bricker says when we get into the living room, gesturing to the old leather couch facing the huge flat-screen TV. He clicks it on for me, turning to a sports game that he sighs at when he sees the score. “Hope you don’t mind a simple dinner,” he throws over his shoulder as he heads to the open kitchen. “I got bread and I got bacon. So...bacon sandwiches?”

“Sure.”

The room soon fills up with the aroma of grease and hot, melted butter. There’s a hint of garlic and onions sizzling in the pan, along with the smoky scent of charred bacon. My belly growls, and when Bricker hands me a plate with two bacon-packed sandwiches, I stuff my mouth right away. Grease and salt explode over my tongue, the perfect combination of crispy bacon and melted provolone on toasted bread. A small sound of pleasure slips out around the sandwich.

“Good, right?” Bricker says, sitting on the other side of the sofa with his own plate. I can only nod, my mouth full of pig. “Yeah, no one can resist my bacon sandwiches. Van swears I put some kind of drug in them.”

Amusement wars with apprehension as I swallow my mouthful. “And do you?”

“Nah.” Bricker flashes a grin. “Wouldn’t wanna mess with the flavor.”

We eat while we watch the baseball game. We’re quiet, except for occasional comments on plays. Bricker and I are both Angels fans, and we make some superficial jokes about how tough it is in a city of Dodgers die-hards. Rooting for the same team makes it easy to forget we play for different teams at work.

Almost.

When Bricker’s phone rings, he glances at the screen, frowning, and stands up. “I just need a minute,” he says, stepping out of the room.

I’m left alone with the flickering light of the TV and a tempting idea. I stand up, stretching, and remind myself of the positions of the cameras around the room. But Bricker can hardly object to me wandering around the dimly lit living room to stretch my legs. He told me to make myself at home, after all.

I stroll over to the side of the room where a few shelves hold photos and knickknacks, and I take in the details of his life.

There are photos of Bricker with various friends, arms around each other, laughing. He seems carefree in these captured moments. I move on to the objects: a signed baseball cap, a stack of dog-eared Stephen King books, an old record player with a small collection of vinyl albums. Each of these things tells me a piece of Bricker’s story, but not enough for me to understand him.

There are no signs of Fabi Soldano here. No photos. No mementos. Nothing to indicate Bricker ever thinks about that man rotting in prison because of me.

No pictures of his mom, either, so far as I can tell. I never met her. I wrote to her after the trial, told her I’d like to help out, but I never heard back. In fact, there are no family photos at all, I realize, as my eyes fall on a picture of Bricker with a man I recognize as Van Delligatti from his crew. They’re both dressed in military uniforms, arms draped around one another,

faces flushed and laughing, and they're both a good deal younger than they are now.

Interesting.

I lean in for a closer look, careful not to touch anything, but I hear a soft shuffle behind me. I turn to find Bricker watching me, holding a beer in each hand.

"Everything okay?" I ask, hoping to distract him from whatever he sees on my face.

He holds up one of the beers. "Everything's fine. Thought you might like one of these."

"Thanks." I take the offered bottle and settle back on the couch with Bricker. The game continues to play on the TV, but I couldn't tell you the score with a gun to my head. My mind is on other things.

"Cheers," Bricker says, raising his bottle to me before taking a long swig.

I follow suit.

"So, Pedretti, you got family? Blood, I mean. Not the Castellanis."

I see an opening. "No. No siblings. Parents passed a while back. What about you?"

"My mom's around, but..." He gives a shrug, and I assume that means he doesn't see her much, or maybe he has a bad relationship with her. "I have a younger half-brother."

It's nice to know his mother moved on after Fabi, though I'm sad to think she and Bricker aren't close. Although I never knew her—Fabi and I always kept our private stuff private, less chance for the Feds to break us down if we ever got caught—I always felt bad for her, whoever she was, with her man in prison and a young kid to support. Proud, too, she must've been, to ignore my olive branch. Or maybe just smart.

Or an upright citizen, which would explain her cutting off Bricker, *if* that's what happened between them, and ignoring me.

And it hasn't escaped my attention that Bricker hasn't mentioned his old man at all.

"I saw you checking out my photos," he says suddenly, his tone light but carrying an undercurrent of seriousness. "Having a little look-see while I was out of the room?"

"I didn't touch anything. Just stretching my legs."

"Relax," Bricker replies with a laugh. "If I really wanted to keep things private, I wouldn't leave them lying around in plain sight, would I? I would've cleaned up before you got here."

He didn't seem to know I'd be staying with him, but I don't point that out. "I see you served. With Delligatti?"

"We got kicked out in almost-record time, actually." Bricker grins. "My greatest regret is not getting that record."

The game on TV has become more of a background noise than anything else, and it's clear that Bricker is interested in getting to know me. I can't say I mind the attention. He's charming and easy to talk to—when he wants to be—and I find myself opening up to him more than I usually would with someone I barely know, especially when I'm halfway through the second beer.

He asks a lot of questions, and not all of them are designed to dig out intel. Some seem to be genuine curiosity, and hell, it's flattering the way he keeps letting his eyes wander over me. I'm not going to do anything about it, of course, but it's nice to be appreciated, especially by someone who looks like Bricker does.

As the night wears on, we finish off a six-pack, and commiserate on the inevitable Angels loss. We seem to be closer on the couch, too, as if it's gotten smaller—or maybe the whole room has grown smaller, because all I can find to look at is Bricker.

For a second, I let myself entertain the notion of reaching out, brushing that stray lock of hair from his forehead—

"Tell me more, Max," Bricker asks suddenly, his voice low and serious. "How'd you end up with the Castellani Family in

the first place?”

I'm jolted out of my reverie. “That's a...long and boring story,” I deflect, hoping he'll let it go. “Ancient history.”

There's something in his eyes that says he's not quite satisfied. “Then tell me this: what do you think of my crew?”

I hesitate, considering my words carefully. “Your crew is... interesting,” I begin, taking the last swig from my beer to stall for time. Bricker nods, encouraging me to continue. “Pretty old school. No computers?”

Bricker just smiles. “We prefer it old-school. Paper is easier to destroy completely. Don't you think?”

I do. But I also wonder if there's more behind it. Bricker's not going to be drawn on it, though.

“My people,” I he repeats. “What do you think about them?”

“Rook and Giddy are green,” I admit, watching Bricker's face for any signs of offense. “But everyone starts somewhere, right?”

For a moment, Bricker's eyes flash with something that suggests his easygoing demeanor is just an act, but he quickly covers it up with a smile. “True enough. And what about Jazz and Pony? They're some of the best in the business.”

“Seems that way to me, too. Though your boy Pony's got a bit of a temper. I like a wheelman with a cooler head.” Johnny Jacopo is a great one, but I don't mention his name. Bringing up the Castellani's new Underboss won't win me any points. “Tank's solid. Knows his stuff inside out.”

“How can you tell?”

“I have to lean on my guys to clean their own damn guns half the time. Tank's doing the whole crew's arsenal, and he isn't doing it half-assed, either.”

“You got that right. Tank always does a full-assed job.” He chuckles.

“So tell me,” I say, sensing my moment, “what kind of jobs are the crew running?”

Bricker stares at the TV for a long moment before his eyes slide sideways to mine. “We talked about that already. Armored cars. Cash points. That kind of thing.”

“But why is Anna-Vittoria Esposito wasting her time on smash-and-grab bullshit?” I make it blunt. I want to see his reaction.

Bricker just gives a slow smile.

“Your crew was put together specially,” I go on, thinking out loud. “Different skills. Different expertise. The one that intrigues me most is Honeybee.”

“You got a problem with women?”

“I don’t care who’s on my team if they’re good. No, what puzzles me is: what in the hell do you need a contortionist for?”

“Perceptive,” Bricker replies noncommittally, taking a long drink of his beer. “And, yeah, their skills are for a particular kind of job. We’re in training, Max. That might be why Anna-Vittoria’s so anxious to have *your* expertise available.” He rolls his head on the couch, and it strikes me *how* close he is. Close enough that our knees brush against each other whenever we shift.

“I assume the armored car run next week is *not* it.” I leave my real question unasked.

Bricker’s eyes roam over me, as if he’s trying to read my body language. *Or maybe he’s interested*, whispers an unwelcome little voice in my head. Then, just when I think he’s going to spill everything, fill me in on exactly what’s going on, he shakes his head. “Trust is earned, Pedretti.”

I let a beat pass, and then I laugh. “So it is,” I tell him. “So it is.” But his eyes are still on me, and if I stay here on this couch with him any longer, stay here this close to him, I might do something I regret. “And now I guess I should head to bed.”

“I’ll come up, too.”

“No need. I can find my way.”

“Sure, but I also need to lock you in.” He gives me the same friendly smile he’s given me all night, and that’s when I know for sure.

He didn’t mean a damn one of those easygoing moments this evening.

I shrug. “Whatever you say, Capo.”

CHAPTER 10

MAX

AS FAR AS NOT-SO-GRACIOUS hosts go, I have no complaints so far about Bricker Soldano. The whole Esposito Family seems decent enough, in fact, and no one's tried to kill me. The one or two unfriendlies in Bricker's crew are made up for by the rest of them. Honeybee, in particular, came over several times today to ask if I wanted coffee or anything else. And Rook and Giddy were smart, learning fast when I showed them something new.

But there's one thing about this whole situation that sticks in my craw.

I sit on the bed and consider my options. There's a camera in here, of course, and I bet Bricker has night vision on it, too, so turning off the light won't do anything.

Opposite from where I'm sitting on the bed is an attached half-bathroom. That's my best shot.

I bend over to untie my shoelaces, then stand and stretch like I'm tired. Doesn't take much acting; my back aches from spending so much of the day bent over those electronics. Then I go into the bathroom and close and lock the door.

I take a moment to turn on the shower, and then I have a look around the room, in the medicine cabinet, behind the toilet tank, stare hard into the vents, the exhaust fan, even let my fingers slide over the tiles, checking for uniformity.

As far as I can tell, there are no cameras or bugs in here.

Good to know Bricker's not some deviant.

I'm a cautious man by nature, but I also know when to take risks. I'm as safe as I can be, so I slide the small radio out from where I stashed it in my sock back at the Lair, the clunkiness of it around my ankle having bothered me for the past few hours. I peel off my socks entirely and shake out the smaller electronic parts hidden within them, then take out the small wire cutters I palmed in those last moments when I wiped down the bench one last time.

And I begin assembling a comms device to contact the Castellani Family.

I have the pressure of time against me. I have a few minutes for my "shower," and I'll have to thrust my head under the water at least to make the alibi believable. Maybe another few minutes for teeth—but minus the time I took looking around in here for a camera.

Ten more minutes. And *that's* stretching it.

Focus. I shove any distracting thoughts away as I fiddle with the radio parts. But as much as I narrow my mind, one particular distraction refuses to leave it.

Bricker Soldano.

My rocky history with his father aside, Bricker is an interesting guy.

And an attractive one. That smile and his surprisingly pretty eyes...the way he swaggers around... I grin to myself. Cocky.

But I don't mind cocky.

Focus.

My hands work their magic, but when I turn the radio on, I have another problem: lack of range. Damn it. Well, tomorrow's another day.

With a sigh, I pack up the half-assembled device, stand on the closed toilet seat, and stow my handiwork in the exhaust fan, in lieu of any other hiding place.

Then I wet my hair quickly and head back into the bedroom.

I don't like subterfuge much, but in this case it's justified. The Boss won't be happy if he doesn't hear from me, and as for Bricker...

Well, just like my work with his father, what Bricker doesn't know won't hurt him.

I'm woken the next morning by the click of the lock opening, and I jolt awake. But the door stays shut, and all I hear is Bricker shouting, "Morning, sunshine," as he heads downstairs, judging by his footsteps. "Dress down a little today, yeah?"

I shower fast and dress in jeans and a button-down, and then I meet him downstairs. He's whistling and cheerful and it smells like bacon is on the menu again this morning. I'm not complaining.

"You're a quiet guy, Pedretti," Bricker observes after sliding me a plate of bacon and toast.

"And you're a bacon lover," I tell him. "You ever eat anything a little less carcinogenic?"

"Now why would I want to do that?" he asks, picking up a crispy rasher from my plate and biting into it with a grin. "Go on, eat up," he adds as he chews. "You can have something green at lunch if you like."

I hope he means vegetables rather than mold. But the bacon is hard to resist, and I need something to offset the three beers from last night. I don't usually drink much. In my line of work, I need to keep my wits sharp.

"What's on the agenda today?" I ask after my first few mouthfuls.

"All in good time, Max, all in good time," he replies enigmatically, chowing through his own plate of food.

On the car ride to the operations house, Bricker talks almost non-stop. I get a full recap of the baseball game, commentary

on the state of the roads out here in the Valley, how much he spent on his groceries last week. None of it important, or even interesting, but I can tell his mind is ticking over behind his mouth. He's the kind of man who talks to think, even though whatever he says has nothing to do with the gears moving in his brain.

"Alright, everyone," Bricker announces as we enter the front door. "Daddy's home. Come and tell me all your troubles."

Most of them are there: Jazz and Tank drinking coffee at the table while Rook makes a fresh pot in the kitchen, Giddy already fiddling with the gadget from yesterday, Honeybee and Nico giggling and flirting with each other in the corner. Inevitable, but not helpful, in my experience. I prefer to keep professional relationships professional.

Van Delligatti appears in the kitchen doorway with a steaming mug, looking straight at me as he sips it. He gives an up-nod to Bricker.

Something's going on. The crew wasn't so amped-up yesterday.

"Morning, Max," Rook greets me, rushing over to hand me a steaming cup of coffee. I nod in appreciation and take a sip. The bitter liquid does little to chase away the worry, but at least it'll give me a jolt.

"Where's Pony?" Bricker asks, wandering over to the table to take a seat.

"Took the van to the carwash," Tank says, only the way he says it tells me it means something else. Probably changing plates on the van. But that means...

"Good to hear." Bricker drops his voice, asking Jazz something in an undertone. She shakes her head.

But another low murmur of conversation catches my attention, and I strain to listen without drawing suspicion. Van is huddling up with Nico, discussing something that seems urgent.

I catch the word *armored*.

Shit.

“You’re doing the armored car job *today*?” I ask sharply, my voice cutting through the conversation in the room.

“Aw,” Bricker says, pouting. “You ruined the surprise, Max. Yeah. Their schedules changed—Van gave me a call last night to let me know—so today’s the day.”

“A word in private?” I ask stiffly, setting down my cup on the old table. Bricker rolls his eyes theatrically, but he follows me to the kitchen just as Tony the Pony comes in the front door.

“Slow your roll, Pedretti,” Bricker says before I can even open my mouth. “I was going to tell you.”

“When?”

“Well...now?”

“That’s not how I operate, Soldano, and I’m not interested in running blind.”

There’s an unpleasant flash in his eyes that tells me again how much he doesn’t trust me. “Pedretti, you need to remember you’re a guest here. You operate how I say you operate. It’s another trial job, that’s all. Easy pickings. I’ll go through the plan with you myself, right now, if it makes you feel better.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Look, it really isn’t—” Bricker starts, but he’s interrupted by Van Delligatti approaching us, glaring at me.

“Why’s the Castellani calling the shots?” Delligatti demands, going on before Bricker has a chance to respond, “You do what you’re fucking told, Pedretti, like the rest of us. You don’t get to pick the jobs. That’s *my* role.”

“Easy, Van.” Bricker places a calming hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Max here was just offering to help.”

“Help?” Van scoffs. “What, is your boyfriend suddenly an expert on armored car heists?”

Bricker’s eyebrows flutter up as he takes that in, the smile on his face turning incredulous. “I’m gonna tell you to walk away

now, Delligatti,” he says, dangerously light, “and take that fucking attitude with you.”

Van scowls at me instead of Bricker, but stalks away without another word. I remember why I’m here, and turn to Bricker to offer an olive branch. “I actually *am* an expert. And I’m supposed to help, right? So *let* me help. Let me do my job, Capo. That’s all I ask.”

He blows out a long breath, still watching Van’s retreat, and when he turns his eyes back to me, I can see how angry he really is at what his so-called buddy just said.

“I want to keep your crew safe,” I tell him softly. “That’s all.”

For a long moment, I’m unable to tear my gaze away from his. The world around us fades away, leaving only a strange, electric connection between us.

“Fine,” he spits at last, his voice low and intense. “I’ll go over the revised plan with the crew, and you can make any suggestions you like.”

“Alright,” I murmur. “Well. Good.”

As we step back into the chaos of the main room, it occurs to me that working on these heists might be the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done, and not because of the risks involved.

But because of this undeniable pull between Bricker and me.

He’s Fabi’s son, my conscience screams at me. That’s all it is, surely. He just reminds me of an old heist partner, so that I *assume* a connection that doesn’t exist. Earning Bricker and the crew’s trust is a delicate balancing act. But as I watch them assemble their gear and discuss tactics, I commit to seeing it through, for my sake *and* theirs.

The only thing more dangerous than running a job is running it with crew members who *haven’t* committed, heart and soul, to seeing it through.

“Alright, let’s get started,” Bricker calls out, bringing the room to attention. “I wanna go over this again, partly for Pedretti’s benefit, but also so I know it’s drilled into every goddamn

brain here. The only thing that changes about this is the day we're doing it."

As we gather around a table laden with maps, I can feel Van's bullish stare bearing down on me. I ignore him and focus on the task at hand.

"Van?" Bricker's voice has an undertone of warning. "You have the floor."

Van starts going over the strategy. It's sound enough: he goes over the armored car's route, and his plan for hitting it under a bridge means we'll avoid a lot of the cameras on the street, and it gives us extra coverage.

But as the plan unfolds, I notice an issue.

"Any questions?" Van asks. He looks at me.

"Yeah." I point to one of the streets. "This road's blocked off right now. They've been doing major roadworks there for the last month. So if anything goes wrong with the main escape route, SWAT comes down here behind us—" I trace the route. "And then we're sitting ducks."

The room falls silent until Tony the Pony snorts derisively. "What, you think Van didn't already consider that? We got it covered, Castellani."

"It's Pedretti," I tell him. "And if Van's got it covered, then I'd like to hear the contingency plan."

"Pony's right," Van says. "I got it covered. Things go south with Plan A, we head up here." He flicks the map, a narrow utility lane between two buildings. "Miss *that*, Castellani? Maybe you need to put your glasses on."

"That laneway is closed off right now," I say evenly.

Van pauses. "Bullshit. Nothing on the apps say that."

I do look at him now. "The *apps*?" I repeat. "You went out there yourself and used those hawk eyes in the real world, right, Delligatti? Tell me you didn't plan this heist based on Google fucking Maps."

“Fuck you,” he fires back. “We’ve been doing this long before you showed up, so maybe just sit back and let the professionals handle it.”

I reel it back in before I make things worse. “Look, I’m not trying to step on anyone’s toes here, but no plan survives contact with the enemy. I just want to know where we go if Plan A fails.”

“And I fucking told you,” Van snarls, stabbing his finger down on the map. “We take this damn lane!”

“And I told *you*, it’s not open,” I repeat doggedly. “So—”

“Enough!” Bricker barks, patience wearing thin. “Van, are you sure about that lane?”

“Yes,” Van says, looking at me.

“It’s one hundred percent open right now?” Bricker asks again.

Van’s head snaps around to him. “You don’t trust me or something? *Yes.*”

Bricker raises his eyebrows at me in a silent question.

“I’m telling you, it’s closed,” I say. “So if anything goes wrong with the primary escape route, we’re fucked. But it’s your call, Capo.”

Bricker is silent for a moment, eyes on the map. Then he checks his phone, and I want to groan, but I swallow it down.

“The lane’s open,” he says at last, looking up at me, “according to Google fucking Maps. We go with Van’s tactics.”

The planning continues, and I don’t push the issue. As long as nothing goes wrong with Plan A, it’ll be fine. But my instincts are rarely wrong, and combined with the sudden change in the armored car schedules, there’s something about this job that doesn’t sit right.

Because Bricker and I drove by that utility lane just this morning on our way here, and I *know* it’s closed.

We head out in three cars. Pony drives the van, which has had clean plates screwed on and a fresh logo on the side. Jazz and Tank go with him in the back. They're taking point on the armored car, once it's hemmed in by the other cars driven by Bricker and Van.

They've done this before, I remind myself. Several times. But I also know that last time didn't go as planned, based on the argument between Tank and Pony.

We suit up with balaclavas, Kevlar, helmets, guns, earpieces... This part always reminded me of gearing up for war, and I like it even less now than I did back then. But I'll do what's necessary, just like I did back then.

The crew is silent, each of us focused on the task at hand, but I can't shake the nagging feeling that something is off.

In the kitchen, Nico and Bricker are starting to get loud.

"...you mean, I'm not in?" Nico demands. "Fuck's sake, Bricker, I carry myself as good as any of you assholes!"

"I need the company," Honeybee calls over cheerfully. She grins at him. "You and me, Nico, we're making sure the Lair stays safe, in case the crew needs a bolt hole."

Nico looks only slightly mollified, and as Bricker walks past me, he rolls his eyes. "Kids these days," he says under his breath.

I quirk a smile, but I do wonder why Bricker's leaving the two of them out. Honeybee makes sense: she's not muscle by any stretch of the imagination, and there's no call for her skillset in a job like this.

But why Nico?

"Alright, everyone knows their roles," Bricker calls out. "Let's get the job done, and get out clean."

"And leave no man behind," Van adds.

“Or woman either, you misogynistic fuck,” Jazz adds, but she grins at Van.

“I’m counting on you to get *me* out,” he tells her, and they fist-bump. I’m relieved to see the camaraderie, but...

Something still feels wrong.

“Hey,” Bricker says on the way past. “You ride with me, Pedretti.”

I follow him out to the car, not his Charger, but a nondescript, reinforced white Ford, and we get moving.

CHAPTER 11

BRICKER

MAX IS EVEN QUIETER than usual as we drive to the waiting zone. According to Van's tactics, Pony is due to cut off the armored car's path right after it takes the corner and comes under the overpass bridge, which will help us avoid cameras. Van—with Rook and Giddy in his car—will come up on the right-hand side to manage the driver, and Max and I will take the guy on the left. Once the guy in the back's been flushed out, Jazz and Tank will clean out the cash.

In and out. Thirty seconds.

But as we cruise past the narrow laneway Max kept insisting was closed, I discover that he was right. There's a big roadblock sign across it.

"Shit," I mutter.

"Didn't catch that?" Max says, touching his earlobe.

"Yeah, yeah. Gloat later." I tap the comms switch on my earpiece and say, "Listen up everyone, that utility lane is closed off, like Pedretti said. So our only road out is this one. Plan A is the only plan. Everyone got it?"

"Got it," comes Pony's reply.

"Van?" I have to prompt.

A moment later, the reply comes, an ungracious, "Yeah."

"We should walk away," Max says, once I turn comms off again.

"We're not walking away. I told you. This'll be a piece of cake."

I wish I could take his advice. But if we walk away from this, team morale will take another hit, and Anna-Vittoria might take the Big One away from us. From me. The team is completely committed, and they're hungry for a win. So even though in the depths of my gut I have a bad feeling that Max could be right, I don't want to call it off.

I pull over to our designated wait point, and we do what we're supposed to do there: we wait.

"Eyes on," Van's voice comes through a few minutes later. "Here he comes."

"Max, you good?" I ask, making sure my ski mask is perfectly adjusted before I put the car in gear. We need to time everything just right.

"Always," he says.

Seconds later, the target comes into view, and it's go time. All of us move in as it drives under the road overpass, Pony cutting off the road from the front and Van coming up on the driver's side. To the passenger side, there's nothing but the brick wall of the overpass.

The driver tries to ram Pony, but the van has been reinforced, just like my Ford, and it rocks, but doesn't budge. The armored car backs up instead—but it's too late. I'm right in behind him, blocking him in, and the Ford doesn't move any more than Pony's van.

"Go," I bark out, and we move.

We're coordinated to the hilt, almost balletic. Van and Rook run up to handle the driver, Van sliding a smoke bomb underneath the chassis of the armored car. It goes off before the driver can even pull his gun, and in seconds the compartment is filling up with smoke—and the back of it will be, too.

Giddy hits the gadget he and Rook and Max worked on to interfere with the back-to-base alarm. It'll only give us a few extra seconds of time, but they'll be worth it. And then, just like we planned, the occupants of the armored car are

frantically diving out of the vehicle, coughing and choking, trying to get away from the smoke.

Max and I cover the two in the front, ordering them on the ground, hands behind their heads. Van does the same with the guy from the back, while Jazz and Tank—with fitted gas masks in place so they can breathe through the smoke—run out with bags to collect the cash.

It's all going perfectly. Jazz and Tank are already running back to Pony with bags full of money, three full seconds ahead of schedule.

They dump and head back for the second run—the last run.

“You worry too much,” Rook calls over with a grin at Pedretti.

“Keep your head in the game,” I snap at him.

So far, the driver and his co-guards have stayed cool under pressure, but that's exactly what worries me. They're *too* cool.

That's when a hail of gunfire erupts from nearby buildings, bullets whizzing past us. I throw myself at Giddy, get him on the ground, and we scramble into a nearby narrow alley. My foot lands on an old half-brick as we go, turning my ankle painfully, but I barely notice in the panic.

All the yelling and cursing over the headset is doing my head in, so I pull it out of my ear a little and grab Giddy, force him to look at me. “You hit?”

He pats himself down. “No. But shit, Bricker—are we gonna die?”

“Not if you do what I tell you.” I wish I believed it as easily as he seems to. But we have to get out, and I don't plan on leaving anyone behind. “You're leaving, right now. Go up there—” I point up the alleyway. “Go *now*, ditch the shotgun on the way, and look like you're minding your own business while you walk—*walk*—to the pickup point for Plan B. Okay? *Go.*”

Giddy goes.

“Little help,” comes a call. It's Van.

Van, who, when I look back out around the corner, I can see peering back at me from behind the armored car, pinned down by a sniper.

Sniper?

Whoever's shooting at us, it's not SWAT. Definitely not cops of any kind; the initial shooting was way too reckless, even for LAPD, and on the road overhead the still-smoky car I hear traffic swerving and crashing into things as stray bullets fly off-target.

My mind runs through possibilities, each more dangerous than the last. But I have to do something to help Van—he's pinned down. The shots have slowed, but every time Van tries to move from his position, that sniper takes a crack at him.

But I'm on the wrong damn side to provide any cover fire. I put my earpiece back in. "Pedretti."

"Yeah."

"Suggestions?"

There's a brief silence, and then Max says, "I got it, Capo."

I should not feel the amount of fucking relief I feel at his calm, competent voice.

But I do.

"Delligatti, you hear me?" Max continues.

"Yeah."

"You see me and Rook over to your left? Other left," he adds, as Van looks the wrong way. Rook gives him a little wave and a smile, and I wonder for a second what the hell is wrong with him.

He's just freaked out. I am, too. So thank fuck for Max Pedretti.

"I can see where the sniper's shooting from," Max goes on. "Gray building right next to us here, third story. I'm gonna cover you while you haul ass over here."

For one long moment, I think Van is going to tell Max to go fuck himself, but I guess his love of life supersedes his dislike of the Castellani. “Count it down,” Van says at last.

“Three...two...one, *go*.”

I contort myself around the corner to watch. I see the rifle barrel appear out the window just where Max said it was coming from, and Max lets off three well-aimed shots. He has no chance of getting the guy, but the rifle disappears from the window, uncertain where the shots are coming from.

It’s enough time to get Van over to the alley, where they all scramble back to cover.

“Van.” I get on the headset right away. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” he mutters.

“Okay. Pony’s already taken off with Jazz and Tank, and I sent Giddy on to the pickup point.”

“Did we get the money?” Van asks.

“Fuck the money,” I snap. “I’m looking to get *you* out.”

“Yeah? So get the fuck over here, Cap.”

I pause.

“You alright, Capo?” Max asks. “Saw your ankle give way when you were diving for cover before.”

Damn him. “You all get moving,” I say. “I’ll find my own way.”

“Are you *fucking nuts*?” Van explodes in my ear, and I pull the earpiece out so I don’t have to listen. As long as the crew is safe, I don’t give a fuck about me. But before I can even think about what to do next, Max Pedretti heads my way.

Heads my way by *running through a hail of goddamn bullets*.

“What the *fuck* are you doing?” I hiss at him as he ducks down with me behind a dumpster and leans in, hand moving over my leg, making me wince when he squeezes my ankle. The scent of his shampoo wafts under my nose. It’s a lot nicer than the dumpster stink.

“You’re hurt,” he says.

“Yeah. And *you* need to get the others out of here.”

“I don’t fancy giving those snipers any more target practice running back over. They’re plenty good already. So tell Delligatti to get Rook out,” Max says. “I’m staying here with you.”

“Listen to me, this is an *order*—”

“Under normal circumstances, I’d do what you want, Capo. But while I was running over here, I saw three guys with shotguns headed this way. We don’t have time to argue. When they come around the corner, I’ll draw their fire. Cover you until you get out the other end.” He nods up the alley, where there are enough dumpsters to offer more cover along the way. “When they’re focused on me, you make a break for it, fast as you can, up to that dumpster. Then we play it like that until you’re out of the alley and headed to the pickup point. Got it?”

“Are you insane? You’ll get picked off!”

“Better me than you. Well?”

If the Castellani dies, I’m in *big* trouble. But that’s not even the thing foremost in my mind right now. It’s the intense way he’s staring at me—like I’m the only thing in the world that exists right now, like I’m *the* most important thing to him.

“No,” I tell him. “I’m not leaving you, either.”

CHAPTER 12

MAX

WE HEAR it at the same time, the footsteps heading our way, and I quit staring so hard at Bricker and try to focus. Bricker gets up to a crouch, favoring his left leg, leans out to take a long stare out of the alley at the men heading our way, and then he puts the earpiece in and tells Delligatti to shut up and listen, before ordering him to scramble with Rook.

“How we getting you out?” Delligatti asks.

“Don’t worry about me. And listen, weapons free, Van. These aren’t guards and they sure as shit aren’t cops.”

“Yeah,” he says grimly. “Figured that one out for myself.”

It’s a good point, though. Where *are* the cops? They should be here by now. The fact that they’re not...

“You’re going,” I tell Bricker firmly. “On my mark.”

“But—”

“You’re going, and then you can get me out, too. Okay?”

The footsteps have slowed now, as the men headed this way become more cautious the closer they get. On comms, there’s a long space of dead air, but when the radio crackles again, it’s the first good news of the day.

“We’re out,” Delligatti reports. “Found Pony. Bringing the van around to pick you up at the other end of the alley, Cap.”

The message comes through just as the three men come into range, so Bricker doesn’t have time to get mad about Delligatti hanging around to help, or argue anymore about my plan.

“Go on three,” I mutter at him. “One... two...” I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what’s about to come. “Three!”

I pop up from behind the dumpster and take a few shots, allowing Bricker time to run. And thank God, he does. He makes it to the next dumpster.

“Go!” I shout as I shoot again, and he zigzags his way to the end of the street, limping as fast as he can.

“I’m out,” Bricker pants in my ear. “Pony’s here—we’re all here. Now you, Max.”

“You and the crew get moving, Bricker. I’m out of bullets here, so I need to think on my feet.”

“Fuck,” he says softly. “Okay. I’m coming to get—”

“No, you’re not. You’re protecting your crew and you’re leaving me to deal with this.”

“Pedretti, you die on my watch, we’re *all* fucked.”

“Then you better pray I don’t. Get moving. I mean it.”

“Bricker,” Delligatti urges him, “SWAT’s nearly here.”

Well, they took their sweet time. “Bricker,” I say gently, “trust me. And *go*.”

One more short pause, and then he gives. “Be careful, Max,” Bricker says, and I hear the concern underneath his bravado. “I’m gonna be real mad if I don’t get to see your face again.”

“Signing off,” I answer, not wanting to dwell on the warmth that floods my chest at his words. I turn off the comms and from the end of the alley, I hear tires squealing as Pony takes off. Good. I allow myself a second to savor that tiny success before considering my own predicament.

The PacSyn boys—because that’s who they are, I recognize one of them—fire blindly in my direction. I’m alone and surrounded by enemies, both PacSyn *and* SWAT, who will be here in seconds, judging by how close the sirens are.

I steady my hand and get my sights trained on the padlock of the door opposite me. I told Bricker I was out; that wasn’t entirely true. I have one bullet left.

One chance.

I breathe out as I take the shot, and the clasp holding the padlock explodes, splintering the wood of the door. The shot makes the PacSyn men duck down, and I run before they can regroup, right through the now-open door.

There's no way to block the door on the other side, so I keep running, making my way through the empty building, trying to find either a hiding place or, better yet, an unsecured exit. This level is an old office suite. There's no furniture or decoration, just dust and forgotten cubicles. The windows are papered over, which makes it nice and dark inside.

I duck down behind a cubicle wall and take a few seconds to catch my breath, get my bearings. But only seconds later I hear PacSyn barging through the same door I came in.

I need a way out.

Fast.

I move quickly through the building, searching for an unlocked exit while keeping an ear out for my pursuers. Finally I come across a side door that looks like it hasn't been used in years, but when I push against it, something shifts and the door swings open with a quiet creak.

The street outside is empty—for now—so I slip out quietly, and then I run like hell.

It's past sundown once I finally make my way back to the house in the Valley. If I'd had a phone, things would have gone faster.

But I don't have a phone.

As I walk tiredly up the broken concrete pathway, the front door swings open, revealing Bricker's broad-shouldered figure silhouetted against the dim interior.

"Max, you motherfucker," he says, relief evident in his voice as he yanks me inside. "You got nine lives or something? How

the *fuck* did you get out of there?”

I brush off his concern as he pulls me into the room. “You didn’t think I’d let you have all the fun, did you?”

They’re all still there, even Honeybee, who flies across the room to hug me so tight I think I might die today after all, of asphyxiation. “Okay, okay,” I say, patting her awkwardly. “Let’s not make a fuss.”

“Fuss?” Honeybee sobs. She’s really upset. “Max, you’re a *hero*.”

I cringe at that. “Knock it off,” I tell her gently, pulling her limpet-like arms from around my neck. “Come on, now, let me breathe. And let me have a goddamn drink.”

That gets them laughing, instead of staring at me with an awe that makes me uncomfortable. Rook runs to get me some leftover pizza, which I’m hungry enough to eat, and Jazz twists off the top of a beer bottle and practically tips it down my throat. Tank and Delligatti are the only ones who stay quiet. Delligatti stays over in the corner, cleaning his gun, while Tank watches Delligatti.

The tension must have been tight, based on how raucous the laughter and chatter is now. But the plain fact is, the job went wrong.

And that’s a problem.

But Bricker, sitting next to me as I eat and drink in silence, lets them joke and laugh, acting like they pulled it off. I guess they got the money, at least, because partway through Rook grabs out a handful of bills from a duffel bag and makes it rain over Honeybee, ignoring Nico’s glare.

“Max, I...” Bricker drops his voice, the playful facade slipping for a moment to reveal something far more troubled. “You saved my ass, no question. Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

But then Tank pipes up with a mixture of relief and anger. “Yeah. The Castellani saved *more* than one life today, and we should all thank him. But you, Van,” he adds, turning his

attention to the silent man in the corner, “you got some explaining to do.”

“Leave it,” Bricker says. “We got out. We can do the autopsy tomorrow. I don’t want anyone blaming anyone else.”

Tank snorts. “There’s only one person to blame for that shitshow today,” he mutters, but he sinks back into silence.

As for Delligatti, his eyes darken with fury, but he doesn’t say a word.

He just glares at me.

CHAPTER 13

BRICKER

MAX IS silent the whole way back to my house, and I don't try to push conversation. The guy looks tired, for one thing, and I have enough to mull over myself as I try to ignore the ache in my ankle.

Another job gone fucking sideways.

And this time it was Van's fault.

Jobs have been going wrong with enough regularity to make me confront the truth now. Someone's spilling. And whoever they are, they're smart enough to make it look like it could always be accidental. But not today. Today was a setup. We were fish in a barrel, and it's a miracle we're not all dead.

No—not a miracle. It's down to Max Pedretti.

"Hey," Max says as we get nearer to the overpass where all that shit went down. The cops have marked it off, and we have to slow to a crawl as we take the diversion.

"It's fine," I tell him. "They have no idea who we are."

"Not that. *That.*" He points discreetly down the street and I follow his finger to the utility lane that was closed off this morning, the one that Van insisted was open. There are detectives all over the place.

And then I see what Max means. The roadblock is gone; only police tape cordons it off now.

Neither of us make any comment on it. It's just one more weird detail of the day. Maybe the cops moved the sign so they could get in and out more easily. Maybe any roadworks were pulled after the gunfight on the surrounding streets.

Maybe someone set it up to make sure we were walking into a trap.

Whatever it means, I don't have the brainpower for it right now.

We get back to my place and Max starts heading up the stairs straight away, until I call him back. "Listen, I know you're exhausted," I say. "But you could probably do with a little relaxation before you go to bed."

He stops on the second step up, turns back, and raises an eyebrow. "Relaxation?" he says.

Shit. I sound like I'm offering a blow job or something. "Uh. Hot tub," I tell him. "I've got one. Out back."

I lost some of the use of my brain while half of it wandered down the happy path of having this guy's dick in my mouth. Hey, he saved my life. Someone saves your life, they automatically seem extra sexy.

"Hot tub," he repeats, and gives a faint smile. "You got all the mod cons here, huh?"

"I don't know what that means, but I *do* know that hot tub is like magic after a bad day. Come on. Indulge yourself."

His eyes travel over me. "Why, I don't have a thing to wear, Mr. Soldano."

I laugh at the unexpectedness of it. "Fuck clothes," I say. "Those Nordic types do all that spa and hot tub stuff naked."

He watches me again for a moment, then shrugs. "My back is killing me," he says. "So why not?"

The steam rises from the hot tub like fog once it warms up, and I breathe it in deep, crouched butt-naked at the side. If Max is going naked, I figure I should, too. And I love going nude in this damn hot tub. It was my one self-indulgent renovation after I bought this place, along with the two little

huts housing a sauna and a cold plunge pool, although I use them less.

My eyes stray to Max as he comes out, turning around to strip off the towel around his waist and stretch out his back with a sigh, his muscles bunching and relaxing as he does so. I tell myself I'm watching him closely out of suspicion, not attraction.

He's a Castellani, after all.

A Castellani who saved my life today, and more besides.

I slide into the tub before my body can give me away, leaning back against the edge and closing my eyes as the jets start to pummel me in all the right places.

"Come on, get in," I say, cracking open my eyes. Max stands there staring at me, but steps in gingerly at my invitation. His body seems rigid with tension as he lowers himself into the water, and I try not to stare at his junk.

It's hard not to. Guy is packing.

Great. Hot Daddy vibes, check. Saved my life, check. Big dick energy backed up with the real thing...

Big check. Huge.

For a moment, we just sit there in companionable silence. I can feel Max's eyes on me, but I don't look at him. I nestle into the jets and let the heat wash over me. Max follows suit, leaning back with a hum as the comfort breaks him down.

Finally, he breaks the silence. "Thanks," he says, looking over at me.

"For what?" I ask, my voice gruff.

He smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "For getting out of there when I suggested it instead of hanging around. It was the right thing to do."

I shake my head, my shoulders tensing up again right away. "I don't know about that."

"It was the right thing to do," he says again. "Crew first. They need you."

A heat washes over my chest that has nothing to do with the hot tub. I shrug it off. “Anyway, thanks for staying alive. I wasn’t looking forward to explaining to Alessandro Castellani how I got his security guy killed.”

Max actually chuckles. “It’s not a conversation you would’ve enjoyed,” he admits. “But Sandro knows the risks, just like Anna-Vittoria. Just like we all do. Julian, on the other hand, might be inclined to take it badly.”

I don’t want to think about all that right now. I surge out of the water, tugging over a small drinks cart tray that I keep out here. “Beer?”

“No, thanks. I’ll take some whiskey, if you got it.”

I do, one of those hotel bar-fridge mini-whiskies, so I lean a little further to grab a lowball glass. “No ice,” I say apologetically, glancing over my shoulder.

His eyes snap up to mine within a fraction of a second, but I know where he was looking.

“That’s fine,” he says, his voice rough, and clears his throat after.

I turn back, pour out his whiskey, then hand it to him. He holds up the glass in a silent salute, and I clink my beer against it. He takes a sip, and his shoulders start to relax again.

I try to lighten the mood. “I should’ve known the job would go south when the Pony tripped over his own shoelaces on the way out the door. It was a sign.”

Max doesn’t laugh. “What happened today,” he says, “it wasn’t just bad luck.” He looks into his glass while he continues slowly, “I gotta tell you, Bricker, because I wouldn’t be doing my job right if I didn’t: I think you’ve got yourself a mole.”

“I can’t believe that. I’d trust any one of my crew with my life. We’re Family.” I say it because I *have* to say it. I know he’s right. But there’s still some part of me that just can’t throw my crew under the bus in front of an outsider. They’re my people. I need to stand up for them.

“Right. Family,” he echoes, but there’s a distance in his voice that tells me he’s not convinced.

“Look, we’re still learning.” I try to sound more confident than I feel. “But we’ve always had each other’s backs. We just need to plan better. Be more careful.”

“Careful.” His gaze is still locked on the whiskey in his hand. “Careful would’ve been calling off the job the second those schedules changed.”

“I thought I *was* being careful,” I shoot back. “I took your advice into consideration, but just because I made a call—”

“You did ask for my advice,” he says mildly. “But I can’t give good advice when you spring things on me. And there’s no point me giving advice when you don’t trust the source.”

I bite back the reply that bubbles up first. It’s not helpful. And Max is fucking right, that’s the problem. I didn’t tell him about the job today because I didn’t trust him. When he pointed out that the laneway was closed, I brushed it off. Figured Plan A would run okay and we wouldn’t need Plan B anyway.

And look where all that fucking optimism got us. Walking right into a trap.

CHAPTER 14

BRICKER

“I’M SORRY,” I say stiffly. I try it again: “I *am* sorry. I should’ve told you last night when Van called through to let me know. And yeah, maybe I should’ve called it off altogether. But as for that laneway...I had to back Van. He’s my guy.”

“Backing your guy doesn’t mean much if you both end up dead. But that aside, he wasn’t wrong,” Max says, his eyes coming up to meet mine. They’re somber. Worried. “That’s the *problem*, Bricker. That laneway *should’ve* been open, just like Delligatti planned. So that means someone knew we were going to be there.”

“Right,” I say after a long pause, and with a sense of relief, because for the first time since we met, I feel like we might actually be on the same side.

“Look, Bricker,” he says, “even though we’ve had our differences, I can see why your crew follows you. You take care of them, put their well-being first. Even when things went south today, you still put them first. That’s admirable. That’s the kind of Capo any Family needs.”

I blink, caught off guard by the compliment. In response, I let out a short laugh. “Well, shit, never thought I’d hear praise from you after a day like today.”

The corners of his mouth turn up, ever so slightly. But then his expression turns serious again. “You did the best you could in the circumstances. But something doesn’t add up. You must see that.”

I swallow down the last of my beer and set the bottle on the tiles. “Of course I fucking do,” I sigh. “But you’re a

Castellani, Max. I can't talk about this kind of shit with you."

His eyes wander down my wet chest, then away. "I'm an outsider," he agrees. "But maybe that's why your Maestra wanted me embedded with you. Maybe she thought I could be..."

"Objective?" I ask coolly. He gives a shrug. "I mean, maybe. Maybe you have a point, Pedretti. But I trust my crew. I have to, or I'm dead. Sure, a few jobs have gone wrong..." I trail off. "Lately, *every* job's been going wrong. But it always seemed like bad luck—until today."

"Today wasn't bad luck," Max agrees grimly. "How long have they been with you?"

I guess trust has to start somewhere. "Tank, Van and Jazz have been around forever, part of the Family for years. We worked the same crew from the start, so when I got made Capo, I asked for them. Pony's been around a while, too. He used to drive deliveries from the Port to wherever, and he had a good rep at dropping tails, so I picked him for wheels."

"And the next-gen?"

"Yeah. The kids." I sigh. "You know Giddy is Tank's brother—he was initiated maybe eighteen months ago. Rook, Honeybee and Nico are newer recruits, only a year in. But they made their vows to Anna-Vittoria, same as we all did. They're overeager and they're green, but I don't like to think that one of them is working against us."

"It may be someone closer than you think," Max suggests cautiously. "Tell me more about Delligatti?"

I knew that was coming, but I don't like it all the same. "Van and I grew up together. He's closer than a brother. I've *literally* trusted him with my life more times than I can count."

"History can blind you," Max says after a pause. "We learned that recently the hard way—the Castellanis, I mean. Even someone who seems devoted to the Family, someone who's been around a long time...they can still turn."

I know exactly what he's doing. He's opening up about Castellani business in the hopes that I'll open up about

Esposito business.

“It’s not Van,” I tell him bluntly. “And just because he doesn’t like you, it doesn’t make him the bad guy.”

“Just keep an eye on him, alright? For the sake of everyone else in your crew.”

I scoff rather than reply. But as I look into his eyes again, I see something genuine there. “Alright, alright,” I say finally. “I’ll keep watch.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” Max concedes. “I’m just trying to protect the interests of both Families. And I know you won’t want to hear this, but calling off this big job you’re training for is *also* the best course of action. At least until you figure out what’s going on.”

I stare up at the night sky for a long moment. “Max, I don’t think you’re wrong,” I admit at last, the words bitter on my tongue. “And I’m torn about it. But how do you think Anna-Vittoria will react if we call off the job? She’s been losing confidence in me lately, and if I call time on the big one, I might be demoted.”

“Demoted is better than dead.” Max takes a sip of his whiskey when I don’t reply. His gaze drifts across the rolling steam that dances over the surface, comes to rest on my nipples, poking out just above the waterline. He looks away again. “It’s First National, isn’t it?”

My mouth falls open. “Who the *fuck* has been talking?” I demand.

He shakes his head, almost amused. “No one. But like I keep telling you—I actually *am* an expert. First National is the only one that fits the specs of your group. Old-school safe that can be cracked if necessary. Blueprints of that building aren’t online. Only paper copies exist, and you managed to get your hands on some—which, nice work, by the way. And Honeybee...she’s for the wire cutting, right?”

Max goes through his reasoning. First National is an old bank in an old building, which makes it tricky in some respects. But he knows about the tiny shaft that gives access to some vital

security wires running through it. The shaft isn't made for human access, but someone small enough and limber enough and skinny enough could fit. Someone like Honeybee.

He even knows that the wires in that shaft include a hardwired alarm that goes not to any security firm, but to the number one client of the bank—hell, the *only* client of the bank, though it's plastered over with shell companies.

Pacific Syndicate.

Max lays it all out, and I guess it makes sense, but still, I give him an admiring laugh. “Well, shit. And here I thought I was being all mysterious.”

“Oh, you were,” he says. “Extremely mysterious.” He smiles, but it dies away. “Chuckles Moran won't like it.”

Chuckles Moran is the leader of the Pacific Syndicate, and Max is right. He won't like it one little bit. “Damn straight,” I say. “And that's the point. We're taking out First National to send a message.”

“But if someone in your crew is feeding intel back to him—”

“I hear you,” I cut in. “But it's not that easy to call this off. Moran's been due a humiliation for a long time, and we're going to give it to him.”

“Bricker,” he says, his voice soft and reassuring. “Anna-Vittoria will understand that you want to put the safety of her people first. You'll find another way to prove yourself.”

“Easy for you to say,” I grumble, my fingers batting gently through the warm water. “You're not the one who'll be taking it up the ass from the higher-ups. Metaphorically,” I add quickly.

Max gives a wry smile. “No. But if it makes you feel better, I'll go in with you and stand there while you tell her you need to call it off. And I'll keep the higher-ups out of your ass, too, if I can.”

My dick gives a happy little bounce under the water and I smile back at him. “I appreciate the offer,” I tell him. “But I can take care of my own ass. If I'm calling the job off, it'll be

my call. I'm Capo. Last thing I need is to make it seem like some Castellani is calling the shots."

"It's not my call," he agrees, his eyes meeting mine with maybe something more than just camaraderie. "But the offer to stand with you is there."

I listen to the bubbling water for a minute before I relent at last. "Alright. I'll contact Anna-Vittoria tomorrow, let her know what happened today. Tell her I think we should call the big one off until I can verify everyone in the team...again." I thought saying it out loud might make me feel worse, but it's the opposite. I feel my stomach unknot itself a little.

It's the right decision. I'm sure of it.

Max just nods, but I can feel his approval. And I like it. More than I should.

"Let's call it a night," I say, and stand up and step out of the hot tub. The cool evening breeze brushes against my damp skin, sending goosebumps racing across my body. Max follows suit, water cascading down his muscular frame as he rises.

He sees me looking, and he does nothing to hide.

"You coming upstairs, or what?" I ask, toweling down.

"So you can lock me up in that guest room again?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary," I reply, a wicked grin crossing my face. "Not if I'm in there too, keeping a very close eye on you, if you know what I mean."

His eyebrows go up. "You're not shy, are you, Bricker?"

"Hey, if you prefer, I can lock you in alone and go back to my own room," I tell him with a shrug. "Your call. Sorry if I misread."

Max's face lights up with amusement, but there's something else there, too. Something that makes my pulse race. I step closer to him and his hand comes up to rest against my hip. For a moment I think he's going to push me back.

But he pulls me in closer.

“I don’t think you’re the kind of guy to misread anything,” he murmurs, his breath playing over my still-damp neck. “I think you know exactly where you stand at all times.”

I tilt my head back, meeting his gaze. “So what’s it going to be?”

“Bricker,” he says, and hesitates. I ready myself for rejection. “There’s something you should know.”

Instantly, I’m on guard, taking a step back. “What is it?”

For maybe the first time since I’ve known Max Pedretti, he doesn’t seem to know how to phrase something.

“Spit it out,” I tell him.

“I...prefer to top,” he says at last.

I laugh, relief making me loud. “Christ, Max. I thought—” I break off, shaking my head. “I don’t even know. You like to top? That’s fine. Sounds like we’re suited. Any other bombshells for me before we do this?”

Max’s answer is to lower his head and press his lips against mine. I’m surprised at the passion behind his kiss, given how reserved he usually is, but my body responds eagerly. His tongue slides against mine, exploring every corner of my mouth, and his hands move down over my ass, pulling me closer. I cup his face, let the stubble along his jaw prickle my palm. The tingle spreads all over me, and the kiss grows more intense as the seconds tick by, until my heart is racing as fast as it did in that alleyway today when I thought I was going to die.

The same sense of inevitability settles over me now as did then. I know exactly what’s going to happen next—and with that knowledge comes a calm peace.

This is right. What we’re doing, what we’re about to do...

It’s *right*.

“We should get upstairs,” I murmur into his shoulder.

Max nods, his lips still brushing my cheek. He takes my hand and leads me back into my own house, upstairs, to his room.

We don't talk, as though words could spark off what's simmering between us.

Once we're in his room, Max moves quickly, surprising me again. The guy is no cold fish, that's for sure. He pushes me up against the door, holding my wrists up near my shoulders as he kisses down my chest, making me gasp. He returns to my mouth, pressing up against me. His skin is hot against mine, and I feel his cock pressing against my thigh, growing as fast as mine.

"Hang on," I murmur, pulling my mouth away from his. "Give me a second." I pull away reluctantly. "You get into bed and relax. You're gonna need your strength."

He raises his eyebrows with a smile, but he lets me go, and I head into the bathroom with a grin. I'm not surprised to see the room is spotless, towels neatly folded on the rail and Max's toiletries lined up like soldiers along the side of the sink. The sight of them stabs me through with a rush of—of *fondness*.

It's just so *Max*.

I force down a chuckle as I glance around the room again. You'd think no one was staying in here at all with how neat it is, how completely—

Wait. What's that?

There's a thin black wire sticking out slightly from the exhaust fan. It only caught my eye in the mirror, and now I turn to stare up at it. Does the fan need maintenance?

Or...

CHAPTER 15

WHAT THE HELL am I doing?

As soon as Bricker is safely tucked away in the bathroom I can think more clearly, the red fog of lust that's been drugging me for the past hour lifting slightly.

What. The hell. Am I doing?

I rub my face vigorously in an attempt to clear my head further. I cannot do this. I cannot sleep with Fabi Soldano's son, with an Esposito, with a man half my age. *Me*, Max Pedretti, sensible, strategic, cautious...I have *never* fucked up this badly.

Well, not since I let Fabi run the job that got him caught.

I put my hands over my face again to help me concentrate. I need to figure out a way to let Bricker down gently, or he'll think I did this on pur—

The bathroom door opens again. "Pedretti," Bricker says in a low, dangerous voice. "What is this?"

I take my time lowering my hands from my face, because I know at once what's happened. I can read Bricker's tone, read his face, too, when I see it. The suspicion and anger.

He's holding my half-made radio in his hand.

"What is this?" he asks again.

"Nothing," I say, realizing too late just how fucking guilty I sound. I should have said *No idea* or something similar.

But the guy's not an idiot. He's already pulling it apart, grabbing my gun and smashing it with the butt.

It's the touching of my gun that really gets to me. No one touches my guns. I take a step forward, reach out a hand intended to calm me as much as him. "It's not what you think."

He looks over. "Really? Because it looks like you're building a device to spy on me and my crew."

"That's *definitely* not what it is. Spying was never my intention. I'm not here to spy on you, I keep telling you that."

"Then explain this!" Bricker snaps, waving a broken piece of plastic in my face.

I push his hand away. "I need a way to communicate with my Family. It's bullshit to expect me to cut ties completely, and it's not what my Boss agreed with your Boss, either."

"Maestra. And even if you didn't intend to spy, you know damn well that this could put us at risk, blabbing over the air about what we're doing. You're compromising the safety of my crew *and* the success of our operation."

"Bricker, come on," I sigh, reaching out for him, but he pulls away. We're both still naked, which makes everything feel slightly ridiculous. "I'm not trying to sabotage anything. I'm on *your side*, for Christ's sake."

"Then why go behind my back? Why try to contact your old Family?" he asks, eyes cold and unyielding.

"They are *still* my Family, and I just wanted to let them know I'm doing okay."

"Why? What the fuck is so important that you gotta tell them, huh?"

He's starting to piss me off. "Put yourself in my shoes," I tell him. "I need to be able to protect my Family's interests, too, even if it means walking a thin line. I need to know what's going on with them, even if I keep quiet about what's going on here. They were talking about dealing with the Bernardis when I left and—"

"Fuck the Bernardis! And fuck you! I can't believe I thought—even for a *second*—that you meant what you said," Bricker

says with a hollow laugh. “God. Look at me, Max. A few days with you and you got me ready to suck your dick and let you talk me out of jobs.”

“That’s not fair,” I say, pointing at him. “That’s fucking unfair and untrue.”

“Man, you are *good*,” he says with false admiration. “You Castellanis really know how to work a guy. Is that why you wanted to contact them? Let them know how fast you got me on the leash? Did you have a bet going with Julian, see if you could break his record with the Bernardi Lion?”

“Will you cut it out?” I snap, pushed too far at last.

And Bricker, surprisingly, does. He throws the broken device on the bed, puts his hands on his hips, and waits for me to say something.

“Look,” I sigh, running a hand through my hair, frustration and desperation swirling within me. “You Espositos *can’t* expect me to cut all ties with my Family, Bricker. My Boss is going to come down hard on *you* if I don’t let him know I’m okay. That’s all I had planned. But this radio, it doesn’t even work.”

“Yet.”

Well, he has me there. “Yet,” I admit.

Bricker gives a bitter laugh. “You expect me to believe that’s all it is? Max Pedretti, security specialist, planted in my crew —”

“I wasn’t planted; your own Boss *put* me here!”

“*Maestra*, for fuck’s sake!—and I’m supposed to believe you just wanted to send back an All’s Well to your boys? Bullshit, Pedretti.”

“Believe what you want,” I tell him, my patience waning, “but I’m telling you the truth. I’m not trying to undermine you, your crew, or the Esposito Family. But I need to keep up my connections. If you were in my place, you’d do the same.”

He glares at me, and I try real hard to keep my eyes from wandering down his naked body. He’s still gorgeous, even

mad as hell.

He turns his back on me. “We can figure this out in the morning,” he throws over his shoulder as he strides out of the room, and a few seconds later I hear what I expected to hear: the key turning in the lock, keeping me in for the night.

Breakfast the next morning is a strained affair, and I don’t get eggs or bacon or any special treatment at all. I get cereal and not enough milk.

“Bricker, come on,” I say, after we sit there crunching in silence for a while. “Do you really believe I’m betraying you and the crew like that?”

His eyes are hard, giving away nothing.

I shake my head. “Sometimes there are things bigger than just one Family. There are threats that require cooperation between us all. Talking to my Family was meant to ensure the safety of everyone, *including* your crew.” I pause, allowing my words to sink in, hoping he’ll see the truth in them.

But Bricker remains unconvinced, his jaw set in a stubborn line. “Anna-Vittoria said no contact.”

“Anna-Vittoria doesn’t get to make a call like that,” I counter. “I was trying to smooth it over before it became a problem. That’s all.”

He prods his cereal. “Even if that’s true,” he says, no longer outraged, but still pretty pissed, “as your *current* Capo, it’s *my* ass on the line. You should have come to me first, let me talk to the Maestra on your behalf.”

He does have a point, damn it. “I should have,” I agree. “But I didn’t think you’d understand.”

“This isn’t a game, Pedretti. I built this crew from the ground up, and I’ll be damned if I let anyone undermine that.”

“That’s not my aim.”

“No? Last night you had me doubting my oldest friends, and ready to call off the most important job we’ve ever done.”

Dread hits me right in the gut. “Bricker,” I say carefully, “you’re still calling it off. Right?”

“Wrong.” He resumes eating his cereal, his air standoffish. “The job is getting done.”

Oh, Jesus. I have royally fucked this. And I can see that nothing I say today is going to make him budge. “Okay,” I say at last. “In that case, I hope you’ll still let me help.”

“Get fucked, Castellani. You think I’m an idiot?”

I tilt my head to one side. “I think you’re a pragmatist. And after that fiasco yesterday, I think *I’ve* proved that I’ll put my own life on the line for whichever crew I’m with. That’s how I work.”

He pokes at his cereal again. I’ve already pushed mine away, sick to the stomach at the idea of this stupid bank job going ahead. But Bricker’s the type to dig his heels in. If I don’t push too much now, I might have a chance of talking him out of it later.

“Let me help you protect your people,” I plead. “Let me prove my loyalty through my actions.”

Bricker’s glare is steely. The playful humor has vanished, and those soft eyes that looked at me last night seem like just a dream this morning. Any attempt to explain will be futile. Bricker has made up his mind.

And he’s as stubborn as his old man, that much is clear.

“I’ll tell Anna-Vittoria myself about the comms device,” I offer. “Let her decide what she wants to do about it.”

“No,” he says abruptly, and turns to put his bowl in the sink. He drinks down his coffee before he adds, “She doesn’t like disobedience. And besides, *I’m* the one who’d get it in the neck for not watching you closer.”

Cowboy though he may be, he’s not a guy who shies away from responsibility. So I wonder if the truth of his concern is

closer to the first part: Anna-Vittoria doesn't like disobedience.

Well, what Mob Boss does? Maybe he really is trying to protect me as well as himself.

"Listen," he says abruptly. "What happened—what *nearly* happened last night...it was a mistake, and the crew doesn't need to hear about it."

It shouldn't hurt as much as it does to hear him say that. "Understood."

"Good," he says, and turns away. "Now let's get moving."

CHAPTER 16

BRICKER

OUTSIDE, I slide into my Charger and gun the engine into a roar. Max climbs in beside me, his usual stoic expression betraying nothing.

After last night, I can't look at him without remembering the feel of his hands on my skin, the taste of his tongue in my mouth. And then the strange wire sticking out from beneath the toilet cistern, the shock as I pulled out a contraband device. It makes my blood run hot, anger and desire warring inside me. I peel out from the curb, tires squealing, the engine drowning out the tense silence between us.

The drive to the Valley house passes in a blur of narrow streets and dilapidated buildings, my mind wandering to memories of kisses, touches, Max's gravelly voice in my ear. I curse silently, again and again—curse myself, mostly. How the hell did this happen?

How did I lose my mind so *completely*?

When we arrive at the Lair, I cut the engine and turn on Max with a snarl. "I need to go report to Anna-Vittoria about yesterday. You'll stay here in the house, in Van's eyesight at all times. You don't take a piss without his permission, you hear me?"

Max meets my gaze, his dark eyes unreadable. "I hear you, Capo."

I slam the car door behind me, limping a little still as I walk toward the house. But my twisted ankle from yesterday isn't the thing that makes my legs feel unsteady. What the hell am I

going to do about Max Pedretti? I can't trust him, not after this radio shit.

But every time I look at him, all I can picture is the raw need in his eyes as I leaned in to kiss him.

Christ, I am *so* screwed.

Inside, the crew greets me with enthusiasm, slapping me on the back and crowding around. And when Max comes in behind me, they give him a cheer.

I guess he *was* the hero of the hour yesterday. None of them know the bullshit that rained down between leaving last night and coming back this morning. Most of them don't even seem to pick up on anything weird between Max and me, thank God.

Except one person. Van nudges my arm, brows raised in question. I nod toward the kitchen as the crew start ribbing Max, and Van comes with me, leaning in as I fold my arms over my chest and put my head close to his for a quiet word.

"Everything okay?" he murmurs.

"Keep an eye on our guest," I say shortly. "Make sure he doesn't go wandering."

Van's lips curl into a smirk. "Trouble in paradise?"

I'm glad my arms are folded. I'd grab a fistful of Van's shirt if they weren't, getting myself in more trouble. "I'm not in the mood for your shit today," I snap. "I'm your Capo, so you do what I say and keep your mouth shut. Are we clear?"

Van crosses his own arms, eyes cool. "Crystal. *Capo.*"

"Good. Now get to work." I raise my voice. "*All* of you get to work. I need to check in with Anna-Vittoria. So you better pray she doesn't kick our asses over that bullshit yesterday."

The crew scatters, shooting nervous glances at each other. Max still stands near the door, watching me.

"You," I say, pointing at Max, "with him." I thumb over my shoulder at Van, and then I stalk past, out the door.

Goddammit, this is a disaster. I can't afford distractions, not with the bank job coming up. I need to get my head on straight, remember who Max Pedretti really is.

An outsider.

No matter how good he might look naked.

Anna-Vittoria's eyes are ice when the Shadow opens the door to her salon silently.

"Soldano," she says. "Do come in."

I swallow hard and step forward. "Maestra. I'm sorry about yesterday. I take full responsibility for—"

"Spare me your apologies," she interrupts. "I want results, not excuses. You assured me your crew was prepared. You assured me the job would be flawless. And yet..."

And yet we made every local news and some national. Heat crawls up the back of my neck. "I know. I was wrong, and I'm sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to succeed." Her voice softens with disappointment and she goes for the jugular. "I expect better from you, Fabrizio. If you can't handle a simple armored car, how do you expect to pull off First National?"

Panic seizes my heart. She *can't* pull the bank job from my crew. From *me*. I need to prove to her I can do this. "I..."

"Tell me everything," she says calmly. "And then tell me what you plan to do differently next time."

I take a deep breath and begin detailing our actions, our missteps, and try not to dwell on the fact that Max's presence was one of those complications. But as I recount yesterday's events, my mind drifts back to the comms device I found in Max's room. I robotically recount everything I plan to do differently for the big heist as my mind unhelpfully reminds

me of the water draining off of Max's thick cock as he exited the hot tub.

"Maestra," I finish, "please, give me another chance. I won't let you down again."

"You're damn right you won't. And Fabrizio—make sure the Castellani doesn't lose a single eyelash during this job. You understand me? Use his expertise, use his skills, but you keep watch over him, make sure he's safe. I don't want to have to explain to Don Castellani that his man was killed. As indebted as these Castellanis are to me, they wouldn't be happy."

Make sure Max is safe? I don't think she has anything to worry about there. I glossed over the part where he totally saved my ass—and the part where he ran through bullets to do it, too. Max Pedretti is not the kind of man who needs saving. But I just dip my head stiffly. "Yes, ma'am."

She waves a hand at me. "Go. Do better."

For a moment I pause, wondering if I should tell her about the comms gadget her oh-so-special Castellani was working on. How would she react if she knew Max was secretly contacting his family behind our backs? "Maestra—" But the memory of Max's fingers tracing down my spine as we kissed stops me cold.

I can't trust him. But I can't betray him, either.

"What is it?" Anna-Vittoria asks.

"The Castellani—he's asked if he can contact his Family. Can I return his phone to him? He...just wants to touch base."

She thinks about it. She honestly does. Then she shakes her head. "Not yet. It's only been a few days. Let him settle in first."

I leave the Villa with my mind churning. As I arrive back at the Lair, I pause for a moment to compose myself before entering the house. My hand pauses on the front door handle, the hard, sun-warmed metal grounding me as I try one more time—as futilely as ever—to shove aside the memories of Max sitting there in the hot tub.

Things would be a lot simpler if I could stop thinking about how *safe* I felt when Max turned up like a goddamn superhero to guard me when I was lying there behind a dumpster with a twisted ankle.

Outsider, I remind myself. *He's an outsider and you can't trust him.*

Use him, yes. Trust...nope. And fuck?

Definitely not.

CHAPTER 17

BRICKER

A WEEK LATER, I rummage through Max's belongings for the second time that day. Morning and night, I told him, and he agreed, leaving the room to stand outside when I ordered him to. It's a pointless search, I know it, but I can't help myself. The man got one over on me, and that makes me mad.

Worse still, he's got those damn serious eyes that seem to stare into my soul, making it impossible to think straight.

I toss a shirt aside. *You're losing it.*

"You done?" Max asks from the doorway.

"No," I snap. "Against the wall. Spread 'em." I feel heat rising in my cheeks as I think about how that sounds, but Max just sighs and leans up against the wall, hands up, legs apart, ready for me to pat him down.

He's clean. Of course.

I run my hands over him again, telling myself it's just to double-check. During his time with me, I've kept my distance at home, speaking to him only when necessary, never looking him directly in the eyes. He must think I despise him, which isn't far from the truth. But beneath the simmering distrust, there's something else—a pull I can't ignore, no matter how hard I try.

It's infuriating.

I've only *known* the guy for a week.

"I told you," he says softly into the wall, "I wouldn't try anything again."

“You tried something once, and that was enough, Castellani. You only get one chance with me.”

I wish I hadn't said it like that. But Max just brushes it off, like he brushes everything else off.

The man is going to drive me insane.

When we get to the Lair this morning, Jazz and Tank are out casing the bank again with Pony, or so Van tells me. So Van and I are stuck with the greenhorns, and—like puppies—they're cute, but tiring.

Van, taking a break in the kitchen from Rook's endless questions, motions me over with his head. “What's going on with you and the Castellani?” he asks. I can't pick his tone. It's neutral, but too neutral. “Did you have an argument or something?”

“Nope,” I say, avoiding his gaze. The last thing I want Van—anyone—to know about is my catastrophic lack of judgment in *almost* sleeping with the enemy. “You were right about him, is all. We shouldn't trust him. He's an outsider.”

A smug grin spreads across Van's face. “I knew it. I told you from the start. What did he do?”

“Keep it down, will you?” I glance around, making sure no one's paying us any mind. “He didn't do anything. We just need to focus on the job at hand. He's an outsider, but he's still my responsibility whether I like it or not.”

“Fine, fine, don't go pulling your ‘I'm Capo' shit again,” Van grumbles, but I can tell he's pleased.

And why wouldn't he be? He was right about Max all along.

“I'm serious,” I tell him. “I want morale high and I want everyone at their best for this job. That includes Pedretti.”

Van purses his lips skeptically. “Why let him in on the job at all?”

“Because he knows his shit.” I feel a pang of regret as Van’s face shutters over. That last armored car plan was his baby. It sucks that things went wrong in front of the Castellani, and I don’t blame Van for what happened, but maybe he feels different.

His jaw works as though he’s trying to keep something to himself, but I know Van. He’ll brood over small shit and explode later. “Spit it out,” I tell him. “Whatever your issue is.”

“You don’t wanna hear it.”

“Come on. Tell me.”

He glances over at the crew, making sure they’re busy, before he leans in closer. “You and me, we’re real tight, Cap. Brothers in arms. But since that Castellani came around, you’re acting like I’m some grunt. I don’t like it. Just because he’s an old man—”

“He’s forty-nine!” I snap.

“—doesn’t make him some fucking font of wisdom. He’s causing trouble just by being here. Stirring things up.”

Van isn’t wrong, in as much as Van himself is being really fucking weird about the whole thing. But he’s not the only one. The crew has been on edge for a while. Maybe Max’s arrival had something to do with it, or maybe it just made it more obvious. I don’t know.

I understand the anti-Castellani vibes. Us Espositos like to keep to ourselves, and it’s strange that Anna-Vittoria is suddenly buddying up to some Sicilian Family, so different from our own. But Max is earning the respect and trust of the crew, that’s for sure. Rook gets this rapturous hero-worship look in his eye every time Max explains something to him. Even Nico shuts up and listens when Max talks. And somehow Max manages to do all this in a way that still feels deferential to me as Capo.

Plus it’s nice to have a calming influence around. God knows we need it. But there seems to be something else under Van’s objections, though I’m not sure what.

“I mean it, Cap,” he insists. “Pedretti’s trouble. It’s *our* necks on the line, the rest of us. We’re the expendable ones.”

“It’s *my* neck on the line with the Maestra,” I remind him. “This job goes south, my ass is the one that gets reamed. So excuse me if I’m a little tired of your bitching and moaning. Now let’s get back to business.” Irritated with our conversation, and with Van as well, I walk away.

Tank and Jazz return after lunch with confirmation of the daily schedules of staff and money deliveries to First National, and I call for the crew to gather around. It’s time to review the plan and discuss the roles for the upcoming bank job.

“Alright, everyone, here we go again,” I tell them, spreading the blueprints of the bank over the table. We do this daily, or did before Max arrived: go over our roles, our plans. I want them all to know it inside-out so it becomes automatic when we get in there. Since Max became aware of the job, I’ve returned to the habit. The crew gathers around, eyes on the plans. “Call it out.”

“Cash deliveries to the bank are all done by two,” Van says. “We arrive at two-twenty.” We need that vault full so we can make a real statement. It’s not about the money, not really.

It’s about reminding PacSyn of their place.

Tony the Pony goes next. “I pull in here,” he says, pointing at the road outside the bank. “And I wait for you losers.” Pony’s skill behind the wheel is unparalleled, and we’ll need a fast escape.

“I’m on crowd control with Rook,” Giddy says, and Rook nods. “And Max,” he adds.

I decided to go ahead and put Max on the floor for this job to help me keep Giddy and Rook corralled, and in the hopes that his calm attitude will keep any customers calm, too. That’ll reduce the chance of things going sideways.

I hope.

Honeybee points to a small shaft on the map. “That’s my way in,” she says. “I get in there and I cut the wires to give us some extra time.” Honeybee is small and agile, perfect for this kind

of job. There are other alarms we assume will go off, but cutting that main one that goes straight to PacSyn will buy us a few extra minutes. Police response time in the area—we've been timing it—seems to run about six minutes.

That's more than enough time for us, as long as PacSyn don't show up first.

Nico, pointing to the van outside with a belligerent look on his face, repeats in a monotone that he'll be in there with Pony, monitoring the police scanner. He *wants* to be inside the bank, keeps hassling me about it.

Jazz points to the manager's office and then to the vault. We're planning to have the manager open the vault for us, and that's when we expect the *under duress* alarm to go out, when the manager keys in the code. Tank and Van will be there with Jazz, and they'll pack and run the cash.

"And I'll move between the vault and the floor," I finish up, "making sure everything runs smooth. No casualties. No problems. And remember, timing is everything." I look around at them. "Things haven't run smooth for us, these last few jobs. But this one will, right?" I pause for acknowledgment, but the unenthusiastic response makes me repeat myself. "*Right?*"

"Right, Cap," Van says firmly, and the others chime in with more conviction. Van might be pissed off with me personally, but he's pro enough to back me when he needs to, and I'm grateful for that.

But as I look around the table, I feel compelled to say something more. "Listen, anyone who wants out, say so now. I won't think less of you, but I don't want anyone on the team who's not a hundred percent in."

Silence greets my offer, until Van says confidently, "We're in. All of us."

Everyone nods at his words, but I find myself glancing at Max, who gives a nod of his own. I wish I didn't find that so reassuring.

“Each of us do our part, we’ll be in and out in two minutes tops,” I go on. “Anything goes wrong, we know what to do. Right?”

Honeybee answers for all of them: “Count on each other.” I try not to smile at the fierceness in her voice. She sounds like an aggressive cheerleader.

But as we continue discussing the specifics of the plan, I worry that something *is* going to go wrong. It’s partly the tension between Van and me, and partly the fact that every damn job we’ve done as a crew recently has run the *opposite* of clockwork.

Max seems to be the only one who picks up on my mood, though, watching me when he thinks I’m not looking.

I’m looking, alright. I’m wondering if Van is right, that I should keep the Castellani out of things.

Apart from Van, the crew has accepted Max. Even Tank, who previously scowled at him constantly, has started making time for him. Max’s cool head under fire during the armored car heist made an impression.

I watch him still as we break up, and he goes back to work with Tank. I’ve kept Max clear of the tech table since he *stole* a bunch of it, although Rook and Giddy tend to go over to ask him questions all the time.

Honeybee approaches him now, her usual smile a little dimmer than usual. She’s struggling with her part in the plan. She’s agile and stealthy, so the acrobatics are no problem. But after she’s done that, she’ll rejoin us on the floor. Getting her to hold a gun, bark at people, make them obey...

When I first recruited her, after watching her as a street performer at Venice Beach for a few weeks, she was eager and reassuring. She was living on the streets back then, so when she said she could play mean, I believed her.

Girl doesn’t have a mean bone in her body, though.

She sits down to help clean the firearms, Tank just raising an eyebrow at her as she chatters at both him and Max. “Max,” I

hear her saying a few minutes later, “you ever done any stage work?”

“Stage work?” he repeats, with an astonished chuckle. “Uh, no. Can’t say I have.”

“You’ve got great presence,” she says wistfully. “I wish you could lend me some.”

“Presence?”

“You’re always so sure of yourself, it makes everyone else believe in you, too.”

Max keeps polishing a barrel for a moment while he thinks that over. “Honeybee, let me tell you a secret,” he says softly, so that the chuckleheads in the corner don’t overhear. Sometimes they tease Honeybee a little too much, and I come down hard on them when they do, but I’m glad Max keeps their conversation private. “If you don’t believe in yourself,” he goes on, “no one else will. You want some advice?”

“Yes, please,” she says at once.

“First, stand tall, lift that chin up. Maintain eye contact. That alone can make a world of difference.” Max touches her chin, making her bring it up a little higher. “There you go. Next, remember that what you’re saying is important. When we get in that bank, believe me, every person in there will be a giant set of ears. No one will want to miss a word. They’ll *want* to know what to do to stay safe. You tell ’em; they’ll follow.”

When I was younger, and I visited Dad in prison, he used to say the same when he crowed to me about the jobs he’d pulled off.

All those folks, all they are is a big set of ears, soon as they’re under threat.

And I found he was right, in the few bank jobs we’ve pulled off as a crew. Nothing big. Regional branches, testing the waters. We only moved back into the city once we were confident. And then things started to go wrong...

“Okay, but...” Honeybee bites her lip. “But what if someone...doesn’t? Doesn’t listen, or doesn’t do what I say?”

“Then I’ll be there to back you up, or Rook will, or Giddy. But you remember, our aim is that no one gets hurt. So you just stay true to your principles and the vows you made to your Family,” Max advises. “You hang on to those, act with honor, everything will be okay.”

“Thanks, Max,” Honeybee says, her voice already sounding stronger. Her smile returns to its usual brightness.

I’m grateful for Max’s encouragement to her. Honeybee is the most nervous of us all. I recruited her only a year ago, but she’s become everyone’s baby sister in that time.

Except for Nico. *He* doesn’t look at her like a sister, not at all.

I keep watching Max and Honeybee as they chat, the way he leans in to listen intently to her questions, his hands making precise gestures as he explains a technique for handling her firearm. It’s hard to ignore the authentic care behind his actions. The anger I’ve been harboring toward him starts to soften at the edges, much as I wish I could hold onto my grudge.

“Bricker,” Nico’s voice pulls me away from my observations, and I turn to face him. He looks eager, almost buzzing with energy. “I had an idea. If Pony’s in the van, why can’t he listen to the scanner, too? Then maybe I could help inside?”

“Nico...” I break off with a sigh. This is delicate. “Pony needs to focus on the road. And look, this isn’t a game. I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Come on, man, *jeez*. You wouldn’t say that to anyone else on this crew, would you?” His eyes are accusatory.

And he’s right. I wouldn’t.

“If Honeybee is tough enough to be inside, I don’t see why *I’m* not,” he says stubbornly. “I can handle it.”

“Honeybee has a special role,” I tell him. “If you want to try wriggling through that shaft—”

“Bricker,” he whines, “I’m serious. You trust *Max*, even though he’s an outsider. You *know* I’m loyal to the Family. To

the crew. To *you*. Give me a chance.” The determination dies away to longing. “Please?”

His words have struck a chord. Trust is a commodity I dole out carefully, and yet I gave it away easily to Max—until I found that radio. But Nico... he’s one of us, oaths and all. I’m doing him a disservice, like he points out, if I trust a Castellani over him.

And if he’s inside, that means Max can keep an eye on him. Keep him safe.

I exhale slowly, deliberating, before giving in. “Alright, you can be part of crowd control. But you better be prepared.”

“Thanks, Bricker!” Nico grins, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “You won’t regret it.”

“I fucking better not.” I slap him on the shoulder, trying to smother the lingering doubts.

This heist is a high-stakes game, and I can’t afford another fuck-up. But as I wander around, see them all working well together...

I finally allow myself a tiny spark of optimism.

Max catches my eye just as I smile to myself, and he smiles back, less guarded than usual. I stare like a dizzy fool for a moment, memories of his hand on my naked hip, his dick nestling against mine—

I turn away abruptly, looking over the crew again.

As long as they keep it together for the job. That’s all I ask. After that, hopefully, Anna-Vittoria will send the Castellani back to his Family.

The sooner this disruption is over, the better.

CHAPTER 18

MAX

IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY, but I'll say this for Bricker: he doesn't give his crew even a chance to forget a plan. Just like his old man, he schools them daily, getting them to memorize the staff schedule, repeat their roles, go over options A, B and C.

There's no question of having solid backup plans this time.

For the second time today, halfway through the afternoon, he calls us all over to the table to go over everything again.

It's been seven days since I nearly slept with him, and that's all I can think about when I'm not worrying about the job—or worrying about what's going on back at Redwood. But Bricker has barely said a word to me at home, keeping up a polite pretense at the Valley house that we're still talking. It's lonely as hell, getting locked in my room each night after an impersonal pat-down. Nothing to do but stare at the walls.

I've been mulling over whether to tell him about his dad or not. Seems like a shitty thing to do now, since the heist is coming up so soon. After that, Bricker has hinted more than once, my time with the Espositos will be done.

Why make the kid regret propositioning me more than he already obviously does?

Right now, as his crew leans in, captivated by every word as he outlines the plan in that firm tone, he reminds me more than ever of Fabi Soldano at his most compelling.

He is his father's son, is Bricker. And it just breaks my heart more each day. I look forward to going home. I shouldn't have

agreed to come in the first place. Never *would* have, if I'd known—

Bricker glances up as though he can read my mind. There's a challenge in his eyes, like he's daring me to back out now.

As if I could. Every day that goes by makes me more determined to keep Bricker Soldano safe through this job. Make sure he comes out unscathed. And it's not just because I owe his father, or because crew loyalty is second nature to me.

It's because Bricker himself *means* something to me, almost despite myself.

“Okay,” he says, spreading out the blueprints again and ignoring the sighs from the crew. “Let's check the bank floor again.”

A small groan goes up, but everyone falls silent as Bricker keeps rifling through the papers. He sweeps half of them to one side, then, brow furrowed, takes them one by one and stacks them.

“Where is it?” Bricker's voice echoes through the silence, tighter than before. “Come on, guys, who's got the goddamn layout?” He looks around the group, but all he gets are blank stares in return. “Who had it last?”

Instinctively, we all look at Rook. He often borrows the maps and blueprints, trying to drive things into his head. He has trouble with his left and right under pressure, he once confided in me. The kid shrinks now under the weight of all those stares. His hands tremble where they rest on the table, fingers twisting together.

“I don't have it,” Rook says, voice shaking. “I swear, I put it back this morning.”

“Go check,” Bricker sighs. The tension dissipates a little. I can just about read his thoughts. *Dammit Rook, always forgetting things.*

But over at the tech table, Rook gets redder and redder as he searches through the papers there. “It's not here,” he says. “But I told you, I never kept it. I put it back.”

“For fuck’s sake, Rook,” Van snaps.

Rook, angry now, snaps back. “My notes are gone, too. So if someone took em, it wasn’t me, was it? Because I wouldn’t take my own damn notes.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Van surges to his feet. He jabs a finger at Rook, who rears back as though struck. “Cap *told* you not to take any physical notes. Now the map is gone, and so are your notes? What are you, a goddamn—”

“I’m telling the truth!” Rook cries. “I didn’t do anything, I swear!”

But Van scoffs, curling his lip as he turns to Bricker. “For all we know, he’s passing information on to the Feds.”

“*Hey.*” I level Van with a hard stare, and he stills. “That’s a serious accusation.”

“Stay out of this, *Castellani*. This isn’t your fucking crew.”

“I’m part of the team, Delligatti, whether you like it or not—and I don’t like bullies.” I meet his glare head-on. Van may have a good mind for tactics, but he’s too quick to turn on his own, and I don’t like it. I don’t understand it, either. Even Bricker seems puzzled from time to time by Van’s attitude, suggesting he isn’t usually like this.

Not until I arrived, at least.

“You can got get—” Van starts.

“Enough!” Bricker’s voice is loud, but I can hear the edge of exhaustion, too.

A muscle ticks in Van’s jaw, but he stays silent. Smart, for once.

Bricker sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “The layout’ll turn up. As for tonight, drinks are on me.” He attempts a smile. “We’ve been working too hard, that’s all. We need a night off.”

The collective exhale just about gusts the rest of the papers off the table. Things aren’t fixed, not by a long shot, but at least we have a reprieve. Bricker looks at the old clock on the wall.

“In fact, let’s call it now,” he says. “It’s beer o’clock somewhere.”

It’s only three in the afternoon, but I can’t fault him. As the crew files out, I linger behind. Rook hesitates in the doorway, glancing over his shoulder at me.

“Go on,” I tell him. “I’ll be there soon.”

Rook nods, and slips out the door. Once we’re alone, I turn to Bricker. “You need to rein in Delligatti.”

Bricker steps into my space, close enough for me to feel the heat radiating off him, feel the gust of his breath as he opens his mouth to bitch me out.

And I remember how it felt to kiss those lips.

For a long moment Bricker just looks at me, eyes searching my face, mouth half-open. Then he huffs and turns away, raking both hands through his hair. “You’re not wrong. So get moving, Pedretti,” he says. “Time for a team bonding session.”

I can barely keep my thoughts on target as I sit with the crew in their usual watering hole. It’s a full table: Van sits opposite Bricker; Jazz, Tank and Pony talk cars; and Rook, Giddy and Nico all compete for Honeybee’s attention. Rook is stuck between me and Bricker, making it harder for him—but truth be told, I think Honeybee made her choice a while back. She reserves her sweetest smiles for Nico.

Despite the laughter and the clinking of glasses around me, all I can think about is how close Bricker is to me, just this other side of Rook, his presence impossible to ignore. His laughter echoes in my ears, mixing with memories of our heated encounter, making it difficult to focus.

“Hey, Nico,” Jazz calls out, raising her glass in a mock toast. “Congrats on finally getting to play with the big kids, by the way.” She smirks, and the others chuckle, but Nico just grins proudly.

“About time Bricker let me show what I’m made of,” he replies, trying to sound like a big man for Honeybee’s benefit.

“Let’s just hope you don’t get stage fright when the curtain goes up,” Giddy smirks, taking a sip of his beer.

“You wanna stay in the van with me,” Pony says. He’s annoyed about the change, arguing more than once that he can’t pay attention to the scanner and play lookout at the same time. “Safer for everyone, kid.”

“Come on, give him a break!” Honeybee pipes up. “Nico will be amazing.”

Rook and Giddy snort, but they don’t contradict Honeybee’s assessment, I notice. As for Nico, he can’t wait to turn back to her, flipping the bird at Pony before he does. I watch Honeybee and Nico’s interaction with a small smile.

Lucky kids. Life is uncomplicated for them.

“Hey, Max! Scoot over,” Rook says in my ear. I let him out of the bench seat so he can move down closer to Honeybee, leaving an empty space next to me, and due to the shuffling and resettling of the crew, Bricker has to slide into it.

“Make room, I guess,” Bricker says as he presses up next to me, his tone light but strained. Our bodies are snug against each other, the crowded table not allowing for personal space. I feel the warmth of his thigh against mine and my mind helpfully supplies a memory of his hot skin moving against mine as I kissed him. He was like a furnace; we both were, on fire for each other—

I take a long drink of my beer and try to think about something else. Anything else.

“Rook,” Bricker calls across me, and now it’s even worse, because his face is so close, “you better not be drinking those goddamn energy drinks on the day.”

“Come on, Bricker,” Rook grins, “they’re all healthy and shit!”

“Kid’s gonna have a heart attack before he’s twenty-five,” Bricker grumbles, taking a swig of his beer.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye, watching as his throat works to swallow. “Aren’t you just on twenty-five yourself?”

He looks at me like he knows exactly what I’m really asking. “I’m twenty-eight,” he says at last.

What’s that thing I heard once about acceptable age gaps? Half my age plus, what, seven? So that would make it...

Shit. Still at least three years short.

Focus, Pedretti. Get a grip.

“Twenty-eight, huh? Okay, grandpa,” I say, trying to shake off my thoughts. “Well, Rook’s young; he can handle the sugar.”

“Easy for you to say,” Bricker huffs, “you’re not the one who has to deal with him when he’s bouncing off the walls.”

“Apparently I am,” I counter. “Since I’ll be on the dance floor during this upcoming party.” I know why Bricker wants me on the bank floor with Giddy and Rook and now Nico, too. He thinks I’ll keep them calm while the job goes down, make sure neither they nor any innocents get hurt. That’s *my* plan, certainly, and I like that Bricker is smart enough to use me that way.

Bricker just raises an amused eyebrow, but the spark in his eyes suggests he enjoys our banter.

Our thighs remain pressed together beneath the table, a constant reminder of just how close we are. But Bricker is still angry with me, and I can’t let myself forget that. This bank job, it’s crucial—and not only for the Esposito Family. If the crew can hit PacSyn where it hurts, that’s good for the Castellanis, too. So I need to prove my loyalty to Bricker, to the Espositos, even if it means staying offline with my own Boss.

Even if it means denying my own desires.

Every time our eyes meet, I picture a rubber band stretched to its limit. And then I catch Delligatti eyeing us with a mix of curiosity and concern, and I stare hard into my drink, hoping he doesn’t ask any questions.

“Weather was good today,” Bricker eventually says, breaking the silence between us. His voice is stilted, the conversation forced. Good weather in LA is hardly something to comment on. But I suppose the crew will notice something if we sit here ignoring each other.

“Yep,” I offer. “It was.”

“Heard we’re due for some heavy rain, though.”

“Yeah. I heard the same.”

I’m relieved when the door to the bar swings open with a loud crash against the wall, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

Relieved, that is, until I see who’s on the other side of it.

Julian Castellani.

CHAPTER 19

JULIAN SAUNTERS INTO THE BAR, his mere presence sending a wave of mutters throughout the establishment. It's an Italian-owned bar, and even those not in the Family business know exactly who Julian Castellani is. Sandro's younger brother has a reputation that precedes him—a ruthless assassin who enjoys the thrill of the kill a little too much.

I quite like him, although he's threatened to kill me more than once. It's the *way* he does it. He's got a lot of charm, and that bright Hollywood smile of his goes a long way.

“Oh, *shit*,” I hear Rook squeak. He stares at me in horror, and I know what he's thinking: that I might have told Julian about Rook and Giddy trash-talking him the first day we met. I give Rook a quick, reassuring shake of the head, but he sinks down low in his chair as Julian looks around, locks eyes with me, then walks up to our table.

“Well, well, well, so *this* is where the Espositos like to drink,” Julian says loudly. “Mind if I join you?” He drags a chair up to the head of the table and sits, uninvited. He greets everyone with a disarming grin, but the crew stays silent. “Pedretti!” Julian exclaims. “What an *absolute coincidence* to see you here. I've been meaning to check up on you. You see, Sandro's worried about you—no contact, no updates. He wanted to make sure you're still alive and kicking. We miss your face, old friend.”

My hands grip hard around my pint glass as I force a smile. “I'm fine, Julian. No need to worry.”

Bricker turns to look at me, and his eyes are a cold shower, dousing any lingering heat between us.

“Of course, of course,” Julian replies, his eyes flicking between Bricker and me. “Just making sure our favorite security expert is doing alright. Well—aren’t you going to introduce me to your new friends?”

Underneath the table, my leg starts to bounce, and I press down on it to make it stop. The situation is spiraling out of control, and I need to find a way to regain it before things become even more dangerous.

For all of us.

Bricker’s neck has gone red, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he glares at me. “I guess you showed us where your loyalties lie, huh?” he snaps.

The rest of the crew sit in shocked silence at Bricker’s outburst, except for Delligatti.

He smiles.

“Bricker,” I say, forcing my voice to remain calm and steady, “there’s been a misunderstanding. Julian—” I glance at him and sigh at his expectant smile. “How about we step away for a moment to discuss this?”

“Yeah,” Bricker snarls. “Why don’t we?”

As Bricker and Julian follow me to a quiet corner of the bar, I can feel the rest of the crews’ eyes on us. Conversation begins again, but it’s not as free or loud as before.

“Julian,” I say, turning to him, “you can tell Sandro I’m fine and that I’m doing my job. You didn’t need to chase me up.”

Julian smirks, looking between Bricker and me, and takes a long breath through his nose. “Mm,” he says thoughtfully. “And is your job the *only* thing you’re doing?”

“Enough.” My patience is already wearing thin.

“It’s Fabrizio, isn’t it? Fabrizio Soldano,” Julian says to Bricker.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Bricker shoots back, “but I go by ‘Bricker.’”

“Do you know, I think I prefer ‘Fabrizio Soldano,’” Julian says, his voice honeyed and condescending. “I have a question for you, Fabrizio Soldano. Do you have any idea how valuable Pedretti is? To my brother? To *me*?” There’s a veiled threat behind his words, and I see Bricker’s fists clench at his sides.

“Alright,” I interject, before things escalate further. “Let’s all just cool off. Julian, I appreciate your concern, but everything is fine. And Bricker, I didn’t know Julian was going to pull this stunt.”

“It’s true, he didn’t,” Julian supplies, as though trying to be helpful.

For a long moment, Bricker says nothing. “There’s something you should keep in mind, Castellani,” he says at last to Julian. “Pedretti belongs to *me* for the time being. Until I’m done with him. And if you want him back early, you’ll have to go grovel to Anna-Vittoria.”

I do a double take at the possessive edge in Bricker’s voice, and Julian raises his eyebrows as a slow smile spreads over his face. “Oh, *Fabrizio*. Never mind. I don’t have *your* sort of prior claim. You just make sure to take good care of my Pedretti.” He leans in close. “Because if anything happens to him, it won’t be my brother you’ll have to answer to.”

“Cut it out,” I say wearily, pushing Julian back a little. “Come on, now, that’s enough.”

“If *you* say so, Pedretti,” Julian says, “then alright. But just remember, Fabrizio Soldano: I will be very unhappy if anything happens to Pedretti.”

With that parting threat, Julian sweeps out of the bar, leaving Bricker and me in silence, staring after him. I try not to cringe as I see the crew staring avidly at us.

“Pedretti,” Bricker begins, cold as ice now, “have you been feeding the Castellanis information?”

“I haven’t had any contact with the Castellanis since I joined your crew—that one attempt notwithstanding. My only focus

is you. And the crew, of course,” I add quickly.

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because if I was a double agent, I’d be doing a pretty terrible job at it. And Julian Castellani wouldn’t be waltzing in here making a big fucking fuss in your face, would he?”

“Damn it, Max,” Bricker mutters, rubbing a hand over his face. “Every time I think maybe you’re *not* full of shit, you go on and do something to make me change my mind again.” It’s the first time he’s sounded normal since the morning he found the radio I was building. I don’t even want to point out that Julian showing up isn’t something *I* did.

Behind him, I see Tank and Jazz getting up from the table, heading our way. “Heads up,” I mutter, just before they get in hearing distance.

“Cap,” Tank says, drawing Bricker’s attention, “I don’t know what the fuck Julian Castellani said to you, but I wanna remind you: he’s an asshole, and Pedretti saved your life during the last job. That’s gotta count for something, whatever you’re thinking.”

Jazz nods in agreement. “Tank’s right. Max has been an asset to this crew. Maybe it’s time we start treating him like one?” Her implication is clear. She wants Bricker to quit icing me out.

Bricker studies them for a moment, then waves them away before turning back to me. “I’ll still be keeping a close eye on you every step of the way,” he says to me in a low voice. “And if that psycho comes near my crew again—”

“He won’t.” Julian made his point. He won’t be back.

I’m *pretty* sure he won’t be back.

There’s something almost vulnerable beneath Bricker’s strong exterior as he stands there looking at me. “I can’t trust you,” he finally says. “But I can still use you. And I’m warning you, Pedretti—if you fuck this up for us, there’ll be hell to pay, and Psycho Ken won’t be around to help you.”

He stalks off, sitting next to Delligatti when he reaches the table. Van tries to ask what went down, but Bricker shrugs him off. I return to the drinks and conversation, hoping we've put the matter to rest.

I'm optimistic like that.

We don't stay at the bar much longer, and Bricker is silent the whole way home, the whole way up to seeing me into my bedroom, the whole way through another rough pat-down. I let him do it, because maybe it'll make him feel better.

And because maybe I don't mind having his hands all over me, even if he hates me.

He doesn't even return my goodnight afterward, just locks me in again. I stare at the locked door and I sigh. I'm sure Julian meant well—he sometimes does—but I wish he hadn't done what he did.

And the next day, as soon as we arrive at the Valley house, I'm faced with the fallout of Julian's actions.

"Alright, children," Bricker calls out as soon as he's through the door, "change of plans. Gather round." He leads us to the table, spreading out the blueprints and maps.

The response is muted. No one likes the idea of a change in the plan, especially one week out from the date. But Bricker seems determined.

"Since Nico's going inside, I decided Pedretti would be better off on the police scanners. Van can lead crowd control with the kiddies while Tank, Jazz and I get into the vault."

"What the fuck?" Pony and Delligatti say together.

For different reasons, I think.

"Pony's got enough to worry about," Bricker goes on. "I don't want our wheelman distracted. So Pedretti will stay with Pony and review the police scanners, feeding us information."

Rook, Giddy and Nico look taken aback. “But—” Rook begins.

“Van can run the floor with you three,” Bricker says, not looking at anyone. He’s staring at the blueprints. “We don’t need him down at the vault.”

Even Van looks like he wants to argue. I know there’s no point in me saying anything, so I wait to see if anyone else will.

Nope.

Bricker finally looks up, straight at me, daring me to disagree. I just nod, trying to keep my expression neutral as I process his decision. On one hand, it keeps me out of harm’s way, which will undoubtedly placate Julian Castellani. Maybe that’s one reason Bricker’s doing this.

But I think I know the real reason. Keeping me in the getaway van means that Bricker won’t have to trust me in the thick of things.

“Sounds like a plan,” I reply evenly. I brought it on myself with that stupid radio.

Pony gives a hollow laugh. “Guess I’ll have some company after all, huh? You and me, Peds.”

“Better behave yourself, Pony,” I shoot back, forcing a smile even though the last thing I want is to banter with him. “I’ll have enough on my plate without dealing with your shenanigans.”

“Hey, I’m always on my best behavior,” he protests, feigning innocence as he raises his hands in mock surrender. The rest of the crew chuckles, but it does little to ease the tension.

“Last week for prep,” Bricker reminds us, knocking on the wooden table twice for luck. “Get your shit together. Next week, we get it done. For Maestra.”

“For Maestra,” the rest of them chorus.

CHAPTER 20

MAX

ONE WEEK LATER, the engine hums under us as Pony drives the converted van toward First National, a steady rhythm that nevertheless does little to calm my nerves. Pony's grip on the wheel is hard, his jaw set, perspiration beading on his temple. When I glance back at the crew, they're each lost in their own thoughts, preparing for the job ahead.

Except Rook. He looks bright-eyed and excited.

"Hey Max," Rook says, leaning forward and laying a hand on the back of the front seat to talk to me. He tries to hide his nerves with a cheeky grin. "Why did the bank robber take a bath before his heist? Because he wanted to make a clean getaway."

I chuckle, though the joke is bad—and old, God knows. But it helps ease the tension a little, and that's a good thing. "You know, when this is over, I'll buy you a beer. Teach you some better jokes."

"You're on," he answers, grinning as he settles back into his seat. My eyes linger on him for a moment longer; the kid's got guts, I'll give him that. I was a fucking wreck my first time on a big job like this.

"Coming up," Pony grunts.

"Alright," Bricker says, looking around the cramped interior and meeting the gaze of each crew member. "Stay focused. Stick to the plan. Don't panic."

"And good luck," I add. Rook leans forward to fist-bump me.

As Pony pulls up outside the bank, the crew members pull down their masks and then spill out of the back doors. I watch them go, breathing slow and mindfully, and I turn my attention to the police scanner.

“Relax, Peds,” Pony says, although he’s the one white-knuckling the wheel. “They’ve got this.”

I don’t reply, my eyes scanning the area outside the bank. That’s when I spot it—a figure lurking in the shadows across the street, his gaze fixed on the entrance of the First National Bank.

“Hey,” I say sharply. “You see that guy over there?”

Pony gives him a glance and then scoffs. “Man, you’re paranoid. There are always people around here. Stop worrying.”

Paranoid? Pony must be living in a different reality. I keep an eye on the suspicious figure between glances at the bank. Every crackle on the police radio makes my blood pressure ratchet up, but nothing yet about First National.

The seconds tick away like hours.

Something’s wrong. I *know* it. My instincts are screaming at me to pay attention to the lurking stranger, but all he’s doing is just that: lurking.

I glance sideways at Pony, who’s chewing on his lip, betraying his own apprehension. “What do you think they—” Pony begins, but the muffled sound of gunfire cuts him off. Pony’s eyes widen, his fingers tightening around the steering wheel.

The crew were under strict orders. No gunfire unless absolutely necessary.

“Shit!” Pony gasps out. He lets off the handbrake—

This fucker is going to flee. I can smell it on him, the instinct to run. “Wait!” I grab the wheel and yank it hard to stop him, then lock eyes. “I’m going in there to help them. You wait right here.”

“Screw that, man, I’m—”

“If you’re not here when we come out, I swear to Christ I’ll send Julian Castellani after you.”

Pony gulps. Then he nods jerkily, hands twisting around the wheel.

I kick open the door, run up the bank steps, and enter my worst nightmare.

The scene is a battleground: Giddy is propped up seated against a desk to the side, hyperventilating as Tank presses hard against a wound up around his collarbone. Nico is lying motionless behind a desk on the other side, Jazz leaning over him, shaking him. Honeybee is with them, but she’s just staring into space, drenched in blood.

And in the middle of the bank floor is Rook. He’s not moving and there’s a puddle of red around him that tells me the worst kind of news.

“Max, *down!*” Bricker shouts, just as a new hail of bullets starts up—all aimed right at me, standing like a fucking idiot there in front of the glass doors.

I scramble toward Jazz in a shower of glass fragments and take out my gun before peeking out. Bricker and Van are pinned down behind an upturned table to the side, exchanging gunfire with...

A PacSyn crew.

There are no other people in this building except for our crew and theirs.

No customers. No staff.

Another setup.

Bricker catches my eye, grim despair written clear across his face. “Shoulda run, Max,” he calls. “No point in you dying here with us.”

“Don’t fucking say that!” Jazz snaps. She’s given up trying to get Nico to come to and is just trying to stop the bleeding now. He’s as pale as the marble floor beneath him.

I look back to Bricker and Van. Bricker holds up a hand, signaling me to stay put. Then he nods at Van and they make their next move. Bricker puts his gun around the side of the table and takes three shots, tempting a PacSyn member to pop up and try to take him.

Van gets the guy neatly through the chest.

Bricker holds up his gun to me with open hands, indicating that he's out, then thumbs at Van. Both of them. They're both out of ammunition.

I take out my own gun, and with the other hand, point where I want them to go. They need to get closer to the door if we're going to make it out of here. Bricker and Van glance at each other, as if they have any other choices, then nod at me.

I do a silent three-two-one countdown with my fingers.

Then I lean out and shoot. It's sloppy and it's risky, but something somewhere is on our side for a few seconds, because Bricker and Van make it to the desk where Tank seems to be keeping Giddy's blood in his body through sheer force of will.

The cops will be here soon, if PacSyn haven't paid them off. Hell, even if they have, there's no way to keep this under wraps.

"You okay?" I call across.

"Yeah," Bricker grunts. "We're good. Nico?" But his eyes have already traveled past me to where Jazz is leaning over Nico. Bricker's head falls back against the desk as he looks back at me, regret and grief in his eyes. "Should've had you in here from the start, huh?"

I ignore that. We can play the blame game later. Tank is still trying to stop Giddy's bleeding, but when I glance at Jazz with a silent question about Nico, she gives a very small shrug.

Time is ticking. We have to get Nico and Giddy out. "Honeybee," I murmur. "You okay?" She still sits by Nico, staring blankly ahead, her face splashed with blood. PacSyn seem to be regrouping for now, which means we have a chance to run. But Honeybee is out of it.

I reach over and touch her, and she looks at my hand on her arm as though she doesn't even recognize her own body. "Honeybee, can you tell me what happened?"

"Nico...he pushed me out of the way," she whispers. "He took the bullet meant for me."

"Okay," I tell her in a level voice. "You want to make sure that counts for something, right?"

She looks at me at last, lips trembling, then down at Nico. "Yeah."

"Then you need to make sure you get out of here, safe."

"But Nico—"

"Nico's coming too," I assure her. "So you need to get your head in the game so you can help. Right?"

"Right." The strength is returning to her voice. "I-I have my gun here..."

"You give that to me," I suggest. "And you help Jazz get Nico up, so when I tell you to run, you can run. Okay?"

Jazz is already pulling Nico up, winding his arm around her neck. Nico's out of it completely, a dead weight, and I worry that even together, Honeybee and Jazz will have a tough time with him.

But I have to get Rook. I'm not leaving him here.

"Max, you need to make a move," Bricker warns, moving into a crouching position. "Get Jazz, Honeybee and Nico out of here. Tank will take Giddy."

"What about you?" Van demands.

"I'm getting Rook," Bricker says. His voice is firm. "And you're going to give me cover."

"Man, I'm out," he reminds Bricker. "No cover."

I slide Honeybee's gun hard across the floor, and Bricker hands it to Van. "We get him together," I call softly to Bricker. "Okay?"

There's no time to argue, and thankfully, Bricker doesn't. He just nods.

"On three," Van says, and counts us down.

We both bolt as soon as Van hits one, and I hope like hell the cover will be enough. Rook's eyes flutter open when we reach him, and he even tries to smile, but it's wiped off his face as soon as Bricker and I pull him up off the ground.

A neck shot, and he's lost way too much blood. I have to focus on not slipping in it as Bricker and I drag him toward the exit. Rook's weight slows us down, and I can feel his blood soaking through my clothes. I try not to think about it, to just focus on getting him out of here before Van runs out of bullets.

Again.

"Fuck, *fuck*," Bricker grunts, but we keep moving.

"Go, go, *go*," Tank hollers. He's got Giddy practically tucked under his arm, and in the other hand, he has his gun. PacSyn are starting to make some noise again, so I put my head down and drag, keeping pace with Bricker. Rook, the poor bastard, is getting dragged right through glass, but I'm pretty sure he doesn't even notice.

We burst out of the bank's entrance, the fresh air and sunshine a sharp contrast to the stifling atmosphere inside.

"Rook! Stay with us!" I snap at him, as Bricker hoists him up. Somehow Rook's held onto his gun this whole time, so I take it out of his hand and look around the street.

Pony's still there, staring at us through the windscreen. Pale. Astonished.

But just as we clear the exit, a figure steps out from behind a nearby car, gun aimed straight at us. It's that suspicious guy I spotted earlier—he must be with PacSyn.

"Shit!" Bricker hisses, just as I holler, "*Down!*"

I shove Bricker and Rook to the ground just as the PacSyn guy takes his shot, diving on top of them both.

And then Pony guns the engine, taking off with a squeal of rubber. For a second I think he's splitting on us, but then I see it: he's driving like a madman toward the PacSyn thug. The shooter dives out of the way just before Pony strikes him, but as soon as his body hits the pavement, I take careful aim and fire, spilling his brains all over the sidewalk.

"Come on!" Bricker shouts, peeling himself off the concrete, gesturing for the crew to pile into the back of the van. With Bricker's help, I lift Rook inside and climb in after them.

"Go, go, go!" Bricker yells, and Pony slams his foot down on the accelerator, peeling away from the scene.

"*Where?*" Pony asks in a panic.

"Hospital," I bark at him. "Like we planned."

During the planning sessions, it became clear that the Espositos have a lot of pull at one particular hospital in the area, and even though Pony had a momentary blank, he seems to have remembered himself now, taking a wild left on the next street.

The hospital was a last resort plan, if the worst happened.

And the worst *has* happened.

Rook is in Bricker's arms, and Bricker shifts him up, hugging him tight. "You're okay," he says in Rook's ear. "You'll be okay."

Rook just coughs up blood in response. I crawl over to them and Rook's wet eyes meet mine, a flicker of hope in their depths. "Hey, kid," I say, and smile. "You gotta pull through. I owe you a beer, remember?"

Rook manages a weak smile, but his breath is ragged and his mouth is bloody. The life is draining from him with each passing second.

"Stay with me, Rook," Bricker pleads, hoisting him up again.

My heart is breaking for both of them. Bricker is desperate, despairing, but Rook is getting weaker by the moment. "Stay awake, buddy," I say, trying to sound reassuring despite the

sorrow bubbling inside me. I already know how this will end.
“You hear me? Stay awake.”

“Max...” he whispers, more blood spilling from the corner of his mouth. I lean in close to hear him. “Thanks for...getting me out...”

But when I lean back up to tell him he has Bricker to thank for that, it's too late. His life has slipped away, leaving an empty void where that cheeky grin used to be.

CHAPTER 21

BRICKER

IN THE BACK of the van, I cradle Rook against my shoulder, his warm blood seeping through my clothes, and I stare into his glassy eyes as time stops.

Something in my head clicks over and over. Undo. Undo.

Why can't I undo this?

But this is reality. Rook is dead. There's no undoing it. His body is limp in my arms, and Max's head drops too, eyes closing as he rubs a hand over his face.

No, no, no...

I can't look at the faces of the crew around me. This is my fault. This is on me.

"Bricker," Max says quietly, resting a hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

I can't speak. Can't even nod.

Rook trusted me. They all did. And I sit here covered in my crew's blood, but *I'm* just fine. I don't have a hole through me.

I'm not bleeding out.

"Come on, now," Max says softly, loosening my arms around Rook. "Let's lay him down, okay?" I let him tug my arms open and we lower Rook to the floor of the van, Max stripping off his own sweater to spread over Rook's face. I can finally look away from Rook then, staring up at the ceiling of the van as it speeds away from the bank, leaving nothing but chaos and death in its wake.

“Nico’s not good,” Max tells me in an undertone. “Giddy got shot too, but I think he’ll be okay.”

I pull my attention back and stare at Max. He puts a hand on my shoulder again.

“Bricker,” he says quietly. “They need you.”

I look up to see everyone staring at me. Everyone except Nico. Because he’s unconscious. Unconscious and probably going to die, just like Rook...

I shake it off. I need to get my shit together, fast. “How’s Nico?” I ask, turning to Jazz. Honeybee is crying silently, the tears just streaming down her cheeks as she sits there, making tracks through the blood on her face.

“Not good, Cap. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

I nod, feeling a sense of urgency wash over me. I need to take control of the situation. I’m Capo, I remind myself. *I’m Capo*. And these are my people. “Not conscious?”

“Not since a few seconds after he got shot.”

“We’re here!” Pony shouts over his shoulder, as the hospital comes into view.

I start giving out orders—get the wounded out and into the hands of professionals, let the doctors do their work, although I can see Tank’s not going to leave Giddy’s side. But they need to hear it from me so they shake off this sense of unreality that’s settled over us all.

“Is Rook going to be alright?” Honeybee sobs, just as Pony brakes hard in the emergency bay. I don’t know how the hell to respond to that. Surely she doesn’t think...?

Thank God for Max, who intervenes. “Your job is to get Nico into the emergency room, okay, Honeybee?” He leans in, drawing her attention. “We all focus on our jobs right now, everything will be okay.”

It’s the most blatant lie I’ve ever heard, but it seems to work, to break through the shock that has her in a dream. Honeybee nods fast, and then the doors to the back of the van are flying

open, and Tank lifts Giddy in his arms, shouting, “Need some help here!”

Someone in blue scrubs runs out, then yells over their shoulder, something about a stretcher.

I turn back to Max. “Max, can you...can you take Rook away from here? I don’t want them to...”

“Of course. Where should we take him?” Max asks, and I have no answer. “Pony and I will take him back to the Lair,” Max suggests quickly, watching over my shoulder as more people in scrubs start appearing.

If they get any closer, see inside the van... “Yeah. Take him home.”

“You go on, now,” Max urges me. “Stay with your crew.”

I hope he knows how fucking grateful I am. I can’t stand thinking of leaving Rook alone and cold in the hospital, no friendly faces around him, strangers looking him over.

Judging him.

It’s me they should be judging.

“Thanks,” I spit out, and then I clamber out of the van after my crew.

It’s a long time later before I make it back to the Valley. The smell of blood and death is heavy in the house as I walk in. I stop still for a moment when I see that Max and Pony have laid out Rook’s body on the table, lying on the old quilt we used to have on the beat-up sofa, and covered head to foot with a sheet.

I keep walking, trying to swallow down my anguish, but I feel like a beaten dog. Van comes in behind me. It took all of Anna-Vittoria’s hefty influence to keep the hospital from calling the cops on us, and the two of us are still covered in the aftermath of the botched heist, soaked in blood.

Rook's blood. I'm soaked in *Rook's* blood, while he lies there unmoving under the sheet on the table.

"Thank fuck you two are back," Pony says anxiously, rushing over. "What's the news?"

"Giddy will be alright," I announce, trying to find some semblance of reassurance in my own words. "But Nico..." I have to stop, swallow down my sob. "Nico's unconscious still. They said...well, it doesn't look good."

Max, ever the stoic, just nods—but Pony swears loudly, slamming his fist into the wall. A hole is left behind, but none of us pay it any mind.

"The Maestra's at the hospital," I continue, my voice cracking on the kid's name. "Max, you and I are going to the Villa tomorrow to debrief."

Van's eyes narrow. "Why does the Castellani get to go with you?"

"It's not a fucking social call, Van," I say tiredly. I go over to the quiltless sofa and sit on it. The blood on me is long dry, and the sofa will get destroyed soon enough anyway.

This house is no more use to us. We'll raze it after we clear it out.

Van is still going, voice rising and rising. "But he ain't even an Esposito! And I'm your second! So why does that Castellani get to have your back when—"

"I don't know why she wants him there, and I don't care," I snap back. "That's what Anna-Vittoria wants, that's what we do. You want to argue with her, be my fucking guest."

"Listen," Van tries, putting on a conciliatory tone that makes my teeth ache. "I just want to make sure you have someone there to look out for you, Bricker."

"Frankly, I think I'd rather have Pedretti there. At least he can keep his cool."

Van stares at me for a moment and then turns his back and leaves, the only sounds the slam of the door and the screeching

tires as he drives away. I glance over at Max, who remains calm, hands in his pockets, but there's disapproval in his face.

I shouldn't have said that to Van. I regretted it even while it was coming out, and now I feel like an asshole. But people are dead and dying. What does it matter whether Van comes with me, when I'm the one who needs to take the blame?

"The Family will keep all this quiet," I say, after a pause. "Anna-Vittoria's close with the hospital administrator, not to mention the D.A., and the cops don't care about a little internecine war."

On the contrary. It thins out the herd for them.

Pony, who is fidgeting in a corner, looks over at Rook's body, and then at Max.

"Pony, you should go on home," Max says. "We'll take care of Rook. Right, Bricker?"

Suddenly I want nothing more than to be alone with Max—and with Rook. I want to say my sorries and my goodbyes. So I nod. "Go get some rest, Pony."

"Listen," Pony says, then pauses, looking doubtfully at me and then Max. "Maybe this isn't the time..."

"Whatever it is, can it wait?" Max asks softly.

Pony gives a fast nod and is gone a second later. I'm just grateful for Max's presence right now. That quiet pragmatism is what I need right now. But he looks at me a little sadly.

"You think I was too hard on Van," I say.

"I think he's your buddy, and he wants to have your back," Max says evenly. "But you've got a lot of other things on your mind right now. He'll be okay. So will you."

"But Rook won't." My throat feels thick, like there's a fist inside me trying to punch its way out. "Rook won't be okay, and that's on me."

Max crosses the floor and sits down next to me on the sofa. "The best we can do for him now is make sure he gets back to his people. Do they know?"

I shake my head. “I’ll have to call them,” I say, dropping my face into my hands. “Oh, Christ. I’ll have to tell his Nonna that her grandson is dead. And she—she raised him.”

Max puts an arm on my back. “It’ll be hard,” he says. “But it’s the right thing to do. The only thing to do.”

“Now?” I ask, almost pleading for him to say no. But he nods.

“Better do it now before they find out some other way,” he says gently.

“I want to...say my own goodbyes to Rook first,” I force out.

Max stands at once. “I’ll wait in the kitchen,” he says. “Put on some coffee, maybe.” On his way out, he stops by Rook’s body himself, bows his head for a silent moment, then crosses himself and leaves me alone in the room.

I go over and pull back the sheet covering Rook’s face. His eyes are closed now. If not for the blood on his face, for the slackness of his jaw, he’d look almost peaceful. But I know better. I know the fear and pain he felt in his final hour, and the guilt yawns before me.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, swallowing hard. “I should’ve protected you.”

Max brings me out a coffee heavily laced with bourbon, and after I drink that I get it together enough to call Rook’s grandmother. The wail she gives when she hears the news is too much for me. By the time I hang up, I’m crouched on the floor with my head in my knees, trying not to break down completely.

“Hey.” Max’s voice is the only thing that pulls me back a little from that abyss before me. “Come sit down. I’ll call the funeral home, if you tell me which one you guys use.”

There was a part of me that worried Van was right, that Van *should* be the one here with me, helping me cope with all the shit I’ve caused. But the thing about Van is, I can’t show any

soft underbelly without him rushing to turn me over again, make sure the hard shell gets the blast instead.

I get it. Most of the time I *prefer* it. And God knows why I feel okay about looking vulnerable around a Castellani, of all people.

But there's something about Max that tells me it's safe.

So I let him pull me over to the sofa and I sit there, huddled up, while I listen to Max calling the funeral home, and I breathe in the scent of all that blood.

CHAPTER 22

BRICKER

WHEN THE FUNERAL home finally arrives, they take Rook's body away with barely a word, except of condolences. They're the people Anna-Vittoria has on retainer, and they're used to this kind of thing.

Afterward, I stand in the middle of the living room and think about how just yesterday, the crew was here, joking and laughing.

"Bricker," Max says. "Let's get you home. Cleaned up."

All I can do is look at him. Max picks up my jacket, the one I left here this morning before the heist, and puts it around my shoulders before feeling in the pocket for my keys. He guides me out of the house, into the car, and then he gets in the driver's seat.

We get back to my house in silence. As we pull into the driveway, I finally turn to Max. "Listen. There's something you need to know. Nico is...well, he's Anna-Vittoria's son."

Max's eyes widen, and he leans back in his seat, but he doesn't say a word.

"And there's more," I go on raggedly. "Anna-Vittoria's been suspicious for a while that PacSyn had turned someone in my crew. I didn't want to hear it, told her no way. That's why I was so pissed when she put *you* on my team. I figured you'd either report back to her, or maybe she was prodding the beast, you know? Seeing what would happen if she threw a curveball. But...she must be right. You were right, too. You picked it, fast."

Max listens intently as I lay it all out for him, his eyes never leaving mine. Then he puts his hand on mine, drawing my attention to him. “Bricker, you need to hear me,” Max says. “I am not, nor have I ever been, reporting back to anyone about you and your crew.”

“I know,” I say, taking a deep breath. “I guess I’ve always known that, even if I...” I look down at his hand on mine. “You risked your life today for all of us. Again. I know you’re trustworthy, despite...”

“Despite being a Castellani.”

I shock myself by smiling, just a tiny smile, a barely-there one. But still a smile. “Yeah.”

He smiles back.

I let my head fall back against the car seat. “You got any idea who it might be?” I ask helplessly. “Because I just can’t believe it of any of them.”

“I don’t know,” he says, with something that sounds like regret.

We’re quiet for another moment and then I say, “Thank you. For...” I have to stop before I break. If I break, I don’t think I’ll be able to put myself back together.

“You’re welcome,” he says.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Instead, I get out of the car and go into the house. “I’m home,” I tell it automatically.

And then I stand there, feeling like time has no meaning. What do I possibly do now? What could I possibly *want* to do?

“Bricker,” Max says softly, shutting the door behind us. I turn to him. He reaches out for my face, cups it, and rests his forehead against mine. We stand there like that, breathing in tandem, and I let myself focus on that.

I’m breathing. I’m breathing still, as unfair as it is.

Max pulls back a little, then takes my hand. There’s an electric connection between us but I hate myself for feeling it. For

entertaining anything—*anything*—after what happened today. But I can't pull away.

I need this. I need the human contact.

I need...him.

"You've never lost someone, have you?" he asks. "Like this, I mean. One of your own."

I shake my head slowly.

"Let's get you into a shower." He turns me toward the stairs, and, with his hand in the small of my back, we go up them together, then into the guest bathroom along the landing. I stand there in the white, tiled room that I don't think I've ever used before. I'm compliant, docile, while he unbuttons my shirt, stiff with dry blood, and pulls it off me. He kneels to unlace my boots, helping me pull out my feet, then removes my socks.

He stands again to unthread my belt, then looks into my face with his fingers hovering over the button of my jeans. "You okay with taking these off?"

I just stare mutely back.

"I can leave if you—" I grab his arm, and the words die in his throat. I can't speak. But I don't need to. "Okay," he says gently. "Okay."

He strips me down all the way, but there's nothing sexy about it, not when I look down my body and see all those rust-colored stains from a young man who won't ever get to laugh again, or drink beers with the crew again, or kiss his Nonna again.

And Nico...

Oh, God, Nico might die, too.

And it's all my fault.

Max starts the shower and then strips off himself before guiding me under the showerhead. He stands behind me, directs my head under the warm stream, and I close my eyes as the water turns pink, swirling around my feet. He massages the

blood out of my hair, turns me around to sluice me down, thorough but gentle, so that when I open my eyes again, the water is no longer stained with my failures.

I feel numb, even when Max pulls me into a hug. I just stand there, grabbing hard at his shoulders, wishing that none of this had ever happened.

We stay there a long time, his hand soothing up and down my back occasionally, until I feel like I can let go without collapsing. He pulls me out, dries me down, and swaddles me up in the fluffy guest robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

“You need to take care of yourself tonight,” he says. “No drinking.”

I give a short laugh that threatens to turn into a sob. “I plan to get smashed enough to forget my own name, Max. Sorry.”

“Really,” he tells me gently, “that’s not a good idea, not if you’re seeing the Maestra tomorrow. And you need to sleep. You don’t wanna be in your head all night.” He hasn’t stopped touching me since we got home, and I’m so relieved by it, like if he took his hand away, I’d spiral into nothingness.

But the idea of sleeping when Rook is lying cold on a mortician’s slab doesn’t sit well. “Nah. I’m gonna sit up. Head’s not in the right place to sleep.”

“Take it from someone who’s been there. Don’t sit up all night torturing yourself. Please.”

“You want me to torture myself lying awake in bed instead?”

It provokes a half-smile. “If it makes it any better, I could lie awake there with you. But I don’t have to, if you don’t—”

“No,” I say quickly. “I want you there. That...” I sigh. “That might help.”

I have to admit, Max has a point. Getting into the bed, just letting my muscles relax after I’ve been tense all day...it does

help. I can breathe a little easier, for one thing.

But I figure there's another heads up I owe Max. He's lying on his side facing me, and I'm on my back staring straight up at the dark ceiling. His hand is on my shoulder, warm and solid. "Listen," I say into the dark, "after I see Anna-Vittoria tomorrow, I probably won't be Capo anymore. Hell, I might not be *alive* anymore, depending on what happens with Nico. But I want you to know that I appreciate your support. And I'll let the Maestra know that you did everything you could to help."

I'm barely even worried about tomorrow. I'm happy to take whatever's coming to me, but Max did nothing wrong.

"She won't kill you," Max murmurs.

I give a scoff. "How do you know?"

"Because she's not stupid. No one in a job like hers is stupid."

I take that in but say nothing, another wave of self-hatred building up inside. "She *should* kill me," I mutter at last. "It's what I deserve."

I put my hands over my face, trying to hide away. From Max, from the truth, from everything. But he just pulls me into a hug.

"Hey," he says in my ear. "You're not responsible for what happened. Everyone in the crew understood the risks, and everyone went in with their eyes open."

"But I'm Capo," I say, my voice muffled by his shoulder. "We all knew what we were getting ourselves into, sure. But it's my responsibility, what happened."

"It's on PacSyn," Max says fiercely. "And those fuckers are going to pay."

It's the first time I've heard him sound like that, like he plans to be the hand of vengeance, and it gets through to me somehow. Makes me fierce, too. "Damn straight."

The ferocious moment between us softens as we keep holding each other, and somehow my lips find their way to his. The kiss is passionate, my emotions pouring out confused and

needy. And then it hits me, blindsiding me: I can feel myself falling for this guy.

Falling for a fucking Castellani old enough to be my father.

A Castellani who has been a rock for me, not just today, but all the days he's been with my crew, no matter how much shit I give him. Van has always been dependable, a capable second-in-command, but he's more like a hype man than a support. He revs up the crew and he cheers me on when I make speeches, and I need that.

But I need this, too.

I need Max's hot breath on my neck and his skilled tongue exploring my mouth. I need his arms around me, pulling me closer and closer, building up the intimacy between us.

I need him to help me forget about everything else...

Rook's lifeless face flashes through my mind.

I squeeze my eyes shut hard, try to focus on Max, on his mouth, on his hands, on how much I want him, but it's impossible.

Nico. Nico lying there at the edge of death...

With a muttered apology, I pull away from Max, the taste of him still lingering on my lips.

"Sorry, it's..." I can't say more, my throat too thick with emotion. Max rests his forehead against mine, his hand caressing the back of my neck.

"It's fine," he says gently, his hand drifting to my shoulder for a moment before he lets a little space between us. "Whatever you need, Bricker. That's what I'm here for."

But he keeps the reassuring contact of his hand on my shoulder. And I want it.

Need it.

I turn on my side and reach back to pull his arm over me. Exhaustion hits hard, a combination of the comforting arm around my middle and the warm shower and the turmoil of the

day. Sleep sneaks up on me, offering a temporary escape, and I gratefully let it take me away.

The next morning, the smell of bacon cooking rouses me from what was a deep, dreamless sleep. I check my phone, relieved to find an update from Jazz. Giddy is fine.

Nico is also doing better, another text informs me, and doctors are more encouraging today about his prognosis.

Relief threads through my veins like a shot of adrenaline, and I get out of bed at once and follow my nose.

Max is in the kitchen, poking around a mound of bacon in the pan.

“Morning,” he greets me with a small smile. “Thought you might want a side of pig for breakfast. Seems to be your favorite.”

“Morning,” I reply, taking a seat at the kitchen table. “And thanks.” As I sip the coffee he brings over, I find myself silently wondering about Van’s reaction yesterday when I told him about being called up with Max to see Anna-Vittoria. The jealousy in his eyes was unmistakable, but I don’t understand why he’s being so *intense* about everything.

Van and I have been tight for years. Decades. He’s my best fucking friend in the world, as well as my right-hand man, and he’s never given the slightest fuck that I’m gay.

But something tells me he wouldn’t be happy to know the kind of thoughts I’m having about Max lately.

I still don’t get why he hates Max so much. Sure, the Castellanis are rivals, but not in any real sense of the word. They stay out of our territory, and we stay out of theirs. Even that business with Vinnie Esposito got cleared up in the end. Seems strange that Van is so dead-set against Max Pedretti for no real reason, especially after Max saved my butt—and Van’s, too, during the armored car heist.

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe Van doesn't like owing a Castellani.

Or maybe he's the mole.

The unbidden thought gives me a physical reaction, turning the coffee sour in my mouth, and I have to go get myself a glass of water to wash away the taste.

No way. Van is loyal as hell.

Well, whatever his problem is, I want to make sure I clear the air with him—once the meeting with Anna-Vittoria is done.

“So I got word from the hospital,” I tell Max as he puts a plate full of bacon between us, and hands me a plate with hot buttered toast. I load it up, add another slice of toast on top, and bite in. “Nico's doing better. Came round early this morning, and they think he'll be okay. Even better, Jazz said Giddy is sitting up and talking and bugging the hell out of Tank.”

“Good,” Max replies, his focus still on picking out particular slices of bacon. “We should pay Anna-Vittoria that visit after breakfast.”

“Yeah,” I say, though my stomach knots at the thought of facing her.

I eat the rest of my breakfast in silence.

CHAPTER 23

MAX

THE DAY IS LESS sunny than usual for LA as Bricker and I step out of his car, the guards of Anna-Vittoria's estate staring at us and saying nothing. There are dark clouds on the horizon, that change in weather that's been threatening for a while now.

The house looms over us, imposing in a different way than when I first saw it. The Villa reminds me today how implacable and disciplined and—yes—how bloodthirsty our Roman ancestors were. I told Bricker last night that his Maestra wouldn't kill him, but I said it without really knowing if it was true. I *believe* it to be true, because I understand how Sandro Castellani thinks.

But Anna-Vittoria is not Sandro.

At least Bricker isn't going into the Colosseum alone. If she tries anything...

I glance at him as the four guards at the door surround us, their hands swift and efficient as they pat us down, no courtesy wave-through this time. The cold glint in their eyes is a warning of what could happen if I resist, but I have no plans to make things difficult. After we're cleared, we're marched into the house without a word, led briskly through the hallways.

All business today, no show.

The closer we get to Anna-Vittoria's salon, the more determined I am to make her understand that Bricker isn't to blame for Nico or Giddy's shooting, or Rook's death.

Rook. God, that poor kid. I fight down the pain when I think of him, those last words. I can't help Rook anymore. But Bricker needs me now.

Finally we arrive at the waiting room, the grand doors to the salon both already thrown open to reveal Anna-Vittoria sitting on the settee in there, dressed in head-to-toe black. She's alone, not even the Shadow with her today.

She rises when she sees us, her eyes as sharp as the stiletto heels she wears. She turns her gaze on Bricker first. I see the strain in her face, the dark circles still peeking through cleverly applied makeup, the pallor of her cheeks even under heavy rouge.

"Fabrizio," Anna-Vittoria says, and takes a step forward. I brace myself—but then she embraces him.

It's not what I expected.

I don't think it's what Bricker was expecting either, because after a moment of shock, he makes a strangled noise that suggests he's trying not to cry. I take a step back to give them some privacy, and Anna-Vittoria gives me a nod at the doors. Understanding her, I turn away to shut them quietly, and then I stand to the side as she takes Bricker to the settee and sits him down, all the while holding him as close as a mother.

"I'm so sorry," she tells him. "So sorry."

"But Nico—" he chokes out.

She gives a little breathless laugh. "Yes, Nico. As his mother, I am furious."

I feel the anger rising in me, but I force myself to remain calm. This is my chance to convince her of Bricker's innocence. Before I can speak, though, she holds up a slight warning hand, silencing me without Bricker seeing it.

"However," she continues, her gaze never leaving Bricker's face, "I knew the risks in placing Nico with your crew. Nico also understood the risks. He is a grown man. He made his choice, just as you did. And though my heart cries out for vengeance—blood for blood—my head is more preoccupied

with the fact that there is a mole in your crew. And *that* is the person I blame. Not you. You understand?”

I’m almost taken aback by the wisdom and restraint she shows. Sandro’s mother would not react like this, I’m pretty sure, if Sandro ever found himself on the wrong end of a bullet. I’m beginning to understand why the Espositos are so fiercely loyal to Anna-Vittoria.

A mother to them all, it seems. And then it hits me, one of the things she looks for in her people. Motherless children. There might be something cunning about that, if I was being uncharitable. Or there might be something loving about it.

It’s hard to tell with Anna-Vittoria.

Bricker, visibly relieved, stammers out an apology for Giddy and Nico’s injuries, and his voice breaks over Rook’s death. It’s poorly phrased but it’s very genuine, and Anna-Vittoria hears him out patiently, though she waves away any blame he lays on himself. “I won’t hear that talk. The responsibility for this mess is PacSyn’s to own. And if they won’t take it, I will be happy to force it on them. So. We have cried together.” And indeed, I can see her eyes are damp. “And we will cry again at Rocco’s funeral—thank you for calling his grandmother, by the way.”

Bricker is crying, unashamed, but he sniffs and rubs his hand over his cheek as he nods at me. “Max helped me,” he mutters. “Max was...amazing.”

Her eyes, when they meet mine, are speculative, but when she says, “Thank you,” she sounds sincere. “The funeral will be next week, fully paid for, of course,” she says, taking Bricker’s hand. “And you will be there, and you will speak in remembrance of him. Then the Family will seek blood for blood. We will have vengeance.”

“Hell *yes* we will,” Bricker says, his tears drying now.

I’m so damn proud of him, of his strength as well as his vulnerability, so that when Anna-Vittoria speaks next, it’s as painful for me to hear as I think it is for Bricker.

“But your crew,” she says, “your work—it’s at an end.”

He pulls back from her. “No.”

“Yes. For now, your crew has been disbanded,” she says softly. “And the Family will seek revenge. But you, Fabrizio, will take some time. Mourn. Reflect. And make yourself ready for when I call on you again.”

I don’t think she’s trying to punish him. I think she’s trying to help him. But Bricker doesn’t see it that way.

“No!” When her eyebrows go up, he backtracks at once. “I mean, of course I’ll do whatever you want me to, but—someone *betrayed* us.”

“Yes. And we will find out who.”

“I will find out who,” he says obstinately.

This is going south. Fast. Her eyes narrow.

I take a step forward. “Maestra, if I may?” She regards me for a long moment before giving a brief nod. “I know Bricker here needs some time, like you say. But he’s smart and he’s capable and he was *there*, working with these people. If one of them’s betrayed you, he’s got the best chance to figure out who.”

“*Please*, Maestra,” Bricker adds after a second, when it seems like she’s considering it. “Whoever it is, they killed one of *mine*. If it was Marty G or any of your other Capos...you’d let *them* handle it. I just want the same chance.”

I wonder then if she was only waiting for Bricker to prove himself by demanding his shot, because she doesn’t look surprised, and she doesn’t look mad about it, either. “Very well,” she says. “Signor Pedretti, of course we will not keep you any longer. You are free to return to your Family, with my thanks—and my apologies.”

“Ma’am,” I say, “if it’s all the same with you, I’d like to stay. While I’ve been here, Bricker’s crew has been my crew, and it doesn’t feel right to walk out on them now in their time of grief.”

She stands. “I’m afraid that decision is not in my hands, Signor Pedretti, but in your Don’s.” I’m about to tell her I’ll

clear it with Sandro myself when she keeps on. “In fact, Don Castellani has inquired after your health.”

“That’s how the Boss is, ma’am. He’s...polite,” I say, and there’s a flicker of a smile across Anna-Vittoria’s face.

“He asked for proof of your well-being,” she says. “Given the situation, I agreed that he could send a representative.”

A representative? Surely the Boss wouldn’t have sent...

Bricker and I exchange a glance, but then whirl around as Anna-Vittoria motions behind us. The door creaks open—

Oh, thank God. Not Julian.

But I’m still wary as I see Johnny Jacopo saunter into the room, hat held casually in his hand. He grins crookedly at me, completely at ease in these unfamiliar surroundings.

“Hey there, Pedretti,” he drawls, as if we’re meeting for a casual drink. “How you doing?”

“Jack,” I respond, unable to keep from grinning back. Jack has that effect on a lot of people. Gregarious type. Even Anna-Vittoria doesn’t seem to mind him. “Well, I’m just fine, as you see. What are you doing here?”

“Sandro thought I should look in on the neighbors. Make sure things are running smoothly.”

“And they are,” Anna-Vittoria breaks in. “So Don Castellani can call off the National Guard—or at least his brother.”

Shit. So she *did* hear about that. Not from Bricker, who looks as blindsided by that comment as I am.

Jack winces a little at the mention of Julian. “Julian gets a little possessive sometimes. Doesn’t like to share his toys, if you know what I mean.”

Anna-Vittoria tilts her head a little as she considers Jack’s words. “Children who don’t like to share need more discipline, I’ve found,” she says at last.

Jack nods apologetically. “Yes, ma’am,” he says. “Now, as much as Pedretti does appear to be in good health, the Boss

wanted to hear it from his own lips. Wanted a...a check-in, you could call it.”

Anna-Vittoria sighs. “I have just informed Signor Pedretti that he is free to go at any time, of course. He wants to stay.”

Jack looks at me. “Is that so?”

I give a slight nod.

“All the same,” Jack says, and there’s a note of seriousness to his voice that I don’t miss, “Sandro was hoping for a chat.”

I glance at Bricker. No matter what, I’m coming back to him, even if it’s not in an official capacity. But whatever is going on at Redwood is important too, or Jack wouldn’t be here trying to delicately hint something.

“I’m happy to go reassure the Boss,” I say with a shrug. “As long as everyone else is just as happy about it.” I look at Anna-Vittoria.

“Very well,” she says. “Pedretti, you may visit Redwood Manor to assure Don Castellani of your well-being. And you are welcome to return, if and *only* if you are given leave from your Don. I will not be accused of keeping you against your will—or his. Is that understood?”

“Understood, Maestra.”

Jack raises an eyebrow at my use of the term, and I can tell I’m going to get some ribbing later.

“And I will send Fabrizio with you,” she adds casually, although she keeps a close eye on my reaction. “A return guest to the Castellanis. I’m sure Alessandro would appreciate Fabrizio’s assurances of your continued safety.”

I glance at Jack, who gives me a slight nod. “Alright,” I say. “Don’t want to worry the Boss.”

The truth is, the last thing I want is to betray the fragile trust I’ve built with Bricker and the Espositos. My job here was to build ties. Pulling Bricker in for a dressing-down by Sandro is the last thing I want to do, but—

“Fabrizio?” Anna-Vittoria says.

His response is clipped. “Fine by me.”

“Then everyone’s happy,” Jack says, nodding his thanks at Anna-Vittoria. “I’ll take Max and his friend right now. Sandro’s at Redwood,” he adds to me.

“A moment, Signor Pedretti, if you will,” Anna-Vittoria says. “Fabrizio, wait with Signor Jacopo outside.” After the door closes behind them, she walks straight up to me and says, “Well? Have you told him?”

CHAPTER 24

I HAVE to bite back my first response. I can't see any of Anna-Vittoria's guards around here, but I bet they're watching, and they wouldn't be okay with the first words that threaten to burst out of my mouth.

"No," I say at last. "I haven't. Assuming you're talking about his dad. You told me not to, and I followed orders."

She nods. "Good. See that you continue to do so."

"Now hang on just a minute—"

"I don't have time for your outrage, Massimo," she says in Italian. "And you know as well as I do that it is even more important now to keep your secrets."

She's the only person who can call me Massimo without me hating the sound of it, but I still don't like what she's saying. "He needs support. His Family's support. *Your* support."

"And he has it. But he needs more than that. He needs a soft place to land." I'm a little taken aback, but she sweeps on before I can ask what she means. "If you are willing to return to us, then I want you two, together, to find the mole. You are the only ones I can trust—you, because you're an outsider, and Fabrizio, because if I can't trust my own judgment in making him Capo, then what kind of leader am I?"

I wonder if she knew how dire things would get when she poached me from Sandro. And I wonder if I'll be able to convince Sandro to let me return. But for Bricker's sake, I'm determined.

She dismisses me then, and I'm anxious to get out to Jack and Bricker, make sure there's no problems there. But the two don't seem to have said anything at all to each other when I open the doors. They're just standing there under the watchful eyes of four armed guards.

Four? I only got one. Jack's lethal reputation is as strong as ever, I see.

As we make our way out of the house and over to Jack's car, I feel rather than see Bricker's double take at the beat-up Pinto. "It's his baby," I sigh.

"That's right," Jack says with a grin. He pauses at the car, extending a hand to Bricker. "Fabrizio, was it? Call me Jack."

"And you can call me Bricker," he says.

"Bricker. Okay. Well, let's get underway."

Out of some silent agreement, Bricker and I take the back seat together. We try not to sit too closely together, while Jack mutters from behind the wheel, something about not being a chauffeur.

"Thanks for having my back in there," Bricker says stiffly to me as we take off, his eyes focused on the passing scenery outside the window. His jaw is tense, the muscles ticking as he clenches it. He's on edge after our meeting with Anna-Vittoria, and the prospect of coming to meet my own Boss can't be pleasant.

"No need to thank me," I reply, trying to look out my own window. But I steal a few glances at him, wondering what he's thinking.

I can't regret kissing him last night. It probably means a lot more to me than it does to him, anyway. He needed comfort. I was there.

Maybe there were other ways to provide it, but in the moment

And then I see Jack looking at me in the rear-view, catching me off-guard. I don't like the look in those gray-blue eyes, the interested lift of his brow.

“How’re things at Redwood?” I ask, trying to divert his train of thought.

“So-so,” Jack says. “You’re much missed.”

I give a small smile, but now Bricker turns away, his brow furrowed. And that’s the only conversation we have the rest of the way to Redwood. But I can see Jack glancing at me in the mirror now and then, his curiosity piqued.

The closer we get to Redwood Manor, the more anxious I feel. My loyalty is being tested in ways I never imagined, but it’s my attraction to Bricker that truly terrifies me. I really don’t want to have to explain that to Sandro Castellani. I was sent to the Espositos as a gesture of good faith.

Not so I could almost *bed* one of them.

The one of them that also happens to be my ex-partner’s son...

Before long, we arrive at the iron gates of Redwood Manor, where Jack slows the car to a crawl for the guards, leaning out to let them know who the unfamiliar face is. I feel a pang as we pass through the familiar entrance, a little ache in my chest for the Family I left behind. There’s a part of me that wants to dive out of the car, refuse to leave the estate, stay right here where I’m loved and wanted.

“You back for good, Pedretti?” one of the guards calls out from the door as we pull up in front of the house, his voice filled with genuine warmth that makes me forget all about the gray skies overhead. My name is echoed by several others, their smiles lighting up. It’s been too long since I’ve seen their faces, and I return their enthusiastic smiles with one of my own.

“Not back yet, Santarelli,” I tell the guard who asked. “Gotta let DeLuca earn his stripes first.”

“You really *have* been missed,” Bricker murmurs under his breath, his arms folded across his chest as he takes in the scene.

“Let me introduce you,” I say. “This is Bricker Soldano, the Capo I’ve been working under while I’ve been with the

Espositos.” And then I tell Bricker the names of each guard, though I don’t expect him to remember them.

They all look him head to toe, and it does nothing for Bricker’s attitude. “Hi,” Santarelli says, his expression reserved. The contrast between their greeting for me and their reception of Bricker isn’t lost on either of us.

“Hi, yourself,” Bricker replies, extending a hand. Santarelli hesitates for a moment before shaking it.

“Let’s go on in,” Jack says diplomatically. “The Boss is waiting.”

Things don’t get much better inside, because waiting right there in the foyer, with a cold smile for Bricker and a delighted hug for me, is Julian Castellani. “Pedretti!” he says, squeezing me hard. “I’m so glad you’re back! Shall we send your friend straight to the cells? They’re partially filled in, but the cement’s still wet, so—”

“Cut it out,” I sigh, pushing him away. I turn to Bricker. “He’s kidding.”

“Am I?” Julian stares unblinkingly at Bricker, who glares back.

“Yeah,” I say. “You are. Bricker is our guest. Make sure you treat him like one.”

“Of course,” Julian replies, his smile never reaching his eyes. “We wouldn’t want any misunderstandings, now would we?”

I change the subject. “Where’s Darian?”

“I gave him the day off.”

And I know why. So that Julian could be right here to intimidate, without having to worry that Darian would be too polite or welcoming to Bricker.

I turn to Bricker now, who looks like he’s a few seconds away from saying something unwise. Poor guy has had a very shitty forty-eight hours. “Come on,” I say, reaching out to his shoulder. “Boss is waiting.”

Bricker lets me turn him around, although I feel the tension in his shoulders as Julian calls after us, “Make sure you stop by on your way out. I want to hear *all* the gossip.”

“Enough, Julian,” I hear Jack tell him in an undertone, but I know from experience that Julian Castellani takes a lot to be quelled. Usually it takes his big brother, in fact, the very same man we’re about to see.

Jack waits in the foyer and I lead Bricker through the house toward Sandro’s study with a strange sense of pride as we navigate the halls. It’s not my house, but it feels like home—and it *is* my workplace. But there’s an undercurrent coming from the surrounds I can’t quite shake.

It’s as if the house itself is holding its breath. And then, as I knock on the study door and open it, my own lungs tighten up in sympathy.

Sandro Castellani looks away from the windows as we walk in, his expression dark as the gathering clouds outside. I give an internal sigh.

Here we go.

CHAPTER 25

BRICKER

I'VE NEVER MET the Castellani Don. Seen him a couple of times, but never this close up, and that scar on his face is pretty noticeable now. His eyes burn with a fury that makes me wonder if the Maestra figured letting Alessandro Castellani take me out would be the easiest way to get rid of me.

“Pedretti,” he says coolly, looking away from me at last, “I’m relieved to see you whole.”

“You know me, Boss,” Pedretti says. “Head like a cinder block. Hard to crack.”

“Not for lack of the Espositos trying,” Castellani says, and that was definitely meant for me, though he only looks at me a moment after saying it. “I hear you lost three men yesterday, Soldano.”

“One,” I spit back. And then I have to add, “Two injuries.”

“That’s not how it was, Boss,” Max says, calm as always. “And maybe we can do some introductions first, so we all know who we’re glaring at.”

Castellani’s right eyebrow, the one not bisected by that jagged scar, goes up. “Do you not know who I am?” he asks me.

“Oh, I know,” I say, and I try to sound at least a little respectful as I add, “Sir.”

“Boss, this is Bricker Soldano,” Max says. “One of the Esposito’s best Capos.”

“Best?” Castellani chuckles, but there’s no humor in it. “If this is what they consider their best—”

“Boss,” Max says softly, “give him a break. These men who were hurt, I’m worried about them, too. I want to go back with Soldano and help sort out this mess.”

Castellani’s eyes narrow as he studies me, anger still evident in his expression. “Pedretti, I don’t like that you’ve been put in danger because of the Espositos. If they’re going to get you killed, I am disinclined to let you return to them.”

Indignation flares in me, but I can hardly argue with another Family’s Don. But Max’s face darkens too.

Max had my back with Anna-Vittoria. The least I can do is try to have his now. “Don Castellani.” I step forward. “I apologize for my actions that have endangered your man. His safety is important to me, too. If I take full responsibility for him, for keeping him safe, will you grant your permission to let him return to the Espositos? So he can help me find out who was responsible for the death of my man—and help me avenge him?”

Castellani returns to his desk and sits down. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t invite us to sit, either, but I can tell he’s considering my request. Inwardly, I will him to trust me, but I don’t know the man. Only his reputation.

The sneer of disdain doesn’t seem like a good sign. “How can *you* guarantee Pedretti’s safety?”

“I will personally ensure it,” I reply, my voice steady and firm. “I’ll make sure he comes back alive. I swear on my life. Mine for his.”

“Your life for his,” Castellani repeats, almost...almost like a binding promise.

But Max scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “I don’t need anyone keeping *me* safe.”

“Be that as it may,” Castellani says, his gaze flicking between Max and me, “I still value these assurances. This—Soldano, was it? He has agreed to take responsibility for your safety, Pedretti, and I expect him to uphold that promise.”

“Soldano and the Espositos aren’t the problem, anyway,” Max says.

“Who, then?” Castellani demands.

Max hesitates, his jaw tightening. Anna-Vittoria’s order not to betray Esposito business binds him. I wouldn’t blame him for telling Don Castellani what he wants to know, but instead, Max says nothing, even though Sandro Castellani’s face gets colder and colder.

“It’s PacSyn,” I say. I see Don Castellani processing this new information, so I give him a little more. “We’ve been working against them for a while. But they were ready and waiting for us in the bank. Which means...” I take a breath, unhappy at what I’m about to admit. “I have a mole in my crew working for them.”

“Is that so?” Castellani asks icily.

“That’s why I need Pedretti’s help, and why the Maestra wanted him, too. The problems have been going on for a while. Pedretti has security expertise, he’s got experience working, uh, similar jobs—” I shoot a sideways glance at Max, but he makes no face at me. I guess it’s to be expected that his Boss knows all about his background. “—and like he says, he has a personal stake in this now.”

Castellani leans back in his chair, his expression unreadable. “I acknowledge your courage and your commitment, Soldano,” he finally says, his tone cool. “You’ve got more balls than I expected. But let me be clear: if any harm comes to Pedretti, there *will* be severe consequences.”

I feel rather than see Max relaxing next to me, as though he was worried his Boss would put his foot down, refuse him permission to return. And I’m more relieved about it than I can almost admit to myself. Relieved and...something else, something less about the professional help Max can give, and more about having him in my house a while longer.

“Your alliance could benefit both Families,” Castellani admits. “And I believe I see mutual respect and trust between the two of you. Am I right?”

“That’s right, Boss,” Max says firmly. “Soldano’s a good man, a good Capo. And I want to make sure PacSyn gets what

they've got coming."

I'm so glad Max jumped in to answer that question. I think I'd stammer out something starstruck about how amazing Max is, and that...wouldn't be great. But hearing Max talk about me so well to Don Castellani feels nice.

Real nice.

Castellani leans forward, gesturing to the chairs in front of his desk. "So, what are your plans?"

We each take a seat. "Well, we find that mole," I say, glancing at Max. "Then, we repay the favor to PacSyn. Blood for blood."

"Is there anything you need?" Castellani asks.

Need? I stare at Max, wondering if Castellani's sudden helpfulness is just a front. But Max leans in, mirroring his Boss's body language.

"Give us a chance to assess, first," he says. "And then we'll let you know." Max glances at me, nudges me with his knee.

"Right," I say quickly. "And I, uh, I appreciate the offer, Don Castellani."

His face pulls up on one side. I think he's smiling. "I want our Families to be friends," he says. "So please, let me know if I can help. But before you leave us again, Pedretti, I'd like a word alone. If you don't mind, Soldano?"

As I leave Sandro's study, I allow myself a moment to breathe, really feel the enormity of what I've just agreed to.

My life for Max's. My head if his falls.

I *seem* to be alone out here in the hallway, but I feel eyes on me. I keep my hands to myself and I look at the pictures on the wall while I wait, though my mind's on other things. Nico, for one. And Giddy. And finding the bastard who did this to us...

On the wall opposite is a formal family photograph of the old Castellani Don with his blonde wife, and a towheaded kid in front of her that I assume must be the young Julian Castellani. None of them look all that happy, and Sandro isn't with them, either. Without thinking, I reach out to straighten it—it's a little crooked—and when I step back, I just about jump out of my skin.

There's a guy there, around my own age, one hand resting on a gun holster and the other on his hip as he stares at me. "Hey," he says.

"Uh. Hey."

"Raffi DeLuca. Head of house security while Pedretti's away." After a second, he offers his hand, but he hasn't taken his eyes off of me.

"Bricker Soldano," I reply. "They told me to wait out here," I add a little defensively.

"Yeah," he says. And then he says nothing more, until we both hear footsteps approaching, and at the end of the hallway, a slender, fair-haired guy in a three-piece suit starts walking toward us.

"Good morning, Mr. Soldano," he says to me. "I'm Darian Thornfield-Hayes. I'm the butler here at Redwood, and head of staff. Please don't hesitate to ask for anything you need."

"He's fine," DeLuca says abruptly, staring at me as though daring me to make him a liar.

"I'm fine," I tell the butler guy. I look him head to toe, if only because he seems a little out of place here. Very formal. Very good looking, in an old-fashioned kind of way.

DeLuca pushes in front of me. "You're *supposed* to have the morning off, D," he mutters. Past DeLuca's head, I see the butler go a little pink.

"When there is a guest in the house—" he begins, but DeLuca takes his arm gently and turns him around.

"I'll let you know if they need anything. Okay?"

The butler walks off, but DeLuca stands there watching him until he pauses at the end of the corridor and looks back over his shoulder. There's an undeniable spark between them, and I wonder if there's something a little less than professional going on between them.

Darian disappears around the corner and DeLuca turns back to me with a cool expression. But before he can say anything, the study door opens and Max comes out.

"DeLuca!" he says. "Was wondering when you'd show up." They shake hands, and for the first time, I see DeLuca look something other than taciturn, as he gives a wide grin at Max.

"So you're finally back with us, Pedretti?"

Max glances at me as he shakes his head. "Not yet, DeLuca. Can you hold down the fort for a little longer?"

"You got it."

"Boss told me about this—" he pauses, glances at me "—this upcoming event. I know you can handle it, but you give me a call if you need anything. Okay?"

DeLuca just gives a nod. Something's going on, obviously. Castellani business. Well, I have no interest in that. I've got enough to occupy me with the Espositos right now.

"Okay, DeLuca. I'll take it from here," Pedretti says, and with a nod, DeLuca leaves us alone.

"All good?" I ask, not because I want to know what Don Castellani said to Max in private, but because I want to make sure he didn't rescind his permissions.

"All good," Max reassures me. "Come on. Let's get moving."

But Max still seems deep in thought as he leads me back toward the foyer. It's just the two of us, which makes me deeply aware of how much status Max has in this Family.

I would never be allowed to wander around the Villa without an escort.

"Hey," I say quietly, breaking the silence between us. He glances over. "I meant what I said in there. I'll do everything

in my power to keep you safe.”

Max stops me, his eyes searching mine. “Listen,” he starts, but then he hesitates. Finally, he nods. “I know you will,” he says softly. “You’re a good Capo. That’s what good Capos do.”

It’s not just that. I want to protest, explain how much deeper it runs than just being Capo, even *his* Capo, which I’m not anymore anyway, I’m no one’s fucking Capo, I’m a Capo in limbo—but it’s not the time. Definitely not the place, either.

“Let’s get back to work,” I murmur, and we continue the walk, shoulder to shoulder, down the hallway.

I’m happy to see that a certain blond Castellani has vacated the foyer as we reach it, but I counted my blessings too soon.

“Hey, Esposito!” comes a call from above. I glance up, doing a double take when it seems like Julian Castellani is buck-naked, leaning over the banister from the second level. “Take good care of my Pedretti, won’t you?”

“Ignore him,” Max sighs.

But my confidence is returning, and I’m not one to turn down a fight. “Like I told you before, Castellani, he belongs to me right now,” I drawl upward. “So I’ll return him when I’m good and ready.”

That response earns me a delighted laugh from Julian as Max hustles me out of Redwood Manor to where Jack is waiting by that shitty old Pinto he drives.

Jack drives us back to Anna-Vittoria’s estate in silence, but as we pull up in front of the Villa, he turns around in his seat and looks at Max. “So,” he says.

Max, who seems to know what’s coming, shakes his head with a smile. “You’ve got enough on your plate. Boss gave me the lowdown.”

Jack gives a little sigh. “It’s a shitshow,” he agrees, “but you know me. I like to keep busy.”

My heart lifts a little. Johnny Jacopo is well known in the LA underworld for his ability to ferret out information. Along with their Don's offer of help...

The Castellanis seem to be falling all over themselves to help out, in fact.

I push away my twinge of suspicion. I saw how well-loved Max is in his Family. Of course they want to help their own—especially when it could mean impressing Anna-Vittoria. Sandro Castellani has been angling to make friends for a while now, just like he said himself back in his study.

“We need any help, we'll let you know,” Max compromises. “Thanks for the ride, Jack.”

Jack gives us a lazy salute and we get out of his car, and back into my own, avoiding the iron-hard eyes of the guards at the door.

I want to ask Max what his Boss told him in those minutes he was alone in there with him, but it's not my business. It's Castellani business. Besides, I've got enough problems of my own without inviting trouble.

“Alright,” I say when we're finally back on the freeway, my mind racing with possible strategies. “How are we doing this? Do we tell the crew what we're looking for, or keep it quiet?”

Max considers for a moment. “I don't like being underhanded. But the truth is, people clam up when they think they're gonna be blamed for something.”

I feel a little sick at the idea. Not only investigate my own people, but pretend like I'm not? “They're not stupid,” I point out. “Sooner or later, it's going to occur to them that someone sold them out.”

“Sooner or later,” he agrees. “But we can try to make it later. They're shellshocked right now—hell, *we* are, too. It'll be a mercy to them to let them grieve a little before they understand why we're asking the questions we're asking.”

He has a point.

I also like the fact that he included himself as shellshocked.

“Okay,” I say. “That’ll be our approach for now. We should also look into PacSyn’s operations, don’t you think? Come in from the other side.”

“That’ll be tougher. But yes. We should try.”

My phone buzzes with an incoming text, and I glance down briefly to see a message: *Nico is awake and he will recover completely*. Relief washes over me, and I share the good news with Max.

“I need to see him.” They’re not just suspects to me, this crew. They’re my brothers and sisters, and they’re hurting.

“Mind if I tag along?”

“Of course not.” I steal a glance at Max as I take the turn-off to the hospital. Today has been almost as difficult as yesterday, and I’m glad he’s been with me. “Thank you,” I say. “For everything.”

“Not a problem.” It’s a brief, polite response, but I feel the weight behind it. It’s as though for Max Pedretti, there’s no other choice than to be honorable.

To have my back.

I like that.

CHAPTER 26

THE WEATHER in LA is unremarkable right up until it isn't. The storm has been threatening all day, and the rain starts as we're walking up to the hospital entrance, the reds and blues of the ambulances sliding across the wet pavement, across Bricker's face, turning the view into some garish nightclub. When Bricker and I step inside, we're swallowed up by the bustle of doctors and nurses striding to and fro, full of purpose. The stark overheads make everything jaundiced.

"Let's check in at the desk," I suggest, my eyes scanning the room out of habit. I'm checking for cops, but there are none.

Bricker was right. The Family handled it.

"Who first?" I say. "Giddy's been awake longest. Might have gone over things in his own mind, have something to tell us."

Bricker hesitates for a moment. "Okay," he says at last. "Giddy first. Over here." He leads me over to the receptionist. "Ma'am, can you tell us where Guido Tauriello's room is?"

She glances at her computer screen and rattles off the directions, barely looking at us. We follow her instructions, navigating through the labyrinth of rooms and recovery wards, accompanied by the beeping of heart monitors and hushed conversations between families and medical staff.

"Room 218," Bricker says, slowing and stopping at a door. His voice is soft, almost tender, like speaking too loudly will shatter the fragile balance of life and death in this place.

I know exactly how he feels.

Giddy is in this room, the door slightly ajar. He's sitting up in bed with a wide grin plastered on his face, as if he just won the lottery instead of narrowly escaping death. Tank is perched on the edge of the bed, tending to his brother with a gentleness that belies his gruff exterior. Van stands near the window, arms crossed and gaze locked onto the rain outside.

"Look who finally decided to show up!" Giddy exclaims, his cheerfulness only serving to heighten the tension. Because Tank's eyes narrow into slits as they lock onto Bricker, and Van doesn't look much friendlier as he turns around.

"Taking time out of your busy schedule, huh?" Van mutters under his breath. I want to protest, remind these two that this is their Capo they're talking to, to show some damn respect. But Bricker ignores it, so I do, too.

And of course, Anna-Vittoria will be disbanding the crew—if she hasn't already. But in my mind, Bricker Soldano is still my Capo, and Van and Tank and Giddy's, too.

"Giddy, man, I'm so glad to see you're okay." Bricker goes in for a hug, but he pauses as Tank rises from beside the bed, stabbing an accusing finger into Bricker's chest.

"It's your fault he's here at all!" he snarls.

I step closer instinctively. "Tank, cool it. We all knew the risks when we—"

"Shut the fuck up, Pedretti! You weren't even inside the bank when Giddy got shot, so don't act like you know what it was like."

"Okay," Bricker says, holding up his hands in defeat. "Giddy, we'll come back when you—"

"The fuck you will!" Tank spits.

Van steps forward. "Tank, maybe you wanna take a walk, cool off." Apparently he's remembered his role.

"You need to show some respect to your Capo," I add, which probably isn't helpful—but it *is* true.

"Respect?" Tank scoffs. "My brother almost dies and you want me to kiss the ass of the man responsible?"

“Tank!” Giddy snaps. “Get out of here for a second. I *want* to talk to Bricker.” Tank shoots Bricker one last glare before storming out of the room, slamming the door behind him. “He’ll get over it,” Giddy says after a second. “You know how he gets.” He holds out his arms for that hug that Bricker was originally offering, and Bricker goes in to return it.

“Sorry about how things went down, Giddy,” Bricker replies, his voice hoarse. He clears his throat. “How are you feeling?”

“Ah, you know, could be worse,” he replies as Bricker pulls back. He wiggles his fingers in front of his face. “Still got all ten of these bad boys. If my trigger finger’s good, I’m good.”

Van jerks his head at me. “How about we give them a minute?”

I head out of the door with him. I’m pretty sure I know what’s coming.

“Look, it’s great that you’ve got Bricker’s back,” Van begins, his voice low and measured, “but if we’re going to point fingers at anyone for this mess, it should be you.”

I give a bitter smile despite the anger flaring in my chest. It’s not fun being right, sometimes. “How you figure, Delligatti? You think *I* sold you out to PacSyn?”

“Did you?”

“Of course not. I would never betray a crew I was working with.”

“Maybe,” he concedes, but his eyes remain cold. “But let’s not forget who wasn’t in any real danger during the heist. You were outside while the rest of us risked our lives inside that bank. You got to run in and play hero right at the end.”

“Fuck off, Van,” I say softly. “I mean it. Get your face out of here before I put my fist in it.”

I’m surprised myself at my reaction. I’m not normally so quick to threaten, but what Delligatti is suggesting...

It’s disrespectful. And I won’t be disrespected.

He's lucky Bricker chooses that moment to come out of Giddy's room. "He's tired," he says, "and I said I'd find Tank." He looks between Van and me. "Uh, is something—"

"Let Tank shake it off," Van says shortly. "He needs a few days, Cap. I'll go find him." With that, Van turns on his heel and stalks off. Bricker watches him with a troubled expression.

"Let's go find Nico," I suggest diplomatically.

Nico is in a different area, the kind where everything is silent and you can tell that half of the people here are going to die before dawn. As we enter his room, he lies sunken beneath the sterile white sheets of his hospital bed, a stark contrast to the vibrant young man I know he really is. But despite his condition, he still manages a weak smile when he sees us enter. Jazz and Pony are in the room, too: Jazz curled up in an uncomfortable-looking armchair and Pony blinking sleep away as he sits upright in a chair he's pulled up against the wall.

"Hey, guys," Nico whispers, his voice barely audible.

"Hey, Nico," Bricker responds gently. He comes over and takes his hand. "Man, you look like shit."

Nico gives a soft sigh of agreement. "I feel it."

I give a nod to Pony and Jazz, and then Honeybee comes into the room holding a takeout coffee, looking surprised but glad to see both Bricker and me. She comes to me for a hug, after smiling at Bricker, who is still chatting with Nico.

I can't turn it off, my security side. I notice it straight away: she's changed clothes since the heist. When we took her in, she was wearing a leotard under a track suit, ready for the climb into the shaft. Now she wears a simple striped dress that clings to her curves.

"Someone brought you in some clean clothes," I say. "Good. You doing okay?"

“Oh,” she says, and her eyes slide away from mine. “I went home to get changed. They said I couldn’t see Nico anyway until he was stable, and Jazz said she’d wait here with him, so...” She gives an awkward shrug. “I’m doing okay. Better, now that Nico’s awake. Anna-Vittoria came in to see us, and she was so nice, Max.” She tears up again, sniffing, and I lead her over to Nico, who smiles to see me—but smiles more to see Honeybee.

“Bet you’re glad you got left in the van, huh?” he says to me, with an attempt at a laugh that makes him wince. “Ow, fuck. Damn, I wish I’d listened to you, Pony. Should’ve stayed with you outside.”

“Yeah, you should’ve,” Pony tells him gruffly.

Nico makes a choking sound as he tries to hold back a sob. “Rook...Bricker, I can’t stop thinking about him.” Tears run from the corner of his eyes and he turns his face away from Honeybee as though ashamed.

“We’ll find out who’s responsible,” Bricker tells him. “I promise. And they’ll pay.”

“Thank you.” But there’s exhaustion and despair etched across Nico’s face.

“*What* do you people think you’re doing?” an outraged voice demands from the doorway. “I want all but one of you out of this room, right now.”

This nurse is exactly the kind I like—takes no shit, and protects her patient. “Alright,” I say, holding up pacifying hands to her. “We’re leaving.”

Jazz turns to Honeybee, who’s standing by the door, arms crossed over her chest. “Honeybee, why don’t you go home and get some more rest? You look like hell. I can stay with Nico while you—”

“No way,” Honeybee says, without even looking at Jazz. Jazz glances over at us, and Bricker shrugs.

Jazz leans in to say goodbye to Nico. “You need to rest up, honey. Your mom’s coming to visit again later, so you better look alive when she gets here.”

So Anna-Vittoria's been visiting her son regularly. I'm glad. Shows there's a heart under all that steel.

Honeybee sits down next to Nico and lays her head gently on the pillow next to him, speaking in a soft voice until she gets a smile out of him.

"Listen," Bricker says after a moment, "I want you to know I'm here for all of you. If anyone needs anything, call me. Day or night. Understood?"

They all murmur their agreement and then Jazz puts a gentle hand on Honeybee's shoulder. "Hey, let's give Cap a few minutes with Nico, huh? Come on. You too, Pony."

I walk outside with Jazz, Honeybee and Pony, and we all stand around like we're not sure what to do with ourselves. Jazz is characteristically silent. Honeybee's quiet is a different kind. She looks...nervous.

"You doing okay?" I ask her.

She actually jumps. "I'm fine."

"You can be *not* fine. It's okay to have a reaction to what happened."

Jazz watches me as closely as I watch Honeybee, who shakes her head. "Seriously, Max, I'm fine. I need to keep it together for Nico. Right?"

I want to hug her, but I don't want to patronize her, so I just smile. "You're taking good care of him."

"I better go check on Giddy, too," Jazz says, just as I look her way to speak to her, and she walks away quickly.

Does she, like Tank, blame me for what went down?

Or is she trying to hide something?

I don't like being suspicious of these people. Honeybee sits on a nearby bench to wait for Bricker's exit, and Pony catches my eye. "I need to talk to Cap," he says in a low voice. "Think he'll give me a minute?"

Pony wanted to tell Bricker something back at the Valley house, too. It could be important. "You heard him in there," I

say mildly. “Bricker’s here for all of you. He’ll give you some time when he’s done with Nico.”

Bricker comes out at that moment, looking a little shaken, and Honeybee dashes back in at once. “Pony wants a word,” I tell Bricker. “I’ll make myself scarce.”

“No.” Pony crosses his arms, huddling in on himself, and gestures with his head for us to come in closer. “You should hear it too, Peds. Maybe you can tell me I’m crazy.”

Bricker’s eyes flick to me as we lean in, but he gives his full attention to Pony. “What is it?”

Pony gives a sigh before whispering, “I don’t like what I’m about to say. But what with Nico and Giddy a-and Rook...”

“Spit it out,” Bricker whispers impatiently.

“I saw Van making a text just before we went out to First National,” Pony says. “I don’t know who he was talking to. But when he saw I’d seen him, he got all...squirrely. Shoved his phone in his pocket. I asked him who the fuck was that, and he said it was just a scam text.”

There’s a brief pause as Bricker takes it in. “Maybe it was,” I say. “Maybe it was nothing.”

“Yeah,” Pony says darkly, “and maybe it was something. Look, all I know is, I saw Van acting real weird, and then things went sideways at the bank. It’s been playing on my mind, and I wanted to tell you, Cap. Now I have. So—” He shrugs. “—do what you want with the info, I just wanted to get it off my chest.”

He turns and walks away, and Bricker watches him go.

I keep quiet. Nothing I say will help things.

After a minute, Bricker just says, “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 27

MAX

AS WE SET off through the hospital for the entrance, I think again about Honeybee's change of outfit—and that takeout coffee she brought in with her. It wasn't the hospital cafe's coffee. In fact, the branded cardboard cup tells me she went offsite to a coffeeshop.

She took the time to go offsite when the guy she's fallen for is lying there in a hospital bed? To go home and shower and get changed?

It seems unlike her. My mind keeps turning it over as we make our way downstairs.

"Max," Bricker says quietly when we get back to the car, "we need to get on this. Find the fucker who did this, ASAP."

"Yeah. We do." Once the car doors are closed, I say, "Something's bothering me about Honeybee."

Bricker raises an eyebrow, clearly surprised by my suggestion. "*Honeybee?*" I guess he expected me to pick on Delligatti after Pony's news. "What's bothering you about her?"

"Call it a hunch," I say, remembering the way she hesitated before explaining her change of clothes. "But something doesn't add up." I explain about the clothes, the coffee.

Bricker looks skeptical.

"You'd prefer me to land on your buddy Van?" I ask. "Because I can do that." He gives a snort and leans forward to start the car. "Look, I'm not saying she's the mole. But we need to cover all bases—including Delligatti, including Honeybee."

Bricker runs a hand through his hair in that habitual gesture that tells me he's irritated. "Yeah. We'll keep an eye on everyone, Honeybee included. But just...give me a minute? Seeing Nico like that..."

I shut my mouth and let him have his moment, staying quiet as he pulls out of the parking lot and we get back on the road.

"Listen," Bricker suddenly says, eyes on the road, "I want you to know that I appreciate everything you've done. And you even had my back with Castellani. That means a lot to me." He pulls up at a light and only now does he look at me. "So promise me something, Max. Promise me that we'll find them. No matter who it turns out to be."

"I promise," I reply without hesitation.

This is more than just a job, more than just a mission. This is about loyalty—the foundation of any Family. I might be sworn to the Castellanis, but my heart...

Well, I just wish I knew what to do about that.

Bricker is silent the rest of the drive back to his house, and I take the opportunity to think about Sandro's private words to me in his study, and hope like hell I made the right decision.

"You want to have a *parley*?" I'd repeated after him. I couldn't stop the rising outrage in my tone. "With *both* Bernardi factions? *At Redwood*?"

"That is an accurate summary, yes." Sandro's penchant for understatement usually made me smile.

Not this time.

Part of me wanted to call it quits with the Espositos then and there. Bernardi assholes tramping all over Redwood Manor? Both AJ and Gino on the estate at the same time—and Leo, too?

Not to mention Julian, who we all know is planning to kill AJ Bernardi, one way or another.

"All due respect, Boss," I'd said, "you're crazy."

He'd laughed. Actually laughed. "Perhaps."

“No way AJ Bernardi would go for it. He doesn’t have a death wish.”

“AJ Bernardi has already agreed,” Sandro told me softly. I could only stare at him. “No, I don’t think he has a death wish. I think he’s driven by vanity. Doesn’t want to look like a coward to his faction, not at this crucial time.”

“But surely he hasn’t agreed to let *you* mediate?” It sounded much more derogatory than I’d intended, but Sandro knew at once what I meant. Sandro had been backing the younger brother Gino’s faction since the moment the Bernardi Family splintered.

“No, indeed,” he agreed. “In fact, I wondered if Anna-Vittoria might come and act as mediator. She is external to all our disputes. Do you think...?” He raised one eyebrow.

I thought it over for a moment before shaking my head. “She’s insular. This party trick she pulled with me—it’s not about making friends with the Castellanis. She needed me, and she was willing to compromise to do it. But I don’t think we can count on her for anything else. Besides, the Bernardis wouldn’t go for it. She’s trying to take down PacSyn, and they’re allies. For now, anyway.”

The Boss gave a sigh, like that was not what he wanted to hear. “AJ and Gino Bernardi have both suggested Tony Clemenza,” he said.

“Tony Clemenza?” I thought it over. “I can see their reasoning. He retired out here before the upheaval in New York with the Morellis, so he has less of an ax to grind with us, and although the Bernardis are a Clemenza offshoot, he’s got no personal ties. Plus from what I hear, he’s easily flattered. Likely to agree to it, if you ask him.”

Sandro nodded. “Have you heard anything else about him?”

“Yeah. I’ve heard he’s an asshole.”

“Can DeLuca handle him? Handle the parley?”

If I said no, Sandro would definitely pull me back in. And I was half inclined to *let* him. Talk about stupid ideas. But I had to admit reluctantly, “DeLuca’s young, but he’s solid.

Wouldn't have picked him to sub in for me otherwise. But Boss...if you really need me..."

"I will not ask you to act against your honor, Pedretti. I see this thing with the Espositos has become such a matter, so put your mind at ease. Take the time you need and trust us to handle the Bernardis in your absence."

And driving along now with Bricker, I'm glad the Boss let me go again. My mind goes back to Anna-Vittoria's odd way of putting it, that Bricker needs someplace soft to land.

I like the idea of it. Being that soft place.

As we head back into Bricker's house, he seems to almost stumble inside, and I move to grab him. The past few days are catching up with him.

He holds up a hand. "I'm good." But then he sags against the wall, chest heaving with ragged breaths. His hands tremble at his sides, knuckles white.

"Yeah, you're not good."

"Just...gimme a minute," he mumbles. "I'm home," he says more loudly, and the house comes alive.

The door automatically locks itself, so I just wait there like he's asked me to, even though it's a special kind of torture. I try telling myself it's some fatherly instinct that has me wanting to reach for him. Some leftover echo of the friendship I had with his dad. But the truth is, it's got nothing to do with Fabi.

The feelings I have for Bricker are decidedly non-familial.

And seeing him like this is unsettling. It *hurts* to see him so broken, hurts in a way I've never felt before. At last he takes a deep breath and starts walking, his hand on the wall as though he needs it as a guide—or to prop him up—and he makes his way to the living room.

Once there, he collapses onto the couch, head in his hands.

Bricker is the heart of the crew. If he falls apart, they all do. I ease down beside him on the couch, close enough that our thighs press together. He leans into me, just a little, but enough. Enough to tell me he needs this. Needs me.

“Talk to me,” I urge softly.

His laugh is harsh. “The fuck you want me to say? That I failed them? That Rook’s blood is on my hands?”

“Bullshit.” I pull his hands away from his face gently, ducking until I catch his eye. He’s tormented, staring at me like he’s drowning and I’m his only hope of rescue. “You didn’t fail anyone.”

“If I’d planned it better—”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. You can’t control everything.” I cup his cheek, rubbing my thumb over the stubble roughing up his jaw. “You’re only human, kid.”

His eyes flutter closed. “How can you be so calm when everything’s...”

“Lotta practice. Made plenty of mistakes over the years.”

One eye cracks open. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Getting older doesn’t make you wiser, necessarily, but it makes things more familiar. You fuck up, you learn, you fuck up a little less next time—if you’re lucky.”

There’s the shadow of a suggestion of a smile when he says, “Maybe you’ll tell me about these fuck ups sometime.”

My hand still cradles his cheek, the warmth of his skin tempting against my palm. I lick my lips, watching his gaze follow the movement.

“I want to help you,” I tell him. “I want to...”

“Make me feel better?”

“Yes.”

He gives a cynical huff. “You can’t. But maybe...maybe you can help me forget for a while.”

“Bricker—”

Too late. He leans in, our lips meeting in a soft slide of skin on skin. Bricker sighs into my mouth, lips parting. The kiss deepens, tongues tangling together as he shifts closer. By the time we break for air, he's straddling my lap, hands fisted in my shirt to keep me close.

"*Please*. Make me forget," he pants out. "Just for a little while..."

I grip his hips as he grinds down against me. I mean to push him away carefully. To tell him this can't happen. Instead, I say, "Whatever you need, I'll give it to you."

He surges in for another searing kiss, and I lose myself in the feel of him, hard and hot in my arms. It's enough for now. This—him—*we*...*we*'re enough for now.

Tomorrow we'll face the world again, but for now, I can help him forget.

I trail my lips down the side of his neck, tasting salt and faded cologne. He tilts his head to give me better access, fingers digging into my shoulders. I nip a little, make him gasp, hips jerking against me.

"Fuck, Max." His voice is ragged, edged with pure craving. "I need..."

"I know what you need," I murmur. "Let me take care of you."

That's what I want from him. I want him to let down his guard. Let me *in*.

I shift us until he's on his back on the couch and I'm braced above him. We grind together through our clothes, Bricker setting the pace, and he pulls me down to capture my mouth again.

When we part, his eyes are dark and hungry. "Then take care of me already. I need to shut my brain off."

I haul his shirt over his head before attacking the zipper of his jeans. He lifts his hips so I can strip him bare, cock hard and leaking against his stomach.

I pause to take it in, the sight of him. The smell of him. I bend to lick up his length, swirling my tongue around the head.

Bricker groans, back arching off the couch.

“Fuck, Max, get your mouth around me—please—”

I suck him down then, unwilling to tease. Not tonight. He cards his fingers into my hair, guiding me into a rhythm that has him panting and writhing under me. I reach down to palm myself briefly, but my focus is on him.

But Bricker tugs at my hair. “Get naked. I wanna see you.”

I pull off reluctantly, shucking my clothes as Bricker watches through heavy-lidded eyes. His gaze is molten, raking over me possessively.

There’s part of me that wants to flip him over and fuck his brains out. But that part will have to take a backseat tonight. He needs a little more tenderness, I think, after these last few days. So I lay out over him, face to face, legs tangled together, and wrap a hand around both our cocks, stroking firmly. He’s smooth and hot all over, and I marvel again at the landscape of his body as I look down to watch us.

A goddamn work of art, this kid. He spends a lot of time making himself look good, all for the benefit of other men. And right now, it’s for *my* benefit. That pleasant idea shoots right through me, along with a streak of possessiveness that I didn’t expect. “You’re gorgeous,” I tell him, and he practically preens, leaning up for another kiss.

I let him take the lead, match his speed as he thrusts into my fist, and after running a tongue over that smooth, broad chest, I capture his mouth again. The kissing turns messy and wet as the tension builds, until the hot slide of his cock against mine is all I can concentrate on.

I could do this forever, but Bricker’s already there, breaking his mouth away from mine with a choking cry, back arching. I feel the hot spill between us and I hurry it up, working him through it just as my own orgasm hits me, rolling through my body in waves.

For a long moment we just lie there, breathing each other in. All tension has left Bricker’s body, replaced by loose-limbed satisfaction. I brush the hair back from his forehead and kiss

him there, seeing faint puzzlement in his eyes when I pull back.

God, I wish this first time had been a little more...I don't know. "Romantic" is *definitely* not the word I'm looking for, and where the hell do I get off calling it a first time? This is a one-off.

It has to be.

The guilt is already creeping in with depressing predictability, replacing any well-being from the orgasm. But Bricker seems happier, and that's what matters.

"Better?" I ask.

His smile is slow. "Much. Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me for this." I take a chance and kiss him softly, wanting to keep this vulnerable Bricker open a little longer. "I do...want to take care of you."

Bricker's expression turns pensive. "You always do, Max. Even when I'm being a grade-A asshole. Why is that?"

I can't answer that. Not right now. So I just pull him closer, both of us uncaring of the mess between us. "Get some sleep for a few hours, huh? Right here. Like this. Screw the mess."

He nods, eyes drifting shut. I wait until his breathing evens out in sleep before I let myself follow.

I wake slowly, blinking at a giant TV. For a moment I'm disoriented, unsure of my surroundings, but then I feel the weight of Bricker in my arms, and the memories return.

We're still lying on the couch, but now Bricker is sprawled half on top of me, jeans still around his thighs, face mashed into my shoulder, snoring softly. I smile, running a hand down his back.

He stirs at my touch, lifting his head to peer at me through sleep-tousled hair. "Mm...time is it?" he mumbles, voice

rough with sleep.

“Dinner, maybe.” I tilt my head to get a better look at the digital clock near the TV. “Around seven.”

“Mmm.” He drops his head back to my shoulder, nosing at my throat. “Hungry.”

I laugh, the sound rumbling in my chest. “Same. But comfortable.”

He grunts in agreement. “Stay here.” It’s more order than request, and he throws an arm and leg over me to keep me in place. I have no intention of going anywhere, though. My belly can wait.

Breathing in the warm scent of Bricker Soldano is more important right now.

We doze for a while longer before Bricker gets restless. “RIP my couch, I guess,” he sighs, peeling away from me and looking at the stained leather. But he doesn’t seem to care all that much, setting off immediately in search of food.

He raids the fridge, emerging with eggs and potatoes as well as bacon this time, and I wipe down in the lower-floor bathroom before starting a pot of coffee brewing while he cooks. “We’ll need it,” I say at his unspoken question. “You and me, we’re gonna be up late, going over *everything*. Agreed?”

He sets the pan on the stove and gives a nod. “Sure as shit won’t be sleeping through,” he says. “That nap was *deep*. I’m good to go all night.”

Good to go all night. My mind suggests things it shouldn’t. We forgot, together, for a while, and the events of yesterday and even today *do* seem further away now, fading into the background. Bricker’s mood has improved. He’s joking and teasing as he works, hip-checking me out of the way when I try to help.

And all I can smell is *him*. Him, all over me, and I know my mark is all over him, too, and I love that notion despite myself. Because crazy as it is, and despite the fact that we’re from different Families, despite the fact that he’s young enough to

be my son, despite the fact that his father was...well, who he was...

Despite all that, I'm falling for Bricker Soldano.

But we have work to do, so my feelings have to come second, and in the meantime I'll breathe him in and let that be enough.

Bricker sets our plates on the table and I pour us each a cup of coffee, black for me and doctored with cream and sugar for him. We eat for a few minutes before Bricker says, "You were right, you know. About how important it is to learn from mistakes." He reaches across the table, wrapping his fingers around my wrist. His eyes are clear and steady on mine. "And I needed to hear that. So thank you."

"You're welcome."

Bricker smiles, slow and sweet, and the look in his eyes makes me shift in my seat. I clear my throat. "So what's the plan?"

"We start from the beginning," he says, taking his hand away from my wrist as he picks up his fork again, "and we figure out who fucked us over. As long as it takes. And then we fuck *them* over. Blood for blood. Agreed?"

I see Rook in Bricker's arms again, see the fear in his face.

The fear in *both* their faces.

I lift up my coffee cup and clink it against his. "Agreed."

CHAPTER 28

BRICKER

IT'S A LATE, *late* night, filled with so much work that I actually fall asleep right there at the dining table, face down, somewhere around four. I wake to the sound of Max making breakfast for us both—a spinach and mushroom omelet, no bacon side—and he gives me a warm smile when he sees me stir.

“Well, good morning, sunshine.”

I have to peel a note off my face. I think it stuck to my drool. The first thing that comes back to me is why I'm here at the table, and I remember Rook's weight in my arms, the slump of him, and all the dread and the grief comes flooding back.

But in the middle of that black hole is a tiny light, reminding me of *Max's* weight on me last night, his cock against mine, the almost-painful orgasm I had as he worked me, the way he kissed me as I came...

“Morning,” I say, sitting up straight. I feel a little shy, somehow. That's not like me. But Max seems comfortable with the cozy silence as we eat, and after that, we decide to drop by the hospital again to see Nico and Giddy, and maybe ask a few questions if the rest of the crew is still there, too.

Later on, we agree, we can go put some heat on PacSyn.

But as we walk up toward the now-familiar entrance of the hospital under gray and grumbling skies, I spot Honeybee some distance away, talking to a guy I don't recognize. Her body language is tense.

“She doesn’t look happy,” Max says, echoing my thoughts as she turns away from the man. “Who’s that guy?”

He’s thin-haired and skinny in a way that tells me drugs are more important to him than food, and I don’t like the aggressive way he steps around to be in Honeybee’s eyesight again. “Don’t know him,” I reply. “But something’s definitely off. Let’s get in there.” I’m already moving toward them when Max grabs my arm to stop me.

“Wait,” he says. “The way she’s glancing around like that—she doesn’t want an audience, and I don’t think he’s going to get physical. If it’s nothing, we don’t want to go in heavy. If it’s something...”

“You *still* think Honeybee had something to do with this?” I wish I could sound more contemptuous about the idea, but the way this guy is leaning in, and she keeps glancing around...

It’s not that she’s looking for help, either. She just doesn’t want to be overheard.

“Fine,” I relent, though I don’t like the idea of leaving her alone with that stranger. I know an asshole when I see one. “We’ll watch how it plays out. Follow him, maybe.”

Max gives a nod, and only moments later the guy stalks off, leaving Honeybee looking even more distraught than before. We move quickly, following him as inconspicuously as possible. He heads toward the hospital’s multi-story parking lot, and we follow suit.

“Damn it,” I curse under my breath as we wind through the maze of cars, trying to keep up with him. People are everywhere, coming and going as visiting hours have just started. It’s a mess of activity that makes it difficult for us to stay on his tail.

And then we aren’t on his tail anymore. The guy’s vanished, my cool along with him. “We should’ve grabbed him while he was with Honeybee,” I snap at Max.

“We’ve already got a lead on him, and that’s Honeybee,” Max points out. “Let’s talk to her, ask who he was.”

“Fine,” I grumble, though I hate the idea of letting him slip through our fingers like this.

We head back to Honeybee, finding her smoking a cigarette around the side of the hospital. She quit when she joined the crew—Pony’s attempts to tempt her notwithstanding—but I can’t blame her for taking it up again now. Hell, *I’m* thinking about taking it up just to relieve the stress, though I get the feeling Max would disapprove.

And as far as stress relief and Max go...

I stamp out that thought before it goes anywhere.

Honeybee is jumpy as we approach, clearly still spooked by whatever just happened. I feel a surge of protectiveness toward her. She’s one of our own, and nobody messes with my crew without consequences.

“Hey, Bee,” I say as we approach her. She gives me a quick hug. “Who was that guy bothering you?”

Honeybee’s eyes widen, almost in panic. “Oh, just some creep.” She takes a deep drag from her cigarette. “I told him to get lost.”

“Sure you’re okay?”

“I can take care of myself.” Her voice is cool. “I need to get back to Nico.” She stubs out her cigarette on the wall and flicks it away. “Are you coming?” She throws it over her shoulder as she walks, without looking back at us.

Max and I exchange a glance, but follow.

I spend some time alone with Nico, but Tank—who’s mad again at seeing me—refuses to let me hang around long with Giddy. Still, the fact that both Nico and Giddy are recovering well lifts some weight off my shoulders. But there’s work to be done, so when Max and I have returned to the car, I don’t start the engine right away. I want to talk things through.

“Alright,” I say, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. “These PacSyn bastards. They’ve got some territory down near the Port that’s easier to walk into than some of their other haunts.”

Max nods, his eyes scanning the outside the car, always vigilant. “Agreed, that’s our best shot. But let’s not forget that one of the Bernardi factions also holds territory down there—at the moment. I don’t want to accidentally inflame things between the Castellanis and AJ Bernardi.”

“Speaking of which,” I say, curiosity getting the better of me, “what’s going on between the Castellanis and the Bernardis?”

“Going on?”

“Leo defects to your bunch—old Aldo gets whacked—now there’s two factions of ’em? And I hear that Julian Castellani and the Lion want AJ dead?”

“They do,” Max answers grimly.

“So why isn’t he?”

“Let’s stay focused on the task at hand.”

I can tell he won’t divulge any more information. Part of me is frustrated by that. But the other part sees it as a sign of Max Pedretti’s loyalty and honor, and I respect him all the more for it, so I change the subject. “So how do we find ourselves a few talkative PacSynners down at the docks?”

“We wait until the sun’s down,” Max says, “and then we go fishing. But in the meantime...”

My heart leaps hopefully, echoed by the content of my pants. “In the meantime?”

Max yawns. “I could use a nap. I think I’m too old these days to pull all-nighters like we did.”

The Port is a maze of warehouses and shipping containers, all grimy and dilapidated in the area we’re moving through.

Graffiti tags every surface, a riot of color amid the rust and rot. The night air stinks of diesel and fish, heavy and rank.

“Keep your eyes open,” Max murmurs. “Could be an ambush around any corner.” He’s looking much less tired than he did this afternoon by the time we made it back home where, true to his word, he had a nap.

In his own room.

I lay down for a while in mine, but I couldn’t sleep.

“Relax,” I say now. “I didn’t get this far by being careless.”

Still, my senses *are* on high alert. This is PacSyn territory, and if they catch us snooping around, it won’t end well. And then, as we walk into an open area, a group of men emerge from between two warehouses, blocking our path. My hand inches toward my gun, pulse racing, but Max puts his hand on my wrist, telling me to keep steady.

“Well, well,” one of them says with a sneer. “What do we have here?”

“Just passing through,” Max says easily. If Max is worried, he’s hiding it damn well. “No need for trouble.”

“On our turf,” the man says, “there’s always need for trouble.” A chorus of menacing chuckles follows his statement, and they close in tighter. I brace myself, fingers closing around my gun. But Max’s hand clamps onto my arm now, stilling me.

“Take it easy,” Max murmurs, barely moving his lips. He steps forward, hands raised, but I know there’s a gun tucked into the holder at the back of his jeans. “We just wanted a word,” he says to them.

The thugs laugh again, a harsh bark of sound. Their leader spits at Max’s feet. “Just one? Then I’ll cut it into your body and send you back to that fucker Castellani as a message.”

He pulls a knife from his belt, the blade glinting dully in the dim lights.

“Wrong answer,” Max says.

The guy charges. I pull out my gun, but there's no need. Max sidesteps neatly, grabbing the man's wrist and twisting until he drops the knife with a yelp of pain. The others jerk forward, then stop as I train my gun on them.

"Back off or this gets ugly."

For a moment they all hesitate, sizing us up.

"What are you waiting for?" their leader snarls. "Fucking kill these assholes!"

But one by one, his backup fades into the shadows between the warehouses until only he is left with us, clutching his injured wrist. Max grabs him by the front of his filthy shirt, slamming him against the wall.

"You're going to tell us everything we want to know," I say, "or Max here will break *both* your wrists. Got it?"

"Fuck you."

Max tightens his grip on the man's shirt, and I lean close so he can see the promise of violence in my eyes. "First National. Talk."

He talks. Babbles, really, spilling words in a desperate bid to save himself. But none of it is useful. No names, no locations, nothing we can actually use. Just useless drivel, the kind of information he would have heard on the street, but nothing about the actual setup.

After a few minutes I shove him away in disgust. "Get the fuck out of here."

He scrambles away without a second glance, disappearing around the corner of the nearest warehouse. I turn to Max, unable to keep the frustration from my voice. "Well, that was a waste of time."

"We knew this wouldn't be easy," Max says. He holsters his gun, glancing around. "Whoever embedded a mole in your crew is going to be high up. Chuckles Moran himself, I assume. He's not gonna spill his plans to the rank and file. It was worth a shot, but..." He shakes his head. "Anyway, we

should make like trees and leave before they find their courage—and their guns.”

“Make like trees and...” I cringe. “Uh, did you just make a dad joke?”

Max gives a small smile. “Let’s get moving.”

“So what next?” I ask on the way back to the car. We came all this way for nothing, put ourselves in danger for no reason.

Max’s eyes glint as he glances my way. “We dig deeper. Time to start leaning harder on the crew, Bricker, much as it pains me to say it.” As we settle back into the car, Max gives a wince and rolls his head on his neck, stretching. “I’m too old for this,” he sighs again.

“Bullshit,” I tell him. “That guy just about shit himself when you grabbed him.” He chuckles, and so do I. “Seriously, though,” I go on, as I drive back out to the main road, “We make a good team, don’t we?”

“Yeah,” Max says, “we do.”

Surprisingly. Maybe there’s something in the Castellanis that Anna-Vittoria should have a look at. She’s never been one to make friends, but times are changing. She obviously sees that, or she wouldn’t have sent Max to help me out in the first place.

“Tomorrow,” I say after a while, breaking the silence, “we should head back to the Lair. It’s past time I got rid of the place—should’ve done it right after...” I clear my throat. “We need to go through it for anything vital, I mean any clues about who this mole is, and then destroy it.”

“Agreed,” Max responds tiredly. His eyes are closed, and I wonder how tired he really is. Too tired to—? “We’ll find answers,” he goes on, cracking his eyes open. “One way or another, we will find this person and make them pay.”

Here I am thinking about my dick when a damn Castellani is keeping his eyes on the prize: finding the mole in *my* Family. I should be ashamed of myself. And yet...it’s hard to keep my mind from wandering when Max is right there beside me to glance at as I drive back to my place.

“After we finish with the Lair tomorrow,” he says, as I pull up in the driveway, “we need to look at Honeybee again.” His eyes open fully at last, and he gives me a serious look. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but—”

“No, I agree,” I say. “I don’t like what happened today. It could be nothing. Could be something. But that’s tomorrow. Tonight...” He raises an eyebrow, a silent prod for me to go on. “Tonight, maybe you could help me forget again?”

Surprise registers in his eyes. I feel compelled to add quickly, “It doesn’t have to mean anything. I just want to get my mind off of things. Figured maybe you did, too. We could...help each other out?”

He reaches out slowly, cupping my face in his hand, stroking me, a look of tenderness in his eyes I wasn’t expecting. “Yeah,” he says roughly. “Maybe we could.”

CHAPTER 29

BRICKER

WE'RE BARELY inside the house when I pull Max into a kiss, long and hard, but he breaks it off just as my hands start working at the buttons on his shirt.

"Hold on." He stills my fingers.

Shit. "You changed your mind?"

"No. But last time...last time I decided if we were ever doing this again, we'd do it *right*."

I grin too, now. "We didn't do it right last time? Mess on my couch suggested otherwise."

He gives a little huff. "There's more to sex than a happy ending. I just want to...take my time. If you're okay with that."

My heart speeds up so much I feel it humming in my throat. "Yeah," I croak out. "I'm okay with that." Does he even *know* how hot he's making me? "Um. In that case, give me fifteen?" I want to make sure I'm at my sparkly-fresh best, if Max Pedretti plans to take his time with me.

He raises his eyebrows a little, but nods. "Sure. You call me in when you're ready."

Call him in, like he's here to service me or something.

That idea only makes me hotter.

"I'll be quick," I promise, as I run upstairs with my cock already heavy in my jeans.

This will be the first time Max Pedretti has set foot in my bedroom, it occurs to me as I start the shower.

The first time we got naked it was in the hot tub, and then we stumbled up to his guest room. And then there was that giant argument, which I won't think about now as I step under the water.

Second time was downstairs on the lounge just yesterday, and it was hot and primal, but tinged with grief. Grief and regret and a desire to escape.

Tonight? I asked him to help me forget again, but that's not what I really want now, not since he said what he said downstairs.

I want *him*, time to explore him, to find out all the secrets of his body, since he won't share the secrets of his mind. He's still such a mystery; it's a fresh surprise every time he kisses me to find that under all that cool there's a hell of a lot of heat.

I dry down and leave the towel around my waist. Nice for Max to have something to open, right? And then I spend some time trying to position myself on the bed in the most inviting manner possible...until I feel like a fucking idiot, get off the bed, and go to the door.

"Hey," I call downstairs awkwardly. "I'm...ready."

Why the hell am I *nervous*? I've never been nervous about sex before. If there's one thing I know how to do, it's fuck. But I have to resist scurrying back into the bedroom as I hear his feet coming up the stairs. I'm glad I stayed in the doorway when he comes into view, because I get to see his eyes taking me in, traveling head to toe and back again.

"Still sure?"

I feel like if I open my mouth, my tongue is going to roll out, cartoon-like, a red fucking carpet for his cock to follow down my throat. So I just nod and walk backward, a silent invitation.

And Max follows.

I half-turn to make for the bed, but Max moves like lightning, lunging forward to grab my waist, pulling me tight up against him so that the air leaves my lungs in a rush. “Where do you think you’re going?” he murmurs, looking over my face.

“I...wherever you want?” I try.

“You got that right.” He backs me steadily into the wall, his body pinning mine as his hands grip my wrists above my head. I lean in for a kiss, but he avoids my lips, pressing a little harder on my wrists.

A thrill races through me. I struggle instinctively, my body tensing, but it only makes his grip tighten.

“Relax,” he tells me with a smile. His voice is like gravel, rough and deep, and it fucking *does* something to me. “You’re mine now. And we’ve got all the time in the world.”

Then his mouth is on my neck, teeth scraping along my throat before biting down gently on my shoulder. I catch my breath at the sensation as it melts into pleasure, my cock thickening up on cue. Fuck, what is he doing to me?

It’s not that I feel helpless.

It’s that I *want* to.

He pulls my arms down, pressing them behind my back. “Stay,” he orders with a mock-scowl.

“Oh, I plan to,” I tell him, finding my voice as his hands roam across my bare skin, squeezing my nipples just to judge my reaction.

“You like that?” he asks, giving a light twist.

Damn. “Yeah. I do.”

A lazy smile tilts his mouth to one side. “I’m going to enjoy exploring you.”

My breaths come fast and shallow. I fist my hands behind my back to keep from grabbing him, because I want this. I want him to do whatever he wants with me.

His fingers brush over my nipple again, tugging at the hardened bud, and I let out a soft moan. He chuckles, low and pleased, before bending his head to take my nipple between his teeth.

I arch into him with a gasp, my dick straining under the towel. He's barely done anything and already I'm shaking with need. How does he know exactly how to play my body? It's like he's digging out every secret desire I've never voiced. Every secret desire I never even knew I *had*.

Max releases my nipple, rubbing his thumb over it as he looks me in the eye again. His hand trails down to my waist, and I look down to watch as he slowly pulls the towel open and drops it to the floor, letting my attention-seeking dick bounce out. But his hand slides under to fondle my balls instead, his breath warm on my neck as he leans in. His other hand strokes my cheek, surprisingly gentle.

"Gorgeous," he murmurs, almost to himself, and I embarrass myself with a whine.

A fucking whine.

But the embarrassment flees as soon as he chuckles, and his hand closes around my sack in a possessive gesture. Right now, I'd do anything, *be* anything he wanted. Turns out his praise is a drug, and I'm hopelessly addicted. I nuzzle into him, craving more. More of anything he'll give me.

"Get on your knees," he says softly, and I hit the floor so fast I'm lucky I don't go straight through it. But it's not what I thought—or not yet, anyway. "I want you to undress me. Start with my shoes."

I glance up at him, my smart mouth about to run away with me, but he smiles, reaching out to run his fingers through my hair.

"Go on," he tells me.

So I go on. I pull at his shoelaces, wondering if I'd actually do this for any other man. I'm a fucking Capo, after all, or at least I was. If anyone could see me on my knees like this—in front of a Castellani—

But that just makes it hotter.

I help him step out of his shoes, his socks, and then I stand again to unbutton his shirt, help it slide off his shoulders. The fabric clings briefly to him before finally giving way, revealing those taut muscles beneath. He's not as cut as I am, but he's broad and solid and for a second I think about going to sleep with my head pillowed on that silky-haired chest.

God. Who even am I?

I put my hands on his belt and give him a look from under my lashes, the kind I know makes me look seductive as hell, but Max just pulls me in and kisses me on the forehead with a faint smile. "Take me out," he says, guiding my hands right to his belt buckle.

My fingers tremble in anticipation as I pull apart the buckle and then his pants, freeing his thick, hard length. He's big, bigger than I even remembered, already half-hard. I want to taste him so bad my mouth waters.

But something about the dynamic between us makes me pause. "Can I...?"

"Yeah," he says. "Go on."

I don't need to be told twice. I sink back to my knees and take him in my mouth eagerly, groaning at the taste and feel of him on my tongue. He fills me so perfectly, stretching my lips as he grows right there in my mouth.

He sighs in pleasure, his fingers in my hair. "Just like that. That's good."

The praise sends a jolt of heat straight to my groin. I take him deeper, relaxing my throat to swallow him whole. I want to give him everything, *be* everything he needs.

His hips buck, fucking my mouth in shallow thrusts. I moan around him, trying to urge him in deeper. I'm so hard it hurts, but all I can focus on is pleasing him, on sucking him just the way he wants it, on being his *good boy*...

Oh, God.

"Bricker."

I'm so focused on his dick that he has to say my name a second time before I look up at him.

"Up, Bricker. On the bed. Hands and knees."

I scramble to obey, positioning myself as he instructed. My heart hammers in anticipation, cock wagging around between my legs. I feel the bed dip behind me and then his hands are on me again, stroking down my spine. "Perfect," he says, parting my cheeks to expose my asshole.

I feel a warm stream of air over my hole and gasp at the sensation, twitching in his grip. He soothes me with a gentle pat, leaning down to press a surprisingly tender kiss to the small of my back.

"Relax," he murmurs, mouth trailing lower. "I want to make you feel good."

I've only had a few guys do this, because the truth is, I normally top. Most guys take one look at me usually and decide I *must* be a top, all those muscles, the way I'm so loud and confident...

It's mostly an act, all that bravado. An act I don't drop in front of anyone, even Van, and I *should* keep it up in front of Max, too, him being both a Castellani and a member of my crew—

His tongue circles slowly around the rim of my asshole and I have to choke down a moan of shocked pleasure. He's barely begun, and already I feel overwhelmed, drowning in sensation.

"Let me hear you," he says, and then his tongue presses inside and I keen loudly, fingers twisting in the sheets. He opens me up with lips and tongue, patiently working me, and it's so much, almost too much to bear. But still I push back into his face, wanting more, wanting his mouth and his tongue *right there*, God, it feels incredible...

I don't recognize the sounds coming out of me. I don't even know what I'm begging for, just—*more*.

"It's okay," he soothes me, withdrawing to nip at my cheeks. "I've got you." He reaches over me to the nightstand, where I left a handful of condoms and the lube in a prominent position, and before I can complain about the loss of his mouth, two

slick fingers replace his tongue, pressing in slow and sure, crooking to stroke at my prostate.

It steals my breath, and I rock back to meet his thrusts, chasing the feeling.

Max presses a kiss to the small of my back, his other hand stroking over the globes of my ass as he stretches me out, twisting his fingers around inside me. “That’s it. Let me in.”

“Yeah,” I gasp out, ready to agree to anything if only he’ll give me more. “Come on, Max, it’s enough—I need your dick.”

His fingers withdraw, and I do whimper at the loss this time. “I’ve got you,” he repeats, voice rough with lust and something else, something dark, something...

He pushes in with one smooth thrust, and I half-laugh, half-gasp as he fills and stretches me, overwhelming in the best possible way. There’s a burn that makes the bliss all the better, and all I want is more.

Max groans, seating himself fully inside me, fingers digging into my hips. “Made for me,” I think I hear him mutter, but then he pulls back and snaps his hips forward, nailing my prostate. I shout out, back arching.

“Again,” I beg. “Again.”

He does it again. And then again and again, taking me hard and deep, in a claiming, primal way I never want to end, the only sound the slick thwack of flesh on flesh and our tandem panting as he fucks me into oblivion. The coiling need in my gut tightens with every thrust. I’m drowning in him, desperate to come and desperate to keep going, climbing higher and higher...

Max leans over me, hooking an arm around my chest to pull me back against him. The new angle drives him impossibly deeper, and I whine loudly as his thrusts grow erratic, chasing his own release.

He bites down on my shoulder and the spark of pain pushes me over the edge. I come untouched with a shout, eyes slamming shut as I clench down hard around him.

His pace slows, lengthens, and then he buries himself to the hilt as he spills with a quiet grunt. He pulls out faster than I'd like, but makes sure that I'm okay before he goes to clean up. And he's back fast, crawling into the bed with me, peppering more kisses over my shoulders and neck with such affection that my heart squeezes.

"You're incredible," he murmurs.

I hum, basking in the afterglow and his praise. "So are you. That was..." Words fail me. Mind-blowing. Incredible. Perfect. None of them do justice to what we just shared.

Max just pulls me closer. But after a minute, I turn around in the bed, pushing him onto his back and putting my head there on his chest, just like I thought about before.

Fuck. It's just as comfy as it looks.

I sleep right through, missing dinner and everything, and when I wake up it's only just starting to get light. And I feel...

Better.

No, not better. Just a little less *lost*, maybe, in the vast ocean of doubt that I've been swimming around in. Yeah. Maybe that's it. Maybe I found a lighthouse in Max, someone I can be sure of. Someone whose light I can trust in all this dark uncertainty.

I smile to myself as I look down at him, spread out and snuffling in his sleep in a way that makes me melt for him. I'd like to go for round two this morning, but I need to put my dick away for now.

"Max," I say, sliding out of bed. "Wake up."

He grunts, rolling over to open tired eyes, looking at me.

And then he smiles.

I smile back before I can stop myself. Before I can break into a certified grin, I head for the bathroom, calling over my shoulder, "Get up, Pedretti. It's time to go to work."

CHAPTER 30

IT'S STILL EARLY when Bricker and I pull up to the rundown house in the Valley where the crew spent so much time planning the ill-fated heist. It was never much to look at in the first place, and now I feel like we're about to raid an old tomb. Hopefully it has a few secrets waiting to be uncovered.

Bricker's eyes are stormy as we go up the creaking step to the door. He's hoping the same thing I am—that somewhere in this ramshackle house is the answer to who betrayed us and got Rook killed. I'm not one for vengeance, usually. The Espositos live by their motto: blood for blood. Me, I think retaliatory killings make little sense. But I also know I'm a rarity in the world we inhabit, that for most of the men and women living in this underbelly life, honor makes demands that they don't question.

And whenever I think about Rook's pale face, his glassy eyes...well, I find that vengeful side of me, too.

So in this case, I'm with the Espositos. Blood for blood.

We step through the front door, and the soggy stink of stale beer and cigarettes hits me, along with an underlying smell that I recognize all too well. Death. It was tough bringing Rook back here, and Pony was so rattled that he wasn't much help, going in and out of the house several times to smoke, wandering around the place, unable to just sit still and wait.

But I pull my eyes away from the table where we laid Rook out, and I head toward the kitchen as Bricker goes through things in the living room.

The kitchen is in the same state of disarray we left it in, and there's nothing of interest there. But out the back window, in the middle of the overgrown yard, an old oil drum catches my eye. That's where Van burned the maps and plans before we left, on the day of the heist. Bricker told him to get rid of them, since they weren't needed anymore.

I go out and stride over, lifting the lid to peer inside. Ashes. Ashes and dirt and—and a glint of something at the bottom. I strip off my jacket and lean into the drum, trying not to breathe in, and come back out covered in claggy soot, with a half-incinerated cell phone as my trophy.

“Bricker!” He comes outside at my call, eyebrows going up when he sees the state of me, then dropping into a frown when he sees what I'm holding up. “Did you tell anyone to dump their phone in here?” I ask as he makes his way over.

He shakes his head. “We burned papers in that drum, but everyone knew electronics had to be turned in to the cleaners for disposal. Think there's anything left on it?”

“It's damaged, but I think I can get something off it.” I turn the phone over in my hands, looking for the SIM card slot. “Whoever did this didn't want us finding it, but they weren't careful enough. Still...makes me wonder why they didn't dump it offsite.”

“Can you get into it?” Bricker asks. I meet his gaze and give a little smile.

“Well, with your permission, Capo, yeah. I can give it a try.”

Bricker shakes his head, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You think we're at point where we can joke around about that illegal radio, huh?”

“Too soon?” I give a chuckle, but it dies out when I look at the phone again. “I'll do what I can. But it's pretty bad.”

“I know if there's anything to find, you'll find it.”

Things have changed between us in the weeks since I first joined his crew. Back then, he didn't trust me—he saw me as an outsider interfering in Family business. Now we've come to an understanding. We work well together, like he said.

And we work even better in bed, God help me. I should feel a lot shittier every time I think about that, but I can't. There's something so open about his sexuality that it makes it real hard to beat myself up over giving him what he asks for, every time he asks. And yeah, it's not like I'm not enjoying it, either. But I like seeing Bricker Soldano come apart for me even more than I look for my own release.

When he told me that it didn't have to mean anything... Well, I keep trying to remind myself of that, telling my feelings to take a break. If sex for Bricker is about passing the time, keeping his mind occupied, I'm happy to be of service, even if it maybe means a little more to me than it does to him.

Hell, I'm experienced enough to know how to keep my emotions in check.

I just wish I could tell him about his father.

But there's no use dwelling on that right now; we have a job to do. I peel off my shirt and shake off the worst of the wet ashes before putting it back on. "I'll get on it as soon as we're back at your place. It was Delligatti out here burning all those papers on the day, right?"

I ask it casually, trying not to let any implications seep in, but Bricker just goes blank again. He *must* see how suspicious this is, especially if what Pony said about Delligatti acting weird about a text on his phone is true.

"Let's keep looking around," is all he says.

We continue searching the house, but find nothing useful. It's not until Bricker, in frustration, yanks all the cushions off the sofa and up-ends it that we discover something else—a few crumpled pages.

"What..." Bricker mutters.

He picks them up, smoothing them out to get a better look. Rook's handwriting is unmistakable. These are the notes he must have taken, the notes he lost.

"Shit," Bricker mutters, brow furrowing as he takes in the scribbled handwriting. "Rook's notes—and the layout, too," he

adds, grabbing up another screwed-up wad of paper. “The layout of the bank floor. How did they end up in there?”

“Not the kind of hiding place you forget about,” I agree. “Delligatti rode Rook pretty hard about losing them. And there they were, all along.”

Bricker’s expression darkens at the second mention of his friend. I know he doesn’t want to think Delligatti had something to do with Rook’s death—or the failed heist, by implication—but he needs to consider it. So I don’t push it, but privately, I do wonder if Van Delligatti’s hands are as clean as Bricker wants to believe.

“Map of the bank floor had our positions marked out on it,” I point out, as Bricker uncrumples it as best he can. “That would’ve been gold to PacSyn.”

Bricker tucks the papers into his pocket. “Anyone could have hidden these. Maybe Rook did it himself, and maybe he *did* just forget. And anyone could’ve thrown their phone in the drum out there. Could be an innocent mistake; maybe they forgot we’re supposed to turn them in. But for now, who owned the phone, who used it—that’s the only lead we have.”

We take a moment to look around one last time. The peeling paint on the walls, the stained carpet, the broken ceiling fan that never worked...all of these things hold memories of what was once a makeshift sanctuary.

“We spent so much time here,” Bricker murmurs. “Lot of good times. Going to be strange not coming back.”

He doesn’t say it, but I know what he’s thinking. Everything’s different. Rook’s gone, the crew disbanded, and we’re hunting for a traitor.

“I need to order the cleaners in,” he goes on. “But I don’t know...doesn’t feel right, somehow, to burn it all down. This—this was our *home*.”

“It’s tough as hell. But you can’t afford to be sentimental.” I put a hand on his shoulder, feeling the tension there. “Being Capo means making the hard calls.”

Bricker scrubs a hand through his hair. “I know. I get that. But can we take a second? Just to, you know. Honor Rook? The team?”

We share a moment of silence, and I think about Rook with sorrow. He didn’t deserve what happened to him. Neither did the rest of the crew—except the one asshole who caused it. And he—or she—will get what’s coming to them.

“Rook loved this place,” Bricker says, his voice barely more than a whisper. “It’s where he felt like he belonged.”

“We’ll get justice for him.” I hesitate a moment, but in the end I say it, the Esposito oath. “Blood for blood.”

He straightens up a little. “Blood for blood,” he repeats.

Outside, Bricker pauses after we get into the car, looking back at the house. “Still feels like I’m torching the family home.”

But he makes the phone call, speaking in code to the Esposito cleaner. I interpret the euphemisms easily enough—the house will be razed to the ground, but with enough care to ensure the rest of the neighborhood is safe. Once the call ends, Bricker gives a heavy sigh.

“Just drive,” I say gently. “The past is done. You can’t change it. All that matters now is your crew and your Family.”

He gives me a strange look. “My crew and my Family,” he agrees. “And...” But then he shakes his head. “Let’s get moving.”

Bricker starts the engine and pulls onto the road, the Lair dwindling in the rearview mirror behind us.

Back at his house, I settle in at the dining table with the remains of the cheap burner phone. It’s a mess of melted plastic and charred circuits, but if there’s anything to recover, I’ll find it.

Bricker hovers at my shoulder, watching me work. “You really think you can get anything off that?”

“If it was easy, you wouldn’t need me.” I give him a wry smile. “Relax. Why don’t you make us some coffee?”

He wanders off to brew a pot, leaving me in peace to focus. One night soon, we’ll have to ditch the caffeine. But not tonight. Carefully, I disassemble what’s left of the phone under the bright light of the overhead fixtures. It’s slow, painstaking work, trying to preserve any components that might retain data.

A half-hour passes in silence before Bricker speaks up again. “How’d you get to be so good with this tech stuff anyway?”

“Picked up a few things in my misspent youth.” I glance up to find him watching me with a mix of curiosity and wariness. “I had a stint in the joint pretty young,” I continue evenly. “You learn skills to pass the time. Turned out I had an aptitude for this kind of thing.”

“And the Castellanis just...took you in after that? After prison, I mean?”

“No, I...” I met his dad there in the big house. Fabi saved my life from some asshole looking to make a name for himself. And after we got out, Fabi and I teamed up. “I did a few different things. The banks, you know. But I got out of that before I got put away. I had a cousin who was with the Alessis in New York. He told me to come out East, join up. But I like the sunshine here in Cali, and anyway, the Castellanis were okay with, well, you know.”

“The gay thing?”

“The gay thing. And then I proved useful.” I shrug. “And loyal.”

“Who’d you work under? I mean, which Capos?”

“Most of them are retired now. But I worked under Al Montanari for a while. Bertinelli for a few months, but he was already long in the tooth when I was with him. A few more, here and there—” I list them out, trying to remember the timeline. It all seems so long ago. “But then the Boss pulled me for security at Redwood.”

“Damn.” Bricker whistles, clearly impressed. “You’ve worked with some big names, Pedretti.”

“And they all had their own way of leading,” I go on, my hands still carefully working on the phone’s delicate components. “But you’re just as good as any of them, Bricker.”

“Huh. So...exactly *how* okay were all those Capos with the gay thing?” He tries to sound casual, but his face reddens as I take a closer look at him.

“Are you trying to ask if I slept with any of them?”

“Of course not!” His cheeks go an even deeper shade of red.

“You’re the only Capo I’ve ever thought about like that,” I tell him frankly, meeting his eyes. “And the only one I’ve slept with. And hell, maybe it shouldn’t have happened, but I can’t regret it, Bricker.”

Bricker seems both embarrassed and pleased by my admission. He clears his throat, trying to regain his composure. “Well, uh, good to know. I don’t...you know, regret it either.”

Neither of us are great with emotional declarations, so I leave it at that and return to the phone. But inside, I’m getting more and more torn up over whether to break Anna-Vittoria’s directive to keep my past with Fabi Soldano quiet.

If things go on like they have been, I’ll have to tell Bricker. And I’ll have to explain why the hell I didn’t tell him weeks ago.

But now isn’t exactly the best time.

Besides, I’ve finally managed to get enough together to start extracting data. Bricker moves to stand behind me, looking over my shoulder. “There,” I say, tapping at the laptop screen where I bring up the data. “Last few calls and texts.”

“Can you trace the number?” Bricker’s voice is tight with anticipation.

“No. But Jack could. Unless you Espositos have someone—”

“No,” Bricker says. “I mean, yeah, we do. But...let’s keep this quiet, and off the radar. If you think Jacopo’s the best guy—”

“Oh, he is.” I send Jack a quick text as we keep looking through the texts on the phone. Most of them are basic, brief. Times, dates. Bricker’s face goes dark as he reads them.

“These are the times and dates of all our jobs that went wrong,” he seethes. And then he finds a photograph of all the maps and blueprints, including Rook’s notes, and he swears long and loud. “This is it,” he says at last. “Whoever had this phone was our mole.”

“Yep,” I agree, pointing at the last text.

It reads, simply, *It’s on.*

And an hour later, Rook was dead.

CHAPTER 31

BRICKER

I STARE at the burned-up cell phone, feeling sick at the thought that it's true. It's really true. Someone in the crew has been playing us, for God knows how long.

"But why not dump the phone somewhere else?" I say at last. "Why try to destroy it at the Lair?"

"Maybe they figured they wouldn't have a chance to dispose of it afterward," Max speculates. "Still, dumb move to burn it at the house."

"Dumb move to turn on us in the first place." I squeeze his shoulder, a brief but heartfelt gesture. "Good work," I tell him, my voice sounds strangely gruff. He covers my hand with his, just for a moment, before getting back to it, digging further into the data.

Johnny Jacopo really is a wonder. Half an hour later, the number comes back registered to a prepaid phone, now out of service and bought with cash. But he manages to trace where it was first activated. Max and I take a look at the map location.

"Anyone from the team living in that area?" Max asks.

"A couple of them are close. Pony. Jazz. Tank would pass through that area on his way to the Valley." I pause, then add grudgingly, "And Van."

I wait for Max to jump on that, but he just nods. "Tomorrow we should have a talk with each of them."

He's right, and I need to remember he's not the kind of man to jump to conclusions. So far, he's been scrupulously fair. It's just that none of the options are good. And one looks more

likely than the others, as far as circumstantial evidence goes. But I can't believe it of Van, I really can't.

"Tomorrow," I agree. "Tomorrow's problems. But tonight, I'm beat." I look over at Max, hoping what I'm about to say will come out right. "Listen, I mean this in the best way, but I don't think I'm up for, you know—"

"It's all good," Max says, too quickly. "I'll sleep in my room tonight."

"Uh, sure. If you like. But I was going to ask if maybe we could just...sleep together. I mean, like, *actually* sleep. I don't know what it is, but I sleep like a log when you're next to me."

A slow smile spreads over his face. "You know what? Me, too."

A good night's sleep is what we need. And tomorrow...

Tomorrow we have some hard conversations waiting for us.

I sleep like a log and wake feeling more optimistic about things in general. Maybe it's something about knowing Max Pedretti is on my side. Committed.

It's been a wet couple of days and there seems no chance of it stopping just yet. The rain pelts rhythmically against the window, providing the soundtrack for our conversation over breakfast. Max and I sit across from each other after we've eaten—cereal today, on his insistence—and try to decide which of my closest friends is most likely to have betrayed us.

"Well?" Max asks at last. "What's our play?"

"Whichever one we start with, we can't spook them. We'll lose their trust if we accuse without proof." I try to suck up some of that calm that Max is projecting. "Honeybee's at the hospital every day," I relent at last. "Let's start with her."

"Because she's the most accessible or because you think she's least likely to be the mole?"

“Both, I guess,” I admit, feeling the need to defend her. “Honeybee’s basically still a kid, only just turned twenty. I don’t want to believe she could betray us like that.”

Max pushes up off his seat with a nod. “She’ll be easier to read than the others.”

I feel a swell of protectiveness for Honeybee. She’s like a little sister to me. If she’s betrayed us, it *must* be under duress. Max is part of the crew, and I believe he has our best interests at heart, but I’m surprised he doesn’t seem to find it shocking to think that one of them has turned.

Still, given some of the drama the Castellanis have been through over the last year, I guess it makes sense he’s more cynical. No one knows the full story except them, but things spill out. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that *Ciro Castellani*, the old Don, was murdered, or that *Leo Bernardi* defecting to the Castellanis made some waves.

Max seems to take it all in stride, though. I need to figure out how he does that, so I can do it too.

Later, he stops me at the front door, just before I open it. “We can’t afford to let feelings cloud our judgment,” he says gently. “It’s not about the person we’re questioning. It’s about keeping the *rest* of the crew safe.”

“Of course,” I say, trying to assimilate his approach. But try as I might, I can’t make the idea that Honeybee is a traitor any easier to swallow.

Or Van.

I grab my jacket. “Let’s go.”

The rain is relentless today, as if the heavens have opened up in protest at our mission. We’re almost at the hospital when I spot Honeybee hurrying down the sidewalk, her bright blue hair like a beacon.

“That’s the coffee house she was at the other day, too,” Max says as I pull over to the curb. “I recognize the brand.” We watch, unnoticed, as she enters and sits down with a man in a booth.

“And that’s the same asshole we saw her with the other day,” I say.

“Might be time to find out who he is.”

We exit the car, keeping a safe distance from each other to avoid too much attention as we head separately into the café. I feel the reassuring weight of my gun pressing against my side, ready if needed. But what if Honeybee really is the mole? Just the thought of it makes me sick to my stomach.

The scent of fresh-brewed espresso wafts over me as I hurry in the door. I slide into a booth inside, shrouded by a midmorning crowd, and Max joins me minutes later. Honeybee and the man have chosen a table near the back, speaking in hushed tones. I strain to overhear their conversation, but they don’t seem to notice us, their conversation intense and focused.

The coffee shop is warm, packed with people, but the atmosphere between the two of them is chilly. Honeybee’s cheerful face has been replaced with a sullen expression, and she stares hard at the table instead of at her companion.

“Listen, you ungrateful little brat,” the man snarls, loud enough for me to hear over the crowd. He leans forward, eyes malicious as grabs Honeybee’s wrist, squeezing until she cries out, and that’s my limit.

I’m on my feet before I realize I’ve moved. In two strides I’m at their table, wrenching the man’s arm away from Honeybee. “Get your fucking hands off her.”

He whirls in his seat to face me, surprised as he looks up, and then his eyes slide to the gun peeking out from under my jacket—not entirely by accident. “Mind your own goddamn business,” he says.

Max comes up behind me and offers a hand to Honeybee, who takes it gratefully and slides out of the booth. Max stands in front of her, leaning over our mark along with me.

“Who the hell are you two?” the guy sneers, looking us up and down with undisguised contempt. He turns to Honeybee. “You got a double set of pimps taking—”

He breaks off as I put one hand on his shoulder and the other on my gun. “You want to think hard about what comes out of that mouth next.”

He goes pale, but he’s still pissy. “She owes me,” he snaps.

“Whatever you think she owes you, it’s been paid in full.”

“What if I don’t see it the same way?” the man challenges, leaning back in his chair. “Anyways, we’re friends. Right, Honeybee?”

I grab his face and wrench him back to look at me. “Don’t talk to her. Talk to me. Who the hell are you?”

Somehow, despite my hand on his face, he manages to give a smug smirk. “I’m her husband.”

“No he’s not,” Honeybee bursts out.

He grins on, despite my fingers pressing into his cheeks. “Close enough.”

Ah. So this is the ex Honeybee has told me about—in confidence, when I first tested her out as a possible recruit. I know all about him, and it takes everything in me not to pull my gun right here and make the world a slightly better place.

“Even if you *were* married, that wouldn’t give you the right to threaten her,” I point out. “So you’re going to leave here and never come back.”

This is the guy who pulled her into the circus, such as they called themselves, when she was only thirteen. Somehow they were more stable than Honeybee’s homelife, to hear her tell it. A group of performers who kept moving around not because they were a traveling troupe, but because they never liked to stay in one place long enough for the law to catch up with them. Honeybee managed to get out just after of her eighteenth birthday and came to LA, where she performed at Venice Beach for loose change and the occasional coffee or meal from one of the café owners along the beachfront.

Until I found her, and she found a new Family.

“That little thief owes me,” the guy insists. “And I’ve come to collect.”

After a glance around the cafe to make sure we’re not being observed, Max pulls out a neat stack of cash from his inside pocket, removes the clip from it, and sets it down on the table. “There you go,” he says. “Debt paid.”

The guy’s eyes go from the cash, to Max, to me.

“You should take the money and run,” I advise. “My associate here has less of a temper than I do. But you push *me* one more time, and you won’t leave here with all your teeth. Get me?”

I let go of his face and step back. The guy’s hand slides over to the money, grabs it, and stuffs it in his pocket. Max moves in front of Honeybee again as he slides out of the booth, standing up in front of me.

“You’re welcome to her,” he says with a fake smile. “But you should remember, I made her what she is today. If it wasn’t for me, she’d still be picking pockets in some backwater town.”

“You and your friends will get out of LA within the next four hours. And you won’t be back in California again.”

“Is that a threat?” the man snarls, baring his teeth like an animal.

“Yeah,” I tell him simply, and he takes a small step backward. “Let me be crystal fucking clear, asshole. You come at her again, you’ll find a whole Family ready to put you down. Permanently. Now fuck off.”

He hesitates for a moment, bravado crumbling as he glances between Max and me. Then he sneers and storms out. The rest of the customers in the place don’t even seem to have noticed anything going on—or they’re doing a very good impression of minding their own business, anyway.

Honeybee is trembling, so Max takes her over to the table where we were originally sitting. She grabs my hand, her fingers tight. “Cap, you shouldn’t have—God, neither of you

should've—Max, I'll pay back that money you gave him, however much—”

“No, you won't,” he says at once. “What's money? Just paper. Easy to make, easy to give away. What we want to know is, are you okay?”

I know more about Honeybee's background than Max does, but he seems to have picked up on the signals fast.

“I'm okay,” she whispers. “But I put you all in danger. If he comes back—”

“Are you kidding me? He's not coming back,” I tell her. “I'm gonna make some calls. Make sure he leaves like I told him to.” My first inclination is to bury them all, or at least this asshole ex of hers, but I've seen his type before. He took the money, and he knows there will be no more forthcoming.

He'll stay away, because he knows what will happen if he doesn't.

“Th-thank you,” Honeybee snuffles.

Max reaches out to take her other hand and gives it a squeeze. “Anytime.”

“We've got your back,” I tell her. “Always. What's Family for, eh?”

She gives a watery smile. “You should...you should throw me out of the crew for keeping secrets. He's been here for weeks, trying to get money out of me...even the day after the bank job, he made me meet him here—I had to go home and get changed just so he wouldn't know what was going on, even though all I wanted to do was stay with N-Nico.”

Max and I exchange a glance. So that explains that.

“Throw you out over some asshole from your past? Come on, now, Bee,” I say softly. “You know that's not how we operate. But you need to be honest with me, tell me straight up—did he have anything to do with the crew jobs going wrong?”

The genuine horror on her face tells me all I need to know, then and there. But I still let her splutter through teary denials.

She deserves to be heard, something this troglodyte ex of hers never allowed.

“And as for Evan,” she finishes, her eyes flashing fire, “he likes to say I owe him room and board for when he took care of me at the circus, but it’s bullshit. I know that. I just...I didn’t want my problems to impact the crew, you know? And I didn’t want...” She bites her lip. “Nico always treats me so nice,” she whispers.

I get it then. She was ashamed, and she wanted to hide her past from Nico. “Because Nico’s a good guy,” I tell her. “And he cares about you. But this is your story, Bee. We’ll keep it quiet until *you* feel like it’s time to tell him. Besides, I don’t want Nico dragging that beat-up body of his out of a hospital bed to try and run your ex out of town.”

It prompts a faint smile from Honeybee. “He would too, the big dummy.”

“And you should trust,” Max adds, “that you always have backup, Honeybee. That’s a promise. That’s Family.”

As Honeybee snuffles and nods, I catch Max’s eye again, and he gives a little shake of the head. I know what he’s thinking. She’s not the one we’re looking for. But if we believe Honeybee, that means the mole is someone else.

The suspects are dwindling.

“Come on.” I pull Honeybee by the hand along with me. “Let’s get you back to Nico, eh?”

As we leave the coffee shop, I glance around, and Max does, too. We’re looking for any sign of the man who threatened Honeybee. But he’s long gone.

“We believe her?” I ask Max, once we’ve deposited Honeybee back with a still pale but very happy to see her Nico.

“I mean, yeah, I do,” Max says with a shrug. “You?”

“Yeah. I’ll make a few calls, make sure that fucknut’s out of state by tonight.”

“You know, I’m sure Jack would like to feel useful again. He’d be happy to send a few of his old crew out there to take care of

things.”

I hesitate. Castellanis sweeping up Esposito messes? That’s my first instinct, but it’s not fair. I think about Anna-Vittoria telling me to stay out of trouble for the time being, and even though I know she’d be more than happy to send some heat out to protect Nico’s girl...well, maybe it’d be quicker and quieter this way.

“Sure,” I say. “Make a call. Then let’s go around to see Giddy. If Tank’s there, I’d like to have a word with him, next.”

Tank hates me already for what happened at the bank. So now’s as good a time as any to poke the bear.

CHAPTER 32

BRICKER

MAX and I walk down the sterile white hallways toward Giddy's room in silence. Max keeps pace beside me, his face an expressionless mask. He's focused, tactical, like we're marching into battle instead of visiting an injured friend.

"How do I do this?" I mutter, half to myself.

But Max responds. "Go easy on him," he offers. "On both of them. Tank's on edge after what happened to Giddy, and you're a convenient target."

Frankly, I think I'm not just a convenient target, but an *appropriate* target. But I need to remind myself what Max keeps saying to me: Giddy knew the risks. We all did. This is the life we chose.

And that's true, but it doesn't change the fact that my crew, my family, is falling apart at the seams.

When we enter, Tank sits vigil at his brother's bedside. Giddy is sleeping. Tank's face is creased with worry as he watches his little brother's chest rise and fall, but when he looks up and sees us, his expression hardens. I know that look—I've seen it aimed at enough enemies in our time together.

Never at me.

"Tank." I give a nod of greeting and still get that cold stare-down in response.

"What do you want?"

"Just checking on Giddy. How's he doing?"

"How do you think?"

I'm already aware this isn't going to go well, but Max has my back. "Bricker didn't pull the trigger, Tank."

Tank's laugh is brittle and mirthless. "Yeah? Well, he damn sure didn't stop it, either."

That cuts deep. We're supposed to be brothers, brothers bound in blood oaths. But now he looks at me like I'm the enemy. I bite back a retort, though, since arguing won't help. "Tank, we need to talk," I try instead.

"What's there to talk about?"

"I need to figure out what went wrong during the heist. So—"

"Are you trying to say *I* had something to do with it?"

He's getting too loud, and Giddy rouses. He smiles sleepily when he sees me. "Hey, Cap. And Max is still with us, huh? It's good to see you guys."

I lean over and smile at him, Tank or no Tank. "Won't ask how you're feeling. You look like shit. Max wanted to see that ugly face again, have a little catch up." I give Tank a significant look. "Tank, come over here and talk to me. Let Max have some time with Giddy."

Maybe it's the voice I'm using, what I think of as my Capo Voice, but despite Tank's glare, he follows me to the corner of the room. "I know you're upset," I tell him evenly. "But calling me an asshole every time you see me won't change anything. Let's talk this through."

Tank's jaw clenches. For a moment, I think he'll keep fighting it. But he gives a shrug. "If you think it'll change anything, you can talk."

How would Max approach this? Massimo Pedretti might never have been a Capo himself, but he's someone I can learn from. "Here's what we know," I begin, trying to keep my voice as calm as Max's always sounds. "The heist was compromised. Someone talked. So tell me this, because I have to ask. Was it you?"

Tank's eyes flash. "Are you fucking kidding me?" he hisses. "My little brother nearly died!"

I raise my hands in a placating gesture. “Like I said, I have to ask. I’m not accusing you. I’m just trying to get to the bottom of things. Next question,” I go on quickly, “is whether you’ve noticed anything weird among the crew. Strange behaviors, unusual meetings, anything that might suggest there’s something more going on.”

“No.”

“Come on, Tank, this is important.” My frustration is mounting, along with Tank’s anger.

He shakes his head in disgust. “If you trusted me, you wouldn’t even *ask* these questions. You’re either a fool or a traitor yourself, Bricker.”

I’m no stoic, not like Max. My frustrations boil over, and I get louder despite myself. “I’m trying to protect our family, Tank. Don’t you get that?”

“Family? Some family we turned out to be.”

“Hey, that’s enough!” Giddy’s weak voice interrupts the escalating argument. “Bricker didn’t do this to me, Tank. No more than you did. We need to stick together.”

“Stick together? You really are naïve, Giddy. Go back to sleep, so you mend quicker. And you two can get out.”

“Bricker’s just trying to—” Max begins, but Tank rounds on him.

“Fuck off, Castellani. You’re part of the problem.”

“*Hey*,” Giddy says sharply. “Max got us out of there alive. He’s on our side, bro.”

“Hero of the hour, huh?” Tank glares daggers at Max. “If you want your mole, look in front of your nose, Bricker. Or maybe look a little past it—your buddy Van planned the whole damn thing in the first place. He was best placed to sabotage it.”

“Tank, that’s *enough!*” Giddy shouts, struggling to sit up in his bed despite his obvious pain. The sudden burst of energy seems to drain him, and he slumps back onto his pillows, defeated. Max leans over him, rearranging the sheets, tutting at him.

For a moment, Tank looks ashamed of himself, but his anger only drops to a simmer. He crosses his arms over his chest. “You’re questioning everyone, huh? Know who else’s been acting strange lately? Tony the Pony. Disappearing off the radar for hours on end, never answering his fucking phone.”

“You think he—”

“Or maybe—maybe it’s *Honeybee*,” Tank goes on, eyes wide and mocking. “Maybe she was looking to take out Nico, what do you think?”

I look across at Max, who is obviously thinking what I’m thinking. It’s a bust. Time to get out of here. “Okay,” I say, trying to sound neutral despite the knot tightening in my stomach. “I just wanted to know what you thought.”

“You want to know what I think, Bricker? I think you’re looking to blame someone when the fault was yours.”

“Maybe it wasn’t anyone’s fault,” Giddy suggests, his voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe we were just unlucky. Maybe PacSyn has ears in places we don’t know about. Bugs...in the house...maybe?”

Max shakes his head, speaking to Giddy gently. “Bricker and I checked the house for bugs. We were thorough.” He glances back at me, then Tank. “But it’s possible someone overheard a member of the crew talking about the job elsewhere.”

A flicker of doubt interrupts Tank’s icy expression, but he keeps up the aggression. “You looking to pin the blame on one of us, Castellani? Fuck off outta here, both of you. And don’t come back.”

The finality in his voice is unmistakable, and the last threads of our bond seem to unravel with each syllable.

I turn to Giddy, give him a nod. He looks mad—and sad. Max is already heading to the door. I give one last glance at Tank. A man who was once a brother is now a stranger, his face weary with pain and suspicion under all that hate.

And I don’t blame him for hating me.

Max and I get back to the car before I speak again. “Tank’s always been like an emotional brick wall, but this...” I trail off, slam my hand down on the wheel. “*Fuck.*” Max’s face is impassive, but I think I see something in his eyes, and it unnerves me. “Surely you don’t think it’s Tank? He’s so mad about Giddy, I...”

And then it finally occurs to me that his anger might well be down to guilt.

“I didn’t hear much except deflection,” Max says. “But I’m too old and you’re too tired for us to go jumping so hard to conclusions.”

“You’re not old,” I say awkwardly. Max gives me this cute half-smile and I have to force my mind back to the job. “So where do we go from here?” I start the engine. “Who’s next?”

Max doesn’t answer right away, staring out the window thoughtfully as he considers our next move. Maybe it should be on me to suggest it, but I’m still dazed by the encounter with Tank—and Max always has good ideas.

“You already know who’s next,” Max says finally, when we’re back on the road. “It’s Van. And then Pony, and then Jazz, and hell, even Nico, if it comes to that. We keep digging, Bricker. Digging until we find the truth.”

“The truth,” I echo.

I swear to God, I will *not* let this darkness consume my brothers and sisters.

But as I drive down the wet streets, I wonder if it’s already too late.

Later that night, sitting at a small table in my bedroom with a rapidly depleting pile of paper, I crumple another draft of my eulogy and toss it over my shoulder with the rest of them lying scattered on the floor. What am I supposed to say about Rook? That he was a good kid, and I got him killed?

And I keep thinking about my father, too, wondering if—when the time comes—I’ll have to do this for him, too. Write a eulogy. Stand up and speak in his memory. What the hell could I even say, when I haven’t seen him for so long? I saw Rook every day, loved him like a brother, and I can barely find words to put on the page for him.

I failed Rook at the bank, and I’ll fail him again tomorrow at the funeral with a shitty, stilted eulogy. I’ll fail my father when the time comes, too.

A small sound makes me turn around to see Max leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. “You want some help with that?”

I’ve been working on it since we got home from the hospital, Tank’s accusations playing over and over in my head.

“Tank was right,” I say. “I’m not cut out for any of this.”

“Bullshit. You’re a natural.”

I rake my hands through my hair. “I got Rook *killed*. My own man.”

“PacSyn killed that poor kid. And you think Tank hasn’t made his share of mistakes?” Max steps forward and puts a hand on my shoulder as he leans over to see the next draft. I got as far as *Eulogy* at the top of the page.

And his touch seems to burn through my shirt.

“What makes a good leader isn’t never screwing up,” he tells me. “It’s learning from your mistakes and doing better next time.”

His faith in me makes my chest ache. I cover his hand with mine, holding on like he’s the only thing keeping me from drowning. “I don’t know if I can do this tomorrow.”

“You won’t be alone. I’m here for you. Whatever you need.”

I know exactly what I need. I need to *forget*, if only for a little while. I grab Max’s wrist as I stand, turn, and crush my mouth against his.

He stiffens for a moment, then groans, fisting my shirt to yank me closer. The kiss is hungry, sharp, made up of teeth and tongues. When we break apart, panting, Max searches my face. His eyes are hooded, pupils blown wide. “Bricker, are you sure—”

“Please.” I’m already fumbling at his belt, craving the oblivion of having his cock down my throat, having just *one thing* in the whole fucking universe to concentrate on. “I’m sure. *Please, Max.*”

A smile tugs at the corner of Max’s mouth as he helps me get his jeans open. “Since you asked so nicely.”

I drop to my knees as Max’s dick springs free, thick and heavy. My mouth waters. I grab the base and guide it between my lips without messing around, humming at the taste of salt and musk already there.

“God, you’re perfect.” Max’s voice is a rough purr as his fingers slide into my hair.

His words light me up, melting away thoughts of everything but the cock filling up my mouth. *His* cock. I take him deeper, craving the ache in my jaw, chasing the helpless noises I know I can drag from his throat.

Max’s grip tightens, tugging me closer until I swallow around his length. “Just like that,” he sighs. But I shove down further, make myself choke on it. Show him what I want. “You like it a little rough, don’t you?” he murmurs. “Want me to fuck that pretty mouth?”

I moan my assent with his dick already partway down my throat, the vibration wringing a curse out of him. He drags my head back and holds me there for a second before snapping his hips, driving into my mouth. I relax as much as I can, struggling to breathe as he uses me. It’s so good I could cry, so easy to narrow my focus to the slide of his cock, his hard grip on my hair, the answering ache in my balls.

“Look at me.” His command cuts through my haze of need. I raise my eyes to Max’s face, to the tenderness in his gaze, a

sharp contrast to the merciless way he fucks my face. “You’re so perfect, Bricker,” he gasps out. “So perfect.”

His praise cracks something open in my chest and I suck harder, desperate to please him. To forget everything but this moment. Max gasps out a warning just before he floods my mouth. I struggle to swallow it all, a few drops escaping to trickle down my chin.

Max hauls me to my feet and puts his mouth on mine, licking the taste of himself from my tongue. “Come and sleep with me tonight?”

The raw need of his tone makes my decision for me. I nod against his lips. “Mm-*hmm*.”

Tonight, at least, I won’t face the darkness alone.

CHAPTER 33

MAX

I GRIP Bricker's shoulders and steer him toward the bedroom. My hands already itch to explore the hard planes of his body again. To trace every ridge and valley of muscle. To hear his breath catch when I find a sensitive spot. He's a work of art, every inch, and I intend to admire him with the appropriate amount of attention.

I worry he's using sex between us as a crutch.

I worry that I am, too.

But the lingering ripples from my recent climax in his mouth make it hard to be rational, along with the bone-deep physical need that still courses through me. I might have come, but something in me needs more.

Needs *him*.

We've reached my room. Time to shut off that sensible part and make sure Bricker gets what *he* needs. I can worry tomorrow, after all.

"On the bed," I order him.

Bricker sprawls across the mattress, gazing up at me through hooded eyes. Waiting. Needing. Just as desperate as I am, though he hides it better, lazily lacing his fingers behind his head.

I let my gaze wander over his broad chest as I undress, follow the dark hairs that trail down between his ridged abs. His biceps flex as he braces himself on his elbows, and his thighs are thick slabs of muscle.

I want to feel them wrapped around my waist.

God, my dick is twitching again.

“Max,” he grits out. “Come on, I’m dying here.”

I pause for a moment, torn between wanting to make this last and wanting to claim every inch of him as my own. Every fiber of my being screams at me to touch him, to worship his body like the temple it is, but...

But this is *wrong*, what’s going on between us. It’s built on half-truths and outright lies, and if I had any kind of honor I’d...

Well, I’d...

Bricker jacks himself slowly, his tongue flicking out over his lower lip as he waits for me to give him what he needs. What he’s asked for. Even *begged* for...

I can worry about my honor later. It’s a small sacrifice to make sure Bricker gets what he needs.

I kneel on the edge of the bed and push his hand aside as I run my tongue up the inside of his thigh. His cock jerks, the head already slick with pre-cum.

“Please,” Bricker gasps. He arches into my touch.

“Alright,” I murmur, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to his inner thigh. “I’ve got you.”

I close my hand around his hard length. Bricker groans in relief, his head falling back on the pillows as I stroke him slowly. I drink in his pleasure, hoarding every moan and shudder. The aching doubt inside me remains, but this is a balm for my soul.

“God, Max,” Bricker moans, arching into my touch. “You make it feel so good. How do you make it feel so *good*?”

Practice, I want to say. But it sounds so crass, I keep it to myself. Being with him is so different from my usual sexual encounters. I’m not one for romance or emotional entanglements, and yet here I am.

Completely overwhelmed by Bricker Soldano.

I crawl up to taste his lips. He responds hungrily, tongue tangling with mine as his hands grasp my shoulders and pull me closer. I feel the desperation in him, the need for more, and I want to build up that fire, make him burn for me the way I burn for him.

Even though this is just a hookup for him. And I'm just a useful outlet.

Right now, I don't even care. I need to taste him. Want to make him beg for me.

I kiss along his jaw, nipping at the sensitive skin of his neck. Bricker's hands slide down my back to grip my ass.

"Fuck, that mouth of yours," he groans as I kiss lower, teasing his nipples with my tongue. I lavish them with attention until he writhes beneath me.

"Tell me what you want," I rasp against his skin.

"I want—ah!" He breaks off with a cry as I bite down on his hip. "I want my dick in your mouth again. *Now*. Please, Max."

"You can wait a bit," I tell him, chuckling at his frustrated groan, and I slow things down, explore his body, my mouth finding the hollow of his throat, the curve of his bicep, the ridge of his Adonis belt. I press my lips against his inner thighs once more, feeling the heat of his hard cock against my cheek as I breathe in his scent, a mix of sweat and desire that only fuels my lust for him.

My *need* for him.

I'm hard again. Hard and aching and desperate to get into him again, but tonight I want to show a little restraint.

"Max, don't tease," Bricker pleads through gritted teeth.

I settle between his thighs, eyes locked on his as I press a kiss to the head of his cock before I take him into my mouth. Bricker's eyes slam shut, overcome, but I don't look away.

I want to watch every tiny expression cross his face.

I swirl my tongue around his sensitive cockhead before I take him deeper. Bricker's hands come up to grip my head as he

guides my pace. I let him, relaxing my throat to give him what he needs. His moans get louder and louder as I work him with my lips, my tongue, my hand. My brain has finally dulled down, so my sole purpose is his pleasure, in servicing this beautiful man beneath me, giving his body up to me so joyfully.

I can tell Bricker is getting close by the way his thighs tremble and his moans pitch higher, turn to whimpers, his body trembling beneath me as he tries to thrust deeper into my mouth. I slow down again, drawing out the unbearable tension. I can taste him all over my tongue as it slides along the underside of his velvet-skinned dick, savoring every inch of him, capturing every single atom of his flavor.

“Beg for it,” I demand, my voice rough and low, pulled from the depths of my own desire. “You want it so bad, you can beg for it.”

“Please, Max, I need to come...let me...” He shudders as I continue to tease him.

“Not yet.”

I take him back into my mouth, working my lips and tongue around his slick length as Bricker’s moans turn into guttural cries. He clutches the sheets, straining with the effort of holding back.

It only makes me double my efforts, hollowing my cheeks as I suck him hard and fast.

“Oh, God, I’m gonna come,” Bricker gasps out. “Can I—*please—*”

His choking groan is desperate, needy, and it goes straight to my core. I lift off him just long enough to say, “Yeah.”

Taking him deep, I feel him tense and then pulse down my throat as he comes. I suck out every drop, right through one wet, hot orgasm and into another, dry and almost painful for him, and I’m still watching his face.

God, he’s beautiful like this, lost in ecstasy, panting out my name.

I suckle him through the aftershocks until his breath steadies. Crawling back up, I gather him close and stroke his hair. Bricker nuzzles into me, spent and sated.

“God, Max,” he murmurs, half asleep already. “You’re *really* good at that.”

My own arousal fades to a background hum of pleasure. This, here, was for him, and seeing Bricker like this—open, vulnerable, trusting—means more than any physical release for me.

I pull him close, wrapping my arms around him protectively. The weight of his body against mine feels like an anchor, tethering me to this moment, to this man who has burrowed so deep under my skin I don’t think there’s any hope of extracting him.

And I don’t want to. It happened fast, but I’m in deep. That’s the truth of the matter, and I know it’ll cause problems down the line, but...

I can’t bring myself to care. Not when I’m holding this man in my arms.

As Bricker drifts off to sleep, I stare into the darkness, thoughts tangled up with my emotions.

It doesn’t have to mean anything.

That’s what he told me. And no matter how I might feel, there’s still a big black untold truth lurking between us that—when it comes out, because I know it has to—will change anything.

He sleeps like a child, deeply and completely, and I lie there for a while watching him, the old worries seeping back in. And Rook’s funeral is tomorrow. It’ll be tough on Bricker. But it’s also an opportunity to talk to Van Delligatti, prod a little into that open wound of his that he seems determined to think I gave him.

Bricker won’t like it.

But it has to be done.

CHAPTER 34

BRICKER

IT'S a long time since I've been to church. The sky above is a brooding gray, thick with the ongoing threat of rain. Fitting for a funeral. The viewing is held at the church rather than the funeral home, in accordance with the family's preference, and I guess on Anna-Vittoria's insistence. She made sure Rook's Nonna has had every request fulfilled for this funeral, and all covered by Anna-Vittoria herself.

A lot of Espositos will be here today, as is our custom. We honor every fallen member, no matter how low down the chain they were. But I hesitate at the heavy wooden doors, the knot in my stomach tighter than the one in my tie.

Coming up the steps behind me, Max places a hand between my shoulder blades. His eyes are somber but understanding. "Whenever you're ready."

He woke me up early this morning and helped me write out a respectful eulogy for Rook, so I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I clear my throat and pull open the door.

It's hushed inside, though the church is filled with mourners, many of them recognizable to me. The air is sick with the scent of flowers and incense. I spot several members of my crew sitting near the front in the pews: Honeybee, Van, Pony, Tank. Jazz must be in another pew, but I can't see her. The Shadow, the Baron, Martino Gargiulo, and all the other higher-ups sit right at the front, places of honor.

And the veiled silhouette of Anna-Vittoria is right there next to the casket, with a comforting arm around Rook's grandmother.

I join the line waiting to pay their respects to Rook. Honeybee turns in her seat as I get closer, giving me a watery smile. Van turns too, raising a low hand in greeting before nudging Pony to do the same. Tank glances over his shoulder at me, turns back, and folds his arms.

Where's Jazz, I wonder?

Max is behind me in the line of mourners, and that thought is all that really keeps me on my feet as we shuffle onward. Before I really want it to be time, I'm next. I steel myself when the person at the casket crosses themselves, moves on.

But I'm stuck there, feet refusing to move.

I feel Max's hand on my lower back, a steady pressure that grounds me, helps me take those last few steps. Together, we stop in front of the coffin to view the body. My heart clenches as I look at Rook's peaceful face, free from all the pain and fear of his final moments.

"Rook, I..." I whisper, the words catching in my throat. Max remains quiet, but I can feel his understanding radiate from him. He knows the weight of my guilt, the burden of responsibility I carry.

I'm so glad he's with me.

I grip the side of the coffin, fingertips brushing against the cool satin of the interior. Max's presence beside me keeps me anchored, and I'm grateful to him.

My mind floods with memories of Rook, of the brotherhood we shared, the bond that was severed far too soon. The laughter, the shit we gave each other, the way he looked up to me like an older brother...

He looks almost comfortable, like he's just sleeping. But he'll never wake up.

That goofy grin is gone forever.

I swallow hard and close my eyes as if to pray, unable to bear seeing him like that.

I'll get them, I promise him silently. I will find that motherfucker and I will make them pay.

Turning away, my gaze falls on Rook's grandmother when I open my eyes again, her anguished face framed by a halo of wispy white hair under the black lace covering her head. Tears stream down her wrinkled cheeks and her gaze is fixed on the casket that holds her beloved grandson. Beside her stands Anna-Vittoria, offering a supportive arm to the elderly woman.

I did this. It's my fault her grandson was murdered.

"Mrs. Laguardia," I say softly, approaching her with a respectful nod. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Rook—I mean, Rocco...he was..." I can't say any more, afraid I'll break down right here in front of people who blame me—rightly—for Rook's death.

"Fabrizio." She embraces me, actually smiling through her tears. "You were a brother to him. He always spoke so highly of you." She grips my hand fiercely, glaring into my face, and drops her voice, speaking in Italian now. "You find them, Fabrizio. You find them and make them suffer like my boy did. The old ways, eh? Blood for blood."

Her words are vicious, full of fire—and they lift me up. I bow deep, touching my forehead to the back of her hand, before replying in the same language. "I promise you justice, according to the old ways. Blood for blood."

"Good," she says, her voice firm. "You're a good boy, Fabrizio."

As I step back, giving Max the opportunity to pay his respects to Mrs. Laguardia as well, a surge of resolve wipes away any impulse to cry. This woman has lost her grandson, but she still believes in the code we live by. I'm bound by honor to fulfill my promise to her.

Blood for blood.

The vigil service begins shortly after Max and I find seats, not with the crew, but a little way back in the church. When I'm called on to deliver my eulogy, I find my hands trembling

slightly, clutching tightly to the piece of paper containing the useless words I finally settled on this morning.

I nod at the priest as I take the pulpit, scanning the faces of my crew again. Honeybee dabs at her eyes with a tissue while Tank stares straight ahead, stone-faced. Pony looks pale and uncomfortable. Van gives me an encouraging nod.

I unfold the speech I prepared, but the words blur together. “Rocco Laguardia,” I begin, but I can’t go on. This is all wrong. I crumple the paper up again and shove it in my pocket.

“We called him Rook. And he was more than a friend to me. He was a brother.” I pause, searching for the right words. “His bravery and loyalty were unmatched, and he made an impact on every single one of us here today who had the privilege to meet him. Now don’t get me wrong—he wasn’t perfect. He liked to get under my skin. Drove me crazy sometimes,” I admit, a grin forcing its way onto my face despite myself—and the answering murmur of soft laughter from the crowd feels like a pressure valve release. “But he had *so* much heart. And he had this ability to make you feel like everything was going to be okay, no matter how bad it got. That smile of his—God, I’m gonna miss his smile.”

I hear Honeybee trying to stifle a sob. Even Tank’s stoic mask cracks as he puts his arm around her and looks at me, finally.

“I’m gonna miss Rook like—you’ll have to excuse me, Father,” I add over my shoulder to the priest, “—but I’m gonna miss him like *hell*. It’s not fair that he’s gone so soon. Losing him...” I stop and take a breath. “Losing him has reminded me how fragile all this is. How you gotta make the most of the time you got on this earth, make sure the people you love know that you love them.” I search for Max, find him. His eyes are full of understanding. “So we’re gonna honor Rook by living each day to the fullest. And I’d like to ask you all to do the same. For Rook.”

As the crowd murmurs their appreciation for my speech, I add one last thing—silently, a vow to God.

And when I find the bastards who took him from us, I'll make them regret the day they were born.

As I step away from the podium, the room seems to give a sigh with me, of release, of grief, of letting go. At least I honored Rook's memory with my words.

At least I could do that for him.

After the service is done, when the crowd is milling around getting ready to head to the cemetery, Van approaches me. He hesitates for a moment before speaking, looking around as if to make sure we won't be overheard. Max has stepped away for a moment, telling me he wanted to have a look at the crowd, see if anyone was here who maybe shouldn't be. Smart.

"Bricker," Van says quietly, glancing nervously around again. He pulls me aside, fidgeting with his tie. "I gotta talk to you. In private. Without that goddamn Castellani shadow of yours?"

"Sure," I reply cautiously. I follow him to a side room, wary. Van and I have barely spoken since I last saw him at the hospital, and I can't take another fight with a friend right now. On top of that, Pony's intel weighs on my mind. But this might be a good time to clear Van from suspicion, ask him about that text he got on the day of the heist.

We slip out of the main hall and into a small side room, the heavy door muffling the sounds of the crowd outside.

"The thing is, Bricker," Van starts, pacing the small room, "what you said out there—that we need to, uh—that we need to make the most of our time? It's true. And seeing Rook like that, it's...God. It's made me think hard, you know?" He yanks at his collar, agitated. "Life's too damn short to waste time." He stops and looks at me intently, and for a horrible moment I think he's going to tell me he's the mole. "I should've told you how I felt years ago. But I was scared. Scared you didn't feel the same. That it would mess up our friendship."

Oh, shit. My stomach drops. “Van,” I start, but he cuts me off.

“I love you, Bricker Soldano. As more than a friend, or a brother. I’m *in* love with you. Have been for a long time.”

I’m stunned into silence. Van? My best friend—my *straight* friend—has feelings for me?

He swallows hard. “So...I guess...ah, fuck it.”

Before I can react, Van grabs my face between both hands and presses his lips against mine. The kiss is rough, desperate, and completely unexpected. My body freezes up as my mind tries to process what the hell is happening.

It takes me a moment, but I manage to gently push him away, my confusion mirrored in Van’s eyes. “V-van,” I stammer, struggling to find the right words. “What the hell, man? I thought you were *straight*.”

“I did, too. Because it was—it was easier,” he admits, his voice pleading. “It was always easier. Playing straight, lying about that to myself, meant I could ignore my feelings for you. But I—I can’t ignore them anymore. I don’t *want* to.”

“Van, I...” I trail off, unsure of how to respond. This is the *last* thing I ever expected from him, and I’m not sure what it means for our friendship. I struggle to find the right words, trying to let him down as gently as possible. “I love you too, but not...like that. You’re my *brother*. In arms, in blood. I never...”

I trail off as his face falls, a mixture of hurt and anger flashing across his features. I hurry to explain.

“You being into guys, I get it, I get wanting to hide that away. That doesn’t bother me, and hell, I’m glad for you if—” Nope, wrong angle, judging by the look on his face. “Van, I’m sorry, but I’ve never looked at you that way before. Never even considered it.”

“Let me guess,” he says with a hollow voice. “It’s him, isn’t it? The Castellani.” I don’t answer, which is answer enough. “Un-fucking-believable,” he spits. “You’d choose your dick over your Family.”

“*Hey!*”

But he’s already storming away. At the doorway he half-turns his face and says bitterly, “That Castellani ruined my whole fucking life.”

I stand there reeling from Van’s confession—and then his vicious accusations. I knew he would be pissed when he found out about Max and me, but I didn’t expect such raw fury. I had *no* idea Van felt that way. And now I’ve gone and broken his heart.

Some friend I am.

With nothing else to do, I head back into the church proper. My mind’s a mess of grief and guilt, but one thing is crystal clear to me now, laid plain by the first thing I thought when Van asked about Max.

My feelings for Max Pedretti run deeper than just physical attraction.

Much deeper.

And that scares the hell out of me. Being with *anyone* is too dangerous in this game, but *Max*? Doubly so, given our positions in our respective Families.

Is Van right? Have I betrayed the Espositos by sleeping with Max?

It just...*happened*. Wasn’t something either of us planned on, and it’s not like we’ve shared intel, either. He clams up hard about anything Castellani-related, and there are a hundred things I haven’t told him about Esposito business.

But there’s no denying the connection. As crazy as it sounds, I think I’m falling for him. Just thinking about that makes my insides twist up with nerves. But at the same time, I get this little flutter in my chest when I picture his face.

His rare smile.

His hand at the small of my back, lending me his strength.

How can something like that be a bad thing?

No. Van is wrong; my loyalty still lies with my Family, and my feelings for Max don't affect that. I won't turn my back on the Espositos. But I can't turn my back on Max, either. There has to be a way for us to make this work.

“Ah, shit,” I mutter under my breath, giving a tight smile to an older lady in black who thanks me for my heartfelt eulogy as she walks past. “Shit, shit, *shit*.” How did everything get so damn complicated? Van's confession, Max, my confused feelings—they're distractions. Right now I need to be strong for Rook and his grandmother, and for my crew. I need to catch up with them.

And I want to see Max again, need his presence. This thing between us...it's dangerous. Reckless, even. But I'll be damned if I can make myself stay away. Van accused me of letting my dick lead the way, and that was a shitty thing to say, no question.

But is letting my heart drag me around really any better?

CHAPTER 35

MAX

“WHERE’S JAZZ?” is the first thing I ask Honeybee when she comes running up to me for a hug.

Tank is with her, though he looks a little bullish. Van has disappeared, and so has Bricker, but I’m more interested to know where the conspicuously missing crew member might be.

“She decided to stay in the hospital to sit with Nico and Giddy,” Honeybee says. “Said she hates funerals.” Her pretty face falls. “So do I. But...”

“But you wanted to be here for Rook.” She nods. I glance at Tank behind her, who, now that he’s closer, looks decidedly sheepish.

“Hey,” he says to me, as Honeybee turns away. “Listen...I wanted to, you know. Apologize.”

It’s embarrassment more than anything that makes him stumble over the words, but I can see he means the apology, so I offer my hand. “Accepted. I know Bricker would appreciate one as well, if you’re in the mood.”

With a grim nod, Tank says, “I’d like to, if he’ll even talk to me after the shit I said yesterday.”

“Of course he will,” I tell him. “I’ll see if I can find him, let him know you want a word.”

The rain is threatening once more as I step outside with the heavy funk of incense still stuffing up my nose. I pull my jacket tighter around me against the unusual chill in the air as I

spot Pony standing nearby, leaning against a low wall. His eyes are distant and he gives a little jump as I join him.

“Pony.” I nod, and he offers a weak attempt at a smile.

“Max. Hey.” His tone is subdued.

“We need to talk,” I begin, and he nods.

“I was going to say the same. I have more I need to tell you guys.” His voice drops an octave. “I hear you’re looking for a mole.”

This isn’t the time or place. “Meet Bricker and me at the bar later, alright? Say four o’clock.”

He nods, and I pat him on the shoulder before turning my attention to the church doors. As if on cue, Bricker emerges. His shoulders are hunched, mouth pinched. Something’s off.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as I walk over to join him.

Bricker shakes his head. “Nothing. I just had a talk with Van, is all.”

“And?” I prompt when he falls silent. “Did you ask him about the text he got?”

“It wasn’t the right time. But I don’t think he’s the mole.” Bricker meets my gaze, chin lifting as he reads my skepticism.

I have no doubt their friendship is clouding his view, but there’s no point getting into a debate here. “Alright. We should get going to the cemetery. Rest of the crew’s set out already—and Tank would like to clear the air, by the way.”

But even that doesn’t seem to soften the tight lines of his face. What the hell did Delligatti say to him? I fall into step with him and we make our way back to the car.

The burial is a bleak scene at the beginning, like all funerals. Bricker is one of the pallbearers, along with Marty Gargiulo and a few other guys I don’t recognize—Rook’s cousins, I find out later—and my arms are full of a shaking, streaming-eyed

Honeybee, who does her best not to sob too loud as the ceremony goes on. Pony and Van have both disappeared, as have a lot of the higher-ups and other service attendees. A ways off, I catch sight of Johnny Jacopo standing there in his hat with a somber expression. He gives me a nod when he sees I've noticed him.

Once the burial's done, I catch up with him while Tank and Bricker have a private word. But Jack has nothing more to tell me yet about the phone, except that he hopes to get some prints from it.

"So if you can get me some comparables, that'd help matters along."

"I'll see what I can do. Thanks for coming out, by the way," I tell him.

"Yes," a voice says behind me, and I turn to see Anna-Vittoria, followed by her Shadow, approaching us. "Thank you for coming, Signor Jacopo."

"Don Castellani sends his respects, ma'am," Jack says with a little bow of the head. "He didn't want to intrude himself, but I'm here as his representative."

"*Va bene*," Anna-Vittoria says, and she even gives a little smile. The Boss is pretty good at the politics of these things, and it looks like he hit the right note here.

And when I rejoin Bricker, he seems a little lighter in the soul. I don't need to ask how things went with Tank, because he's still chatting with the guy, and the two of them are actually smiling a little as they exchange a memory of Rook. A painful sort of smile, but still a smile.

"You ready, Cap?" I ask. "I told Pony we'd meet up with him."

"Sure," he says, and when Tank tells him to come round tomorrow to the hospital to see Giddy, I know things are going to be alright between them.

"I'll take that if you like," I tell Tank, gesturing at the order of service pamphlet he's been folding and unfolding in his hand. He gives it to me without even thinking much about it, and I take it carefully at the corner and pocket it.

First set of fingerprints for Jack. Now I just need everyone else's.

Later that afternoon, the atmosphere at our usual hangout bar feels very different from the solemnity of the funeral. Glasses clink and conversations hum at a low drone. For the rest of the world, nothing at all has changed. That's always the hardest thing about death, I've found. Life keeps going, no matter what. Never seems fair.

Bricker and I take a small booth near the back as we wait for Pony, instead of our usual large team table. When Pony does saunter in, he nods at the bartender for his usual and then looks around before spotting us. He makes his way over, sliding in with a sigh that almost sounds content.

"Tough day, huh?" he says.

Bricker nods. "Tough day."

Pony leans forward. "So I hear you boys are mole-hunting."

"Something like that," Bricker replies. "Who told you?"

Pony's favorite microbrew appears. He takes a long swig, wiping the foam from his lips with the back of one hand. "Figured it out for myself," he says at last. "You keep having those quiet conversations, looking at us all like you're searching for something. So, what's the story?"

"Well, the thing is, Pony," Bricker says slowly. "Someone *must* have been leaking intel for things to go the way they did at First National. Have you noticed anything off about anyone lately?"

His eyes dart between Bricker and me before he leans in even closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Look, I already told you about Van."

"It's not Van."

I keep my eyes on my beer. I don't want Pony to know Bricker and I don't think alike on that particular issue.

“You sure?” Pony asks, puzzled. “But what about that text he got—”

“Forget about the text. You seen or heard anything else?”

“Eh...I don’t want to point fingers.”

Now I do look up. “You said back there at the church that you wanted to talk, Pony,” I point out. “So talk.”

He spins his beer around slowly, considering it as he thinks. “Well...Jazz has been spending an awful lot of time with Nico at the hospital. And you know how hard Nico tried to get into the on-the-ground team, right?” He pauses, letting his words sink in. “Seems suspicious to me.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Why?” He frowns. “Well, I mean, why was he so desperate to get out of the van and into the bank?”

“I can think of a million reasons,” Bricker says, his tone lacking any inflection at all, but Pony laughs wildly.

“Okay, okay,” he chuckles. “Maybe he wanted to look like a big man in front of his girl. Maybe he didn’t wanna be sitting around with old Pony.” He takes another long sip of beer. “Or maybe someone *wanted* him in there. Maybe someone had a word in his ear. Made out like he wasn’t a man if he didn’t go in. In combo with Jazz hanging round him like a stink...” He shrugs, letting his implication waft over to us along with his beery breath. “She didn’t even show up to Rook’s funeral today. That’s pretty heartless. Maybe she feels *guilty*.”

Pony’s phone buzzes, and he glances down at the screen. “Ah, crap. I gotta go.” He chugs the last of his beer and stands up, wiping his hands on his jeans. “Catch you guys later.” He nods at Bricker.

“You’ve been a big help, Pony,” I say. “Keep your ear to the ground. We’ll be in touch.” We watch him go, the door swinging shut behind him.

“Jazz and Nico?” Bricker stares at me, drumming his fingers on the table. “That’s an angle we haven’t considered.”

“Honeybee seemed to think it wasn’t all that strange for Jazz to skip the funeral.”

As a bar staff member comes by to clear away empty glasses, my hand shoots out to grab Pony’s before they can take it. “Hey, leave that one. I’m still drinking from it.”

Bricker raises an eyebrow, his eyes flicking between me and the glass. “You’re...gonna drink his dregs?”

“Hell, no.” I pull out a large Ziploc bag and unobtrusively drop the glass into it before tucking it inside my jacket. “I want to get his prints off it. Jack’s hoping to get some prints from the burned shell of the burner phone we found at the house, but it’ll take some time.”

Understanding dawns in Bricker’s eyes. “Smart thinking. And his suggestions about Jazz and Nico?”

“I think they’re bullshit,” I say bluntly. I reserve my further thoughts about Pony for now, but I plan to tell Jack to get a hurry-on with the prints. “But Jazz sure is making herself look odd, I’ll give Pony that much.”

Bricker nods slowly. “Time we paid a visit, maybe.” He checks his watch. “No time like the present. Visiting hours are done at the hospital, so we should try her apartment first.”

The early evening air is still chilly as Bricker and I get out of his car and approach Jazz’s apartment building. It’s a sad old structure with peeling paint and graffiti covering the side walls. Dim light from a nearby streetlamp makes everything feel even more depressing than it is.

“This is getting messy,” Bricker mutters, shoulders hunched against the wind. “When’s it going to end?”

“When we find the mole.” I glance at Bricker sidelong, wondering again what Van said to convince him he wasn’t involved. “You’re sure about Van, right? Absolutely sure?”

Bricker exhales sharply through his nose. “Van’s clean. I know him. He wouldn’t betray us.”

“He’d put *me* down no questions asked if he thought he could get away with it,” I point out.

Bricker gives a bleak smile. “Maybe. But he wouldn’t betray *me*. Or at least, up until...” He sighs. “Look, I’ll tell you about Van when we get home, I promise. Let’s just—” He makes a vague gesture toward the apartment block.

We climb the sagging stairs to Jazz’s door, and then Bricker raps his knuckles against the thin wood.

“Who is it?” Jazz’s guarded voice comes through the door.

“It’s Bricker. I got Max here with me,” he replies. “Come on, Jazz, open up.”

There’s a moment of silence before the door cracks open, revealing Jazz’s hard eyes and stony face. She hesitates, then reluctantly steps aside to let us in. “Make it quick.”

Jazz’s apartment is small and cluttered, a far cry from the organized exterior she presents to the crew. Dishes are piled high in the sink, and clothes are strewn about on furniture. A few framed photos of happier times with the crew are propped up on the few pieces of furniture, their smiles a stark contrast to Jazz’s unfriendly stare.

“Well? What do you want? I’m not in the mood for company.” She crosses her arms defensively.

“We’re wondering who might have spilled details on the heist,” Bricker says bluntly, wasting no time on pleasantries.

“The fuck did you just say to me?” Her face flushes with indignation, and she takes a menacing step toward him. “You come into *my* home and accuse me of betraying my Family?”

“I’m not accusing you,” Bricker points out. “I’m asking everyone in the crew, Jazz, not just you, if they know anything. Only you weren’t at the funeral today for me to ask.”

Jazz stares at us. “Fine. You want to know the truth? I had nothing to do with it. But if you can’t trust me, then put a gun to my head, pull the trigger, and get it over with.”

“Jazz,” I say, “we just want to find out who did this.”

“And good luck with that,” she spits, her gaze never wavering. “But don’t expect me to sit here and be accused of something I would *never* do.”

“Alright,” Bricker says, his voice softening. “I know you’re loyal and I’m sorry I had to ask. Do you have suspicions about anyone else?”

Jazz narrows her eyes. “If I knew anything, that traitor would be dead already.”

I believe her, both about her innocence and about taking out the mole herself if she knew.

“Okay. Well then, tell me this: why are you spending so much time at the hospital with Nico and Giddy?”

“Because they’re *family!*” Jazz snaps, losing her temper. “And they need someone there with them, especially Nico!” She gives Bricker a glare, and he winces at the strength of it. “Is it so wrong for me to care about them?”

I can tell Bricker’s about to assure her it’s not, but I make a motion behind her, a slice of my hand through the air, and he shuts his mouth. A moment later, my silent advice bears fruit.

“And because it’s *my* fault Rook died, and my fault Nico and Giddy got shot as well.” She looks away from us, her voice dropping. “I should’ve been there for them,” she murmurs. “*I* should’ve been the one out in front, not Rook, not Giddy, not Nico. It was my job as a senior member of the crew, but they pushed ahead, and I didn’t stop them. And now one is dead and two are in critical condition because of it.”

Bricker shakes his head in amazement. “No way, Jazz. You did your job. This whole thing was *my* mistake. Mine alone. And you have nothing to feel guilty about. Hell, Nico is *alive* because of you—because you were there with him right after.” He takes a cautious step forward, but Jazz doesn’t pull back, even when he puts his arms around her and hugs her.

She even awkwardly returns the hug after a second, closing her eyes tight over Bricker’s shoulder.

“Thank you for saving Nico, and for being there for him in the hospital, and for Giddy, too,” Bricker tells her, and then lets her go. “But you gotta stop laying this guilt trip on yourself. Promise me.”

“Wish I could,” Jazz huffs, turning away a little to wipe a hand at her cheek. “I’ll give it a try, Cap. But if it wasn’t my fault, then it wasn’t yours, either. Okay?”

Bricker nods, even though he clearly doesn’t believe her.

As we prepare to leave, I subtly swipe a dirty fork from a plate on the coffee table and, holding it carefully, slip it into my pocket without making a sound while Bricker says his goodbyes to Jazz.

Jazz’s explanations sound convincing, but we need to be sure.

CHAPTER 36

BRICKER

ON THE WAY HOME, I suggest we pick up something along the way. “Pizza?” is my half-hearted suggestion. But Max offers to cook dinner, and I’m more than happy to let him take the lead.

“Let me make you some *pasta aglio e olio*,” he says, his voice warm and inviting. “It’s good after a day like today. Simple but delicious. And it’ll warm you up on the inside.”

And now I watch him move around the kitchen, chopping garlic and heating oil in a pan. The aroma of the food soon fills the air, and for the first time all day, I feel my shoulders relaxing. “What, no bacon?” I grin at his disapproving look. “Seriously, this smells great. Thanks.”

I grab plates ready to serve it into and lay silverware out on the table. Max glances over at me as he stirs the pasta. “How are you holding up?”

I give him a noncommittal shrug. “I’m okay.”

He doesn’t push, just concentrates on the food. Ten minutes later, we sit down to eat, and I try to avoid eye contact and focus on the steaming pile of spaghetti in front of me.

I can’t get Van’s confession out of my mind, and it feels like a betrayal to keep it from Max. But then again, I *also* feel like I’d be betraying Van by spilling his secret. It took him a lot of courage to work up to it, and I don’t want him to feel like the first thing I did was turn around and blab about it.

But my stomach churns as I twirl my fork around in the spaghetti, and then I can’t hold it in any longer.

“Van told me something today,” I blurt out.

Max sets his fork down carefully. “What did he say?”

“He...told me he’s in love with me.”

Max’s brow creases, and for a moment, he looks confused. Too late, I realize he must have expected Van’s confession as the mole.

“Oh,” he says, trying and failing to keep his face as blank as usual.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” I sigh, setting down my fork as well.

“And do you...have feelings for Van?” Max asks stiffly.

Wait a minute. Is Max—is he *jealous*?

I shake my head after a long, surprised moment, vehement in my denial. “Hell, no. Van’s my friend, my brother—but that’s it.”

Max’s shoulders relax a tiny bit. “Oh,” he says again. “So how did you handle it?”

“My straight best friend telling me he was in love with me? Uh, I was *surprised*. So I could’ve handled it better. But like I said, I don’t feel the same way. I tried to let him down easy, but...” I grimace. “You don’t know Van all that well, but I’m pretty sure you can figure out how he reacted.”

A wave of relief washes over Max’s face, though he tries to hide it with a casual comment. “Well, he picked a hell of a time to confess his feelings.”

There’s something almost exciting about seeing a man as self-contained as Max struggle with jealousy, and I find myself enjoying the sight more than I should. “Like I said, there’s nothing romantic between Van and me. We’re friends. He stormed off after I turned him down, bitching about you ruining his life...” I break off. “Look, I shouldn’t have told you that. Forget it.”

Max watches me closely. “But why would Van think I ruined his life?”

“I guess because,” I say, leaning back and studying Max’s handsome face, “he knows how I feel about you. And he doesn’t like it.”

Max’s shocked face might be enough to make me laugh after the day I’ve had, if I wasn’t so exhausted. “Let’s not talk about Van anymore. It’s been a long day.”

“Okay,” he agrees, his fingers tightening around his fork as he picks it up again. “Let’s just focus on...uh, on eating.”

But I can tell he’s thinking over what I said, the way he keeps glancing at me, and trying to suppress a smile. The comfortable silence between us extends right through dinner into clean up, when Max rinses the dishes before stacking them in the dishwasher. At one point, when I apparently get too close, he “accidentally” flicks his wet fingers at me.

“Hey!” I protest. “Watch it.”

He chuckles and does it again, and then I find myself doing something I haven’t done in years: play fighting. As the laughter dies down, Max has me cornered against the kitchen island, arms on either side of me. I reach up to cup his face in my hands, press a gentle kiss to his lips.

“You want to know why Van’s jealous? It’s because he can see I need you, Max.” I lean in, my forehead resting on his. “I *need* you.”

His eyes darken with desire, and his hands, still wet, trace under my shirt, make me shiver as he finds skin. “Need me? Or need—this?” His hand slides over my hip, fingers dipping under my waistband.

“Both,” I tell him truthfully. “God, *both*, Max. And everything else that you can give me.”

His nose brushes the side of my face, and he presses a kiss to my cheekbone, moves his lips to my ear. “You’re a lot younger than I am, Bricker.”

I wait, wondering if he’ll say anything else after that, until I realize what he’s really asking. “You’re not too old for me, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

He pulls back a little. “At my age, I don’t want to do casual anymore. I want something...” His eyes search mine. “I want something *deep*.”

Deep? I’m practically drowning in him. “I want that, too.”

“And I’m too old to play games.” He hesitates, and then says, “Am I...too old for *you*?”

I almost laugh. “Have you not been paying attention or something?” But my grin dies as something occurs to me. “Wait—do you think I’m too *young* for you?”

“I think you could have any man you wanted, Bricker Soldano. So I need you to be real clear on this. Real clear on what you want.”

I pull him in for a kiss, hard at first, softening into something sweeter. Something...*deeper*. Just like Max says he wants.

When we break, I look into his eyes. “I want that depth you’re talking about. I want *everything* with you—and I don’t give a fuck about the age difference.”

And just like that, we’re lost in each other, the dishes forgotten, the kitchen only a background detail as we kiss, mouths moving fast and hard, his hips grinding into mine, humping me right there against the kitchen counter. And then Max pulls off my tee and strips off his own shirt. “If you want to slow down—” he begins with a warning tone, his hand on his belt buckle.

“I want you to *speed up*.” I get on my knees right there in the kitchen and yank open his belt myself, then tug down his pants, his underwear, looking up to see his reaction as I rub my face into his thickening cock. And I get exactly the reaction I’m hoping for.

“Open your mouth.”

I open wide, and Max slides his cockhead across my lips, dips into my mouth, and follows my tongue to the back of my throat. I give a happy gargling moan and reach up to pull his hips closer, urging him deeper. He lets me move him into position, although I have to let him out of my mouth for a second as we try to get aligned. I look up at him again, my

head resting back against the cabinet door just below the sink, and I open my mouth again in a wordless invitation.

He pushes in. I encourage him, wriggling into place until he's all the way in to the root and I can't breathe, his warm belly a cozy cushion for my forehead, his pubic hair tickling my nose, filling up my senses with his scent. I swallow as fast as I can, the spit streaming out of me like someone turned on a faucet, but then I choke, and he pulls out.

"No," I cough. "I *want* you deep. Deep as you can get."

"Yeah you do. Okay, open up. There you go, that's my good boy—" And he pushes back into my mouth, *deep* in, as the flood of pleasure at his praise makes me pliant, malleable.

He gives me exactly what I'm craving: a deep, slow face-fuck, his hips rocking under my hands as I try to get him further into me. I really do want to drown in him, grabbing at his ass to make him pick up the pace, his pants down around his thighs and the zipper scraping here and there against my chest, an angry little sting that only makes me hotter.

I let my lips tighten around him, moaning encouragement as he fucks a little faster, his breath coming in quick little gasps, my mouth filling up with his flavor, the tang of his pre-cum, the clean salt of his sweat—

And then he pulls out, making me whine, a flood of spit running down my chin as he looks down at me fondly. "You're a mess," he says roughly, tipping my head back with a handful of hair.

"Come in me," I demand. "Come on."

His eyes go darker, if that's possible, and his fist in my hair tightens to just this side of painful, but then he lets me go and yanks me to my feet. "I plan to. But I want to hear you beg me for it, and you can't do that with your mouth full. So get your pants off."

I try to rip them off so fast I just about fall on my face, and Max has to steady me with a chuckle, even as he kicks off his own shoes and pants. But then he pauses, his eyes going up

toward the roof, to the bedroom overhead, and I know exactly what he's thinking.

“Don't worry about that. Fuck me bare. Please?”

The look on his face...I swear to God, his self-control *almost* slipped. But he pauses and says, “You sure you don't want protection?”

“I'm sure. I have my last results, I can go—”

“You're not going anywhere.” He grabs me by the face and kisses me again, hard, before whirling me around and pushing me down over the kitchen counter, my breath deserting me in a rush. “Pull your ass open for me. Let me see you.” I reach back and spread my cheeks for him, breathing hard as I hear him make a low sound of pleasure. “Perfect.”

He leans over, reaching for the olive oil he used for dinner, and uses it just as liberally on me, pouring it all over my ass, into my crack, slicking me up with one hand while he spreads it over himself, too. I watch him over my shoulder, watch until he lines up with one hand and, with the other, pushes me firmly down between the shoulder blades, so I'm pressed down on the countertop.

I feel his blunt head pressing against my hole, and when he breaches me, it's with one thick stab, his dick splitting me open. Pain thrills through me, but I gasp out, “Don't stop,” when he pauses. “Come on, Max. Make me feel it.”

He makes noise that's almost a growl, and he shoves in hard, making me cry out. One more push and he's home, bottoming out in me, his cock flexing against my walls as he leans close over my back with a satisfied hum.

“You're so damn hot inside,” he sighs out.

I wonder if he's ever done this before: fucked bareback. I haven't. I haven't, and I'm already desperate to feel him shoot his load, fill me up.

Mark me.

“Max, come on,” I mumble. “Please.”

The weight of his chest disappearing makes me whine in protest, but his hand returns to my back, keeping me there in place. Keeping me right where he wants me as he fucks into my hole, a steady, medium-paced pistoning that lets his head drag right over my most sensitive spot, pulling moans and whimpers out of me. I can feel my dick drooling down my thigh, or maybe it's the oil, or maybe it's the whole goddamn mess of our mating as he pumps me deeper and deeper with a wet slapping sound that's almost as erotic as his grunts of satisfaction.

His hand leaves my back only so he can brace himself on the edge of the counter, pounding into me as I gasp and laugh and—yeah—start begging for it. Begging for him to fill me up with his seed, to make me his, breed me, make me feel it...

“Please, please, please, please,” I chant, driven to the edge by the intensity of his fucking, the way his balls slap against me, the way his dick stretches me out as he pulls out and the way it's *almost* too much to bear when he shoves back in. Almost too much—and just what I need.

“You want it?” he demands. “Tell me. Tell me you need it.”

“Give it to me,” I beg. “I need your load in me—*please*—”

His dick swells up inside me, impossibly large, and then I feel it throb as he spills into me, his hips rolling, stuttering, grinding against me as he deposits every last drop deep in my gut, and then falls over me, panting and groaning, cursing me out affectionately, *that's my good fucking boy; God, you take it so well; you're gonna fucking kill me...*

And then he's pulling out of me, ignoring my cry of protest at the sudden loss, pulling me up off the counter for a sloppy kiss, all tongue and spit. I can feel the mess oozing out of my hole, and I writhe away, try to clench my butt muscles shut, but his hand darts between my cheeks, catching the oil and his spunk as it trickles out of me, using it as lube to jack my stiff, reddened cock, leaking away in his hand.

I'm so hard and swollen it's almost painful, and his muttered *Come on, kid* in my ear is what pushes me over the edge. My dick shudders and spurts, painting my belly and his with my

hot spray, and his arm goes around my waist, keeping me upright, holding me close, while he works me through it until I'm completely dry, my arms around his neck, holding on like he's the only thing keeping me afloat.

And hell, that's not so far from the truth right now.

As my heart rate settles, I shift, the stickiness between us becoming a lot less sexy as it cools. "This floor is gonna need a real wash down," I mumble. "God. Tomorrow. That's tomorrow's problem."

"Tomorrow," Max agrees, and then yawns.

"Ugh, I'm leaking. That was great," I add quickly. "I mean—more than great, for sure, but—"

"Let's go upstairs so we can clean off."

I run up to the bathroom and then we shower together, regretfully washing away the evidence. Once clean and dry, we slip into my bed together.

Max falls asleep quickly, his breathing slowing into a steady rhythm. I lie still beside him, wide awake despite my exhaustion. Thoughts about my crew, the mole, my relationship with Max...they're all keeping me from sleep.

And thoughts about my father.

He's been on my mind so much recently, I wonder if it's time to face him again. Because next time he gets sick, he might not shake it off.

The words I spoke myself at Rook's funeral come back to me, reminding all those people how unpredictable life can be. Van echoed those sentiments afterward to me, and more than one person there thanked me for my words.

Maybe it's time to put the past to rest. Maybe it's time to go and see my father. I haven't spoken to him for years...

I glance over at Max, listen to his steady breathing in sleep. He's become such an important part of my life in such a short period, and part of me wants to share my thoughts with him. Ask his advice, even.

But it has to be my own decision.

I'm so fucking lost right now.

As if in response to my thoughts, Max's arm tightens around me in his sleep, pulling me closer. It's a small gesture, but it gives me the strength I need to make up my mind.

I'll go see him.

I'll go see Dad, and I'll go alone. I'll do it soon as I can before I chicken out. I wrote to him when I was seventeen, told him I was gay—this was in my coming out phase, where I was determined everyone should know, not that I regretted it, only...

I got no response at all back from Dad. That was worse, in some ways, than getting something negative back. And when I got no response, I didn't write again.

That was the last contact we had.

But I guess he's still my dad, and maybe I owe it to myself to face up to him, show him the man I've become. And once I've closed the door on my past, maybe...

Maybe I can think about the future.

CHAPTER 37

BRICKER

THE NEXT FEW days pass by fast in a mix of going over and over all the information we've gathered, and visiting Giddy and Nico in the hospital. Working together, Max and I managed to collect prints from the rest of the crew without them noticing—except Van's prints.

He hasn't been in touch.

This morning, Max slides a plate of scrambled eggs my way and I stare at them, my stomach churning.

"You sure you're okay?" Max asks, brow furrowed.

"Fine."

I'm not fine. I'm a mess of nerves and guilt. I looked up visiting days at the prison, and it turns out, today's one of them. My obligatory visitor's background check is still valid, and as a family member I get priority, so if I leave early enough today...

I'll make it in time to see my father for the first time in over a decade.

I told Max I was going to track down Van, try to talk to him—and get his prints. It's not a complete lie. After I see Dad, I'll give Van a call, invite myself over to his place to talk.

But I'm not ready to talk to Max about my father. Not yet.

"Like I said, you should call Jack while I'm out," I tell him. "Get him over here to collect the fingerprints."

Max doesn't seem completely convinced that I'm alright, but he lets it go with a nod. "We've come a long way since you

were locking me up each night to keep me away from my own Family. I even get to use a phone, now.”

I give a strained laugh. “Well...a lot’s changed.”

Max gives a slow nod. “You’re not wrong. Listen, Bricker, when this is over, we need to talk about a few things.”

Joy and panic war within me. I swallow hard and meet his gaze. “Yeah. We do.” But he looks so damn serious that I come over and kiss him quickly, before he even realizes what I’m doing. He smiles after, pulls me back in for a hug. For a moment I let myself get lost in the familiar warmth of his embrace.

“I gotta get moving,” I say a few seconds in, pushing away. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

The prison stands squat and wide before me, stark concrete and barbed wire under an obstinately cheerful blue sky. Of all the days it should be raining, surely this is one? But the weather cleared up after Rook’s funeral. I sit in the visitors’ parking lot, white-knuckling the steering wheel, torn between facing my father and driving away as fast as I can.

It’s been a long time, Dad.

No, that’s a shitty opening line. But I can’t think of any better. Maybe when I get in there, inspiration will hit. I get out of the car, steel myself, and walk through the entrance. I get checked off on a list and then a guard pats me down with impersonal efficiency and leads me to the visitation room, an open room with plastic tables and chairs bolted to the floor, the seats already crowded with other visitors, other prisoners.

I’ve only just taken the seat the guard points to when there he is, led in by another guard.

Fabrizio Soldano Senior. My father.

Thinner and graying, but still him. Our eyes meet and a flicker of recognition lights in his face. He drops into the chair as

though his legs are weak. “Bricker?” His voice is rough.

My throat closes up. I can only nod. We stare at each other, a lifetime between us, and I start to wonder if this was a mistake. He’s just...staring at me. I clear my throat and force myself to speak. “Yeah, it’s me.”

He studies me, taking in the muscles, the scars, avoiding my eyes. “Look at you. All grown up.”

Another uncomfortable silence stretches between us. I fidget in my seat, unsure how to bridge this yawning chasm.

“How’ve you been?” I finally ask lamely.

He barks out a harsh laugh. “How do you think? This ain’t exactly a country club.”

I wince. “Right. Dumb question.”

“You keeping safe?” he asks after a moment, almost grudgingly.

“Yeah. I mean, mostly.” I rub my cheek, trying to figure out a way to let him know what’s going on without breaking the Family code *or* letting the Feds in on anything. Because they’ll be listening to this conversation, either now or later.

“Your mother told me you moved up in the world,” he says at last, and I know he’s talking about my promotion to Capo.

Mom still writes to him, I know, even though she doesn’t come to see him. “Yeah.” I let a proud grin slip out, but it dies quickly. “Or at least, I did, for a while. I think I...might get demoted again. I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Complicated how?” he asks sharply.

I hesitate.

“You can talk if you’re smart about it,” he tells me in a low voice. “They don’t listen in too much here. Long as you keep it general.”

Still, how much can I really reveal? My oaths bind me to the Maestra, to my Family. But this man is my father, and I came here for a reason. I want him to know me.

To be proud of me.

“I got...assigned a new guy to help out. An outsider.”

My father’s eyes narrow. “An outsider?”

“A Castellani,” I say, so softly that it’s practically a breath. “Things have happened recently that made us...look around for allies.”

“You can’t trust anyone, Bricker,” he growls. “You should fucking know that.”

“I know,” I say defensively. “But this guy, he’s proven himself so far. And...” I take a deep breath, “the thing is, we’ve gotten close.”

“Close?” I don’t like the tone in my father’s voice. It was a bad idea coming here. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone soft over some stray dog.”

“It’s not like that!” I insist. “I just...I *know* I can trust him. But I don’t know what to do about the rest of it. I was—we were—betrayed. Someone sold us out.”

My father leans forward, eyes blazing. “I told you already what you need to do. You trust no one, Bricker. A real man stands alone, does what needs to be done with his own two hands.” His intensity unnerves me. “Even if that means taking out your own men,” he raves on, and my eyes flick to the guards, hoping like hell that it’s true they don’t listen in. Dad fixes me with a piercing stare. “They’re a liability, the lot of them, and you can’t trust them. If one turned, they all will. You should get rid of them before they get rid of you.”

I recoil. “I’d never do that! That’s—”

“They’re a means to an end,” he snaps. “The only thing you can really count on is blood, boy. Don’t you forget it.”

“Things have changed since you went inside,” I say quietly after a moment. “Loyalty means something now. And Max...” I hesitate, then steel myself. If I can’t be honest with my own father, what kind of man am I? “Max has proven himself to me. And like I said, we’ve grown close.” I search his face

anxiously for a reaction. “You have to understand, Dad. The world isn’t the way you remember anymore.”

For a long moment he just stares at me, eyes cold and expressionless. Then he smiles, but there’s no warmth to it. “Max?”

“Max,” I confirm. “Max Pedretti.”

Dad laughs. A horrible, cold, mirthless laugh, his eyes fixed on me. I wish I’d never come here—but I can’t leave. Not yet. There’s something he’s not telling me. “What are you laughing about?”

He leans forward, gripping the edge of the table, ignoring the warning shuffle forward of the guard nearby, who noticed the loud, cruel laugh if nothing else. “Massimo Pedretti put me in here, boy,” my father hisses. “He’s the reason I’ve rotted away in this hellhole for the past twenty years.”

I pull back. “What? You’re lying,” I say hoarsely.

“Ask him.”

“He would have told me already if he—”

“Oh, he’s got you fooled alright. But he’s a traitor and a liar, just like all the rest. The second you lower your guard, he’ll put a knife in your back.” His eyes blaze with hatred. “He took everything from me, Bricker. My freedom. My life. And now he’s trying to take you, too.”

I can’t speak. I don’t know what to believe anymore. The man I’ve come to care for, the man I was ready to trust with my life...is he really responsible for destroying my father’s?

I can’t believe it.

I won’t.

“Don’t let him get away with it,” my father hisses. “Promise me, Bricker. Promise you’ll make him pay.”

I stare at him helplessly, wordless. This can’t be true. Surely. Maybe my father’s figured out what I was working up to telling him, maybe he’s still pissed about me being gay, trying

to undermine me. “Things have *changed*—” I start, but my father slams his fist on the table.

The bang echoes through the room, making the guard give a warning grunt this time. “Have you lost your mind, boy?” Dad snarls. “He’s poisoned you against me! Can’t you see that?”

“No. Max is...he’s...” I falter, unable to find the words.

My father’s eyes widen in understanding. Disgust twists his lips. “Oh, Jesus, Bricker. Don’t tell me you’re *fucking* him.”

I flinch.

For a long moment, my father just stares at me. The revulsion on his face cuts me to the core. Then he laughs again, a low, choking sound. “My own son. Seduced by the man who destroyed our family.” He spits on the floor. “You’re no better than him. Get the fuck outta here.”

I feel something inside me start to break. The foundations I’ve built my life on—loyalty, family, trust—all of them are crumbling.

I don’t know who I am anymore.

I stumble from the seat in a daze, barely aware of my surroundings. The guard’s bang on the door, his call—“Visitor leaving!”—echoes in my ears as I stand and back away, but it’s distant. Muted.

And my father doesn’t even look back at me as he’s escorted back out of the room.

I get outside somehow, get to my car and slide inside, resting my head against the wheel. My heart is pounding against my ribs.

Max.

Not Max. Not the man I’ve come to trust more than my best friend, more than my entire crew.

Max has been lying to me this whole time? My hands shake so hard that I have to grip the wheel to stop them. If Max knew who my father was, why not say something? Why let me bare

my goddamn soul to him, night after night, believing he was doing the same?

No. It can't be true. But...

I need to find out for sure.

I start the car, peeling out of the lot. By the time I pull into the driveway at home an hour later, I've gone past feeling sick and straight into fury. I sit there for a long time in the car, glaring at the front door. Preparing myself for confrontation.

What if it's true?

I can't kill him, obviously. I can't hurt him at all.

Not physically.

When I enter the house, I find Max and Jack in the kitchen. Laughing together like old pals, and it just makes me angrier.

"Bricker!" Max looks so happy to see me, I *know* it must be an act.

"So when were you gonna tell me, Pedretti?" I ask.

Max's smile vanishes. He knows exactly what I mean, and that just makes it worse. Some part of me was so sure he wouldn't, that my father was lying about the whole damn thing, that Max would be confused—then horrified—deny it angrily—

But it's all true. I know it now. I see a glimmer of remorse in his eyes—but also wariness.

It's the look of a man with secrets.

CHAPTER 38

THE DAY'S gone so well up until now. I should have expected the other shoe to drop.

I was in such a good mood this morning, feeling optimistic about the progress Bricker and I were making in our investigation, confident that Jack would be able to help. I even went out this morning to buy groceries, laughing at myself for “playing house” with Bricker, but I enjoyed the feeling nonetheless.

When he went to see Van, I sat myself down and had a hard think, weighing up the pros and cons of obeying Anna-Vittoria's orders versus my discomfort at holding back such a huge secret from a man I've grown to care for.

It's not in my nature to be disloyal. And in this case, my decision was always going to be disloyal to one of them, the Maestra or Bricker. But when I thought about it that way, it was a simple decision.

I'd choose Bricker any day of the week.

My mind made up, I felt better. I'd sit Bricker down that very night and explain it to him—and we'd work through the fallout together. When Jack arrived in the afternoon to pick up the fingerprint samples, and filled me in on the rapidly upcoming Bernardi parley at Redwood Manor, I won't deny it made me feel a little homesick—and concerned as hell. But until Bricker and I pinned this traitor, I was set on my course. So I told Jack I was looking forward to getting back to Redwood Manor, as soon as he could tell me about the fingerprints.

“Well, damn, Pedretti,” Jack had said wryly. “If it means you’ll be back at Redwood, I can have those results for you in a nanosecond...though I can’t guarantee they’ll actually be correct.”

We’d been laughing at that when Bricker walked in. But my good mood died as soon as I looked into Bricker’s stormy eyes.

“Jack,” I say now, “you’d better give us the room.”

Jack settles his hat on his head and slips past Bricker with one backward, meaningful glance at me. I have backup if I need it.

I don’t need it. Certainly don’t deserve it.

I owe Bricker this truth and I should’ve given it to him sooner.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Bricker asks again after the front door closes with a quick click. His hands are tight, clenching fists, and I see fury in his eyes—but also confusion and hurt. “You knew my father. Worked with him. You’re the reason he’s in Chino right now.”

Earlier today, I felt almost young again. Right now, I feel every year of my age, tired and used-up. “I wanted to tell you,” I sigh, rubbing my face with one hand. “But Anna-Vittoria wouldn’t let me.”

Bricker scoffs. “She wouldn’t let you talk to the Castellanis, either, but you tried anyway.” He steps closer, anger radiating off him like heat. “Didn’t seem to worry you too much, either.”

I wince at his words. He’s right, of course. But somehow, this particular secret about Fabi felt different. It was much more dangerous and much more personal. And now it’s come to light.

How?

Well, that’s not really the point.

“Bricker,” I say, searching for the right words, “it was complicated. Anna-Vittoria swore me to silence. Said it wouldn’t help matters any, and that she wanted you to trust me, not be suspicious of me. Later, I wanted to tell you—but I

also wanted to *protect* you. I didn't want our...whatever this is between us, to be tainted by my past."

His eyes narrow, and I see the struggle in them. The desire to believe me, to trust me, warring with betrayal. And there are no easy answers, no simple explanations that will make this all go away.

"Please." I take a step towards him. "I—I care about you, Bricker."

Bricker's eyes blaze. "You don't care about me! You *used* me, Max. You played with my feelings, manipulated me. And for what? To get closer to my Family? To betray us?"

"I didn't mean to hurt you," I insist, my own voice cracking with emotion. "I was trying to obey orders, both my Boss's and yours—and as time went on and I...when we got closer, it made things even more complicated." I pause, to see if that's had any effect. It hasn't. "Who told you?" I ask with a sigh.

"I heard it from his own lips. I went to see him today. Wanted to tell him straight out that I was *falling* for—" He breaks off.

I shake my head. "Whatever Fabi told you, Bricker...it probably wasn't the real story, anyway."

"Are you seriously calling my father a liar now, on top of everything else?"

"All I'm saying is that there might be more to it than what Fabi told you." I try to reach out to him, but Bricker steps back, putting distance back between us.

"Are you the mole? Are *you* the one who's been betraying us all along?"

Bricker's question hits me hard, but I summon every ounce of conviction I have and look him straight in the eye. "I would never do that. I would never betray you."

My voice is steady. Perhaps *too* steady, based on the suspicion on Bricker's face. Inside, I'm a whirlwind of thoughts and memories, images from our time together flashing past like a movie reel. The laughter, the intensity, the vulnerability...

“Believe me,” I beg him, “I’ve done a lot of things in my life that I’m not proud of, including not telling you sooner about my past. But *betraying* you? Betraying a crew? That’s something I could never, ever do.”

With a swift movement, Bricker pulls out his gun and points it at me. The world seems to freeze, the only sound a passing car outside, and the low hum of the fridge. I focus on Bricker, take in every detail: the way his hands tremble, the play of emotions across his face.

This is my fault.

“Bricker, come on, now. You’re not thinking straight.”

“It makes sense for you to be the mole, Max. You’re the only outsider in the crew.”

“It doesn’t make sense. Things were going wrong before I got here. You know that.” His grip on the gun tightens. “Think about it,” I go on calmly. He’s just angry. And he’s not stupid, I know that too damn well. He won’t kill me. I’m pretty sure he won’t, anyway. “If I was the mole, why would I have protected you so many times? Why would I put myself in harm’s way for you? Why even run into that bank after you? If I was the mole, I would’ve shot Pony between the eyes and driven away. Left you all to die.”

He hesitates for a moment, and I can see the conflict in his eyes, the struggle between his heart and his mind. But then, as if some invisible hand tipped the scales in favor of darkness, his resolve hardens.

“Leave.” Bricker’s voice is devoid of any emotion. “Go back to the Castellanis where you belong.” I try to protest, to plead with him, but he doesn’t listen. He’s too hurt, too angry. “Get out of here before I kill you,” he spits at last. “The last thing I need is a Castellani corpse to get rid of.”

I can’t reason with him. Not like this.

“I’ll leave. But you’re making a mistake, and I think you know that.” I hold up my hands as I walk slowly around him, heading for the door. “When you’re ready to hear the full story, come and find me. I promise I’ll tell you everything.”

I turn and walk out of the house, feeling like I'm leaving a piece of my soul behind. The door shuts quietly behind me, but the lock sliding home from the other side echoes like a gunshot.

"Thought you might need a ride," Jack calls over sympathetically, hat in hand, leaning against his beat-up Pinto where he parked it on the street.

"It was that obvious, huh?"

Jack just shrugs and opens the car door for me, his face soft with understanding. "Come on, Pedretti. I'll take you home."

"Home?"

Jack hesitates. "Wherever you want that to be right now."

"Not Redwood." I can't face that right now. I need time alone. "I have a place in Glendale. Take me there." It's more of a crash pad than a home, but it'll do as a place to hole up and pick through my regrets for a while. Because right now, I can't see any way out of this situation I've gotten myself into.

The rain is back the next morning when I wake up.

It smacks against the windowpane, bleaching the day into gray light throughout my apartment. I haven't been here for so long, it seems foreign to me now. I pull off my shirt—I slept in my clothes—and pause while I'm putting it the laundry basket, remembering Bricker nuzzling into my neck. And then a different memory intrudes.

Go back to the Castellanis where you belong.

I should have told him the truth about Fabi from the start. But how could I? How do you tell someone that their father was once your partner in crime? That *you're* the reason they're locked up?

Get out of here before I kill you myself.

I clutch my shirt tight for a moment, then ball it up, throw it in the hamper, and force myself to *think*. I slept badly, but it's a new day now, despite the miserable weather.

And I might have lost Bricker's trust, but I don't plan to let him down. Not again. Even if he doesn't want me, even if he can't forgive me, I'll do what I can to find this mole and make sure he's safe. I settle on the sofa with a coffee and a pen and paper, and I write down my thoughts as they come in. Possible motives. Possible suspects. Information we've been given and things I noticed myself. Hours pass as I note down every scrap of information I can remember, but with each note I make, in the back of my mind I replay Bricker's laughter, his teasing smile, the way he looked at me in bed...

Because in the end, for me, finding the mole isn't about loyalty or duty or even honor.

It's about love.

CHAPTER 39

MAX

I DON'T HEAR from Bricker for several days, and I don't expect to—even though I hope for it. At one point, I get a call from Jack, telling me—predictably—that the parley at Redwood between the Bernardi factions, led respectively by AJ and Gino Bernardi, has gone belly-up.

“Do you need me there?” I ask bluntly, not because I want to go, but because I know I should.

He hesitates a minute. “Truth is, Pedretti, even if we wanted you there, you couldn't come in. Sandro instituted a lockdown.”

“*What?*”

“It's a long story. One that we're keeping real quiet, if you know what I mean. But I'm sure it'll all pass over soon. Leo and I are looking into things.”

If the Castellani Underboss and the new Enforcer can't figure things out, I'm not sure what I could do different. But I know Jack is also throwing me a lifeline. “You're sure?” I ask, praying that he won't change his mind.

“Like I said,” he tells me, “nothing you can do, Pedretti. You take care of business with the Espositos, and Leo and I will take care of business with the Bernardis. I'll tell you the whole story over a drink when it's done.”

I'm too relieved to argue any longer. And I know where at least one of my targets for today will be. I pick an early time, since Bricker isn't much of a morning person in my

experience with him, and I head to the hospital just as visiting hours commence.

Tank is there just like I thought, watching over his brother, who's still asleep. I nod from the open doorway instead of walking in.

Tank comes out readily enough. "Pedretti. What brings you here?"

I guess he hasn't heard from Bricker about me, or I'd be backing away at gunpoint. "I need to ask you a question."

He shrugs. "Shoot."

"You don't have to answer if—"

"I don't wanna answer, I won't answer. What is it?"

"Who suggested First National? For the job, I mean."

He crosses his arms over his chest, chin going down as he thinks, frowning at the floor. "It was a while back, now. I always assumed it was Anna-Vittoria, but..."

I nod. He's putting it together now, same as I did. First National is a good target for PacSyn. But there are better ones. Better ones that would have required less specialized skills. Their part of the Port, for example, is always unsecured and sloppily managed. Hitting them there would've been just as effective, too.

"I guess it could've been Van," Tank says at last. "He was the man with the plan."

"You're sure?"

"Hell, no, I'm not sure. Maybe it was Bricker. Maybe it *was* the Maestra, I don't know. I wasn't involved in the planning. You need something more than a guess, you should ask Bricker."

That's not possible right now. But I don't say that to Tank. "Has Van been by to see Giddy again?"

"Most days he drops by." Tank's jaw clenches. "If you're trying to paint Van as the mole—"

“I’m not trying to paint anyone as anything. But if there *is* a mole in the crew, we need to root them out before they can do any more damage.”

Tank stares hard at me. “The hell do you care, anyway? You could just walk away, Castellani.”

“Yeah. I could.” I stare right back at him.

After a moment, he sighs. “Van was around yesterday. He’s probably home today. But if you find anything against him, you bring *me* in on it. Understand? Bricker’s got a blind spot there.”

Don’t I know it.

“I’ll do that,” I tell Tank. “How’s Giddy?”

For the first time in a long time, Tank actually smiles. “They’re releasing him later today. Gotta say, I’m looking forward to sleeping in a bed again.”

I clap his shoulder with a grin before taking my leave. And as I walk back to my car, I feel a spark of satisfaction at having earned even the smallest measure of Tank’s trust.

Given Jack’s unavailability, I call his right-hand man Freddy Lazzaro instead to get an address for one Giovanni Delligatti. The streets are slick with rain as I make my way to Van’s apartment, the weather as depressed as I am. But I can’t let rain or a heavy heart stop me from doing what I need to do.

“Who is it?” Van’s voice filters through the door, wary at the early-morning intrusion. Ten to one he’s got a gun on me, and he can already see who it is, too. I stare straight back at the peephole.

He’s just jerking me around. “It’s Pedretti,” I sigh.

There’s another long moment before the door swings open, revealing Van in the doorway with a scowl on his face. “What do you want?”

That's not the greeting I'd get if Bricker had talked to Van about his dad and me, that's for sure. I don't know whether to feel better or worse that Bricker's keeping my lies under wraps...for now.

"Can we talk?" I ask, doing my best to keep my tone neutral.

Van narrows his eyes. "No."

"Come on, Delligatti. This is important. It's about Bricker."

At last he steps aside, allowing me entrance into the apartment. "You have two minutes."

I wait until he shuts the door before I start talking, and I take a quick look around his apartment. It's neat enough. Sparsely furnished, but that furniture is all good quality, and his TV rivals Bricker's for size.

"Look," I begin, forcing myself to meet his cold gaze. "I know we've had our differences, but there's something bigger going on here. If there's a mole in the crew, it puts everyone at risk. Especially Bricker."

"It always comes back to Bricker with you, doesn't it?"

"I care about him. And I want to protect him, just like you do."

Van walks away to sit down on his sofa, but doesn't invite me to take a seat with him. "Is that supposed to make me trust you?"

"If we don't find the mole, we're all in danger. But I won't stand by and let someone hurt Bricker. And I know you won't, either."

Van's eyes widen. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demands. "Did Bricker tell you..." I let him trail off, but I don't want to humiliate him.

I cross the floor and sit down in the armchair opposite him, invitation or not. "I know you're Bricker's oldest friend. And that means something, Van. So tell me: are you going to help me or not?"

Van scrutinizes me as he thinks. "Alright, Pedretti," he says at last, tone still guarded. "I don't like you, and I sure as hell

don't trust you. But I can see you care about Bricker, and that's more than I can say for the mole in the crew." He pauses, his jaw clenched as he forces out the next words. "So, I'll help you. For Bricker. What do you want?"

I ask him the same question I asked Tank, and get much the same reaction.

"Who suggested it? Bricker, I guess," he says. "No, wait—he was thinking of the Port originally. Hit them where it'd really hurt. Probably woulda been smarter." He gives a bitter twist of the mouth.

"You didn't suggest First National yourself?" I hold up my hands at the jut of his jaw. "I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm just trying to understand the logic behind it."

He backs down, but only a little. "Why the hell would I have suggested a bank heist?" he asks. "Bricker and me, we've always run ops for the Maestra, but not specialized, not like banks. Not like you," he adds grudgingly. "Meant we had to do a lot of training. We had to pull together a whole team. Pony for a wheelman, Honeybee for the shaft..." He pulls a face. "Listen, I don't like thinking that you might go after them just because of something I said—"

"I won't. I'm just following a hunch. I'm not planning on making any accusations."

He doesn't like it much, but he lets it go. "Where *is* Bricker, anyway? You and he have been joined at the hip lately."

I hesitate, but then I admit, "We had a disagreement. We both needed some time to cool off before talking it out. But I *do* plan on talking it out."

If he studied me hard before, I feel like he's dissecting me with his mind right now. "Disagreement," he says at last. "Okay. Does that mean you won't be at dinner tomorrow night?"

I shake my head with a pained smile. "Didn't even know there was one. Whole crew going?"

"No. Bricker asked me over. Said he wanted to talk."

“Good. You make sure you go, eh? I’m worried about Bricker. He won’t let me near him right now, but I know I can trust you to watch his back.”

“Yeah. Well, you make sure to watch your own, Pedretti,” he tells me as I rise and head for the door. He strolls after me. “I bet there’s someone out there who’d be more than happy to put a knife in it.” He gives me a hard smile and a goodbye salute.

“Thanks for the advice,” I mutter as the door slams shut behind me. And then I look down to make sure I’m carrying the TV remote by the wrong end, so that Van’s fingerprints will be preserved.

I don’t know what’s going on at Redwood, or when Jack will be available, but Freddy’s out and about. If I give the remote to him, it’ll end up in Jack’s hands eventually.

Van was the last of them. During our hospital visits, I managed to snatch good samples from Honeybee, Nico and Giddy. Jack has the full set now.

I just hope his expert contacts will be able to get prints off that damn burner phone.

Alone in my Glendale apartment again, I go over my notes and the information I’ve gathered so far. The pages are littered with names, dates, observations—all pieces of a puzzle I’m struggling to put together, but my thoughts race faster than I can catch them.

I think back to the beginning. The crew’s distrust was clear at first—barely concealed beneath a thin veneer of civility. And who could blame them? I was an outsider, a potential threat to their delicate balance of loyalty and secrets.

But now, with Van’s reluctant cooperation, I have at least one ally in this dangerous game. For a moment I wonder how his dinner with Bricker is going. I hope they can talk it out, find a way to get that friendship back on track.

As for Bricker and me...

I need to find a way to apologize. One way to do that is to find this mole. Show him I'm still dedicated to doing what's best for him. That I always will be from now on, whichever Boss gives me orders.

I look back over my notes and see a mess of scribbles, no clear pattern emerging yet. I have some ideas, but they're murky. Shadowed. Still, if there's one thing I've learned in this life, it's that when you're stumbling around in the dark, you only have two options. One is to do nothing. The other is to keep stumbling. And only one of those options is ever going to get you anywhere.

I stretch, hearing both my back and neck crack, and groan.

And then I put my head back down, eyes on my notes, and keep on stumbling.

CHAPTER 40

BRICKER

THE SMELL of burnt tomato sauce hits me as I pull the scorched pan off the stove. Cooking anything except bacon isn't really my forte. I scrape the mess into the trash and start over, opening a fresh jar of sauce. Thank God I got three from the store—just in case I fuck this one up, too.

Gotta make this right for Van. Can't mess up his favorite meal if I want to fix this thing between us. It took long enough for him to answer my texts, and then long enough to persuade him to come around.

This *has* to go right.

I try adding the noodles to the boiling water, and I end up spilling pasta across the counter. God, I need to get it together. I faced down the Castellani Don without blinking, but one old friend coming over has me this rattled?

The thought of the Castellanis means my mind shifts to Max immediately. I can't believe I neglected my friendship with Van for that asshole. But fuck him. Tonight is about fixing things with Van, not dwelling on Max.

I still wonder whether Van will actually show up.

A knock at the door startles me. I check the cameras from the kitchen; Van is on my doorstep, staring at his shoes. His shoulders are curled in, hands stuffed in his pockets. He doesn't exactly look thrilled to be here.

Or maybe that's just me projecting.

I jog down to the front door and swing it open. "Van! Good to see you, buddy."

He glances up. “Bricker.” No smile. No handshake.

This isn’t the Van I know.

I usher him in and he refuses all drinks, but the meal is just about ready. After I serve up, we sit across from each other at the table, avoiding eye contact as we twirl noodles around our forks. The tension is thicker than the pomodoro sauce I managed not to burn this time.

I clear my throat. “Nico’s doing well. I saw him today. He told me Giddy got out of the hospital.” I’m hoping to draw out more than just a one-word answer.

“Yeah, I went round today to see Tank and Giddy at home,” he says, offering me a quick glance before returning his attention to the food in front of him. “Giddy’s doing okay. Still sleeping a lot, I think because of the pain meds.”

“Yeah, I bet. I’ll go by to see him tomorrow, make sure he and Tank don’t need anything.” I wrack my brain for another casual topic of conversation that won’t make this awkwardness between us stretch endlessly.

I’ve got nothing.

Van stabs a meatball, watching red sauce splatter across his plate.

I set down my fork. “Okay. I know things have been weird between us since the funeral. But Van, I want you to know... hell, you’re my best friend. You always will be. But *I’ve* been a bad friend. I let bullshit get between us, and I’m sorry about that.”

Van looks up at me, curious.

“You were right about Max,” I tell him. “You know what I found out? *He’s* the reason my old man’s in prison. Max kept that little secret tighter than the fucking First National vault.”

Van’s eyes open wide. “What the fuck? How did you find *that* out?”

I don’t feel like digging into that open wound right now. “Long story. Point is, you tried to warn me: never trust a

Castellani. And I didn't listen. I'm sorry, man. I was a shitty friend and I want to make things right."

There's a short silence before Van nods. "Apology accepted." Then he actually smirks as he adds, "We both know you'd be fucked without me, asshole."

This is him.

This is Van, the guy who's had my back through thick and thin. We can get through this. I laugh in relief. The tension evaporates; we're us again. Just a couple of old friends bonding over truly mediocre pasta.

"And, uh, I'm sorry, too," Van adds with a sheepish grin. "For planting that kiss on you outta the blue. I've been...confused about some shit for a while, and I always saw you as...well, as a role model for being out and proud in the Family, I guess."

My cheeks warm, but I wave it off. "Forget about it. Heat of the moment."

Van frowns at his plate. "It wasn't just the heat of the moment, Bricker. I meant what I said. But it also wasn't fair, and I don't want it to get in the way of our friendship."

"It won't. And Van—any guy would be lucky to have you."

Van gives a snort, then asks tentatively, "So...you still want me in your crew?"

"Are you fucking kidding me? There's no one I'd rather have as my second than you. The minute Anna-Vittoria lets me back in the game, you'll be getting a call."

He grins at that, although I have no idea if the Maestra will even let me have a crew again. "Good to know," he says. But then he leans back in his chair, staring into the middle distance. "Speaking of the crew..." He pauses, choosing his words carefully. "Pedretti came to see me yesterday. He's still trying to figure out who the mole is."

My good mood evaporates. "What the hell did that bastard say?"

"Whoa!" Van holds up his hands in a calming gesture. "He's just doing his job, Bricker."

“His job is to go home and suck up to psychos like that fucker Julian Castellani.” I shove away from the table and stalk to the window.

“You know, maybe you should talk to him.”

I whirl around to stare at him. “Uh, who the hell are you and what have you done with Van?”

“I’m serious. I know this is rich coming from me, but I really do think you should hear him out. I don’t like him, but I can tell he cares about you.” Van looks like he’s sucking on a sour gummy worm as the words come out. “At least give him a chance to explain his side.”

“Explain what? How he lied to me? Used me? Hung my dad out to dry?” I drag my hands through my hair. “You *hated* him, Van. Now you’re taking his side?”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side.” Van joins me at the window, staring out at the quiet backyard. At the hot tub where I first put my lips on Max Pedretti’s. “And the thing is, Cap, your dad’s in the big house because *he* decided to rob a bank, not because Pedretti made him. So do the Castellani the courtesy of hearing him out, at least. Maybe there’s more to the story than you know.”

I scoff, angry that Van is taking the wrong side. “What more is there to know? Pedretti betrayed *me* by not telling me about it sooner. And he betrayed my father, too.”

“Did he? Or did you just hang on to that because it’s easier to make assumptions than hear a truth you don’t like?”

I want to argue, but I can’t. Because Van’s right. I never gave Max a chance to explain. I just assumed the worst. I’ve always believed my father’s story that he was in Chino thanks to his ex-partner. Not only believed it, but just yesterday I went to ask my father’s *advice*.

My angry, paranoid father, who is apparently not at *all* cool with me being gay, and who—I realize now—turned his back on me for ten years after he found out.

Van raises an eyebrow as he sees me starting to process. “Look, I get why you’re pissed at Pedretti. But if there’s a

chance you've got shit wrong, and if you still care about him—which, frankly, Cap, I think you fucking do, even though I don't get it—don't you owe it to yourself to find out the story for sure?"

I stare out the window, watching the rain smack down on the hot tub cover. Think about being in there with Max, about the way he looked at me. *Do* I owe him anything after what he's done? But if Van's right, and Max isn't the bad guy my father so desperately wants him to be...

"I'll think about it."

Van gives me a playful shove. "There's the Bricker Soldano I know. Open-minded and *so* willing to admit when he's wrong."

"Yeah, yeah. Fuck you."

Van laughs. I'm glad to have my best friend back, but now I have a new problem. Do I reach out to Max and demand answers? Or do I keep my distance like I have been?

But Van raises a more immediate problem. "Pedretti was asking about whose idea the bank job was in the first place," he says, heading back to his meal. "I couldn't remember. Was it yours?"

"No. I was just following orders from Anna-Vittoria. Her original plan was for me to lead a crew of disruptors, and I suggested a targeted strike on the docks at the Port. She actually liked that idea, but when the official plan came down, it was a bank job, along with a list of suggestions for the crew."

I come and sit back at the table with Van and we keep eating while I let things turn over in my head. What trail does Max think he's following?

"Van, can I ask you something? Right before we left the Lair for the bank job, Pony said he saw you making a text. Said you got all squirrely about it when he asked who it was."

Van's attitude is about the definition of "squirrely" right now, and for a moment a sense of dread swirls in my stomach along with the not-so-great pasta.

“Yeah,” he drawls out at last. “Shit, man...the thing is...I went home with this guy one night a while back, just to...” He clears his throat.

“You *slept* with a guy?” I wish I hadn’t sounded so shocked, but Van just gives a slightly embarrassed chuckle.

“I wanted to make sure, you know? Anyway. This guy, Rob, he could tell I was stuck on someone else, and he...God, he became a friend, maybe? Time to time he’ll text and check up on me, ask whether I’ve finally had the guts to...” He shakes his head. “Well, I’ll have an answer for him next time he texts. Anyway, he texted that morning. Bad timing. Pony was all up in my shit, trying to see who I was talking to, so I probably did get a little weird about it.”

“Oh.” The thing is, I actually believe Van’s story. He’s gone bright red, but he’s still smiling like he’s just glad it’s out in the open.

“Bricker,” Van says then, sounding serious, and I’m not sure I want to know what’s coming. Another love declaration? Or worse?

But when it comes, it’s an apology.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a fucking dick since the Castellani showed up. To you—and to him, too.”

I want to tell Van that he can be as much of a fucking dick to the Castellani as he likes, but I keep my mouth shut about that. All I say is: “Thanks. And forget it.”

“So, this chef thing,” Van says after a minute, clearly trying to lighten the mood. “You thinking of opening an Italian bistro?”

I snort. “With my cooking, I’d be out of business in a week.”

“No kidding. Stick to the Family business, chef.”

“Hey, you’re eating it, aren’t you?”

“I’m being polite.”

After the laughter dies down, I raise my glass. “To brotherhood.”

Van raises his beer to meet mine. “To brotherhood.” We clink glasses and drink. For the first time in a long while, things feel almost right in my world again.

Almost.

Van hangs around a long time, just like he always used to. We watch the game together, and when he finally leaves, I walk him out to his car. “Thanks for coming over. I’m glad we could talk things through.”

“Me too. And thanks for dinner. It was...edible.”

I clutch my chest dramatically. “I’m wounded!”

Van chuckles. “Keep working on those skills, chef.”

Standing there and watching him drive away, Van’s words about Max still echo in my mind.

Do I owe it to myself to find out the truth about Max? I hate the idea of that asshole worming his way back into my heart.

But if there’s a chance I don’t have the full story, don’t I owe him a chance to defend himself?

With a sigh, I head back inside to clear the table. Spending the evening with Van was good for me. Our friendship has always been my anchor in rough seas and I’m especially glad to have that anchor back now.

As for Max...

Well, maybe I *should* hear the guy out. Give him a chance to explain. Can’t hurt to listen, at least.

And I also need to find out his thinking behind these questions he’s asking. Because even if Max and I are done, I’m still looking for the mole. Just like he is.

Blood for blood.

CHAPTER 41

BRICKER

I SPEND the next morning taking care of the small bullshit that's been piling up—bills, laundry, the kind of stuff I let drop when the job went sideways. I feel better having restocked clean underwear, that's for sure.

And I do Max's laundry for him, too, since he left all his clothes here when he...No. Not when he left. When I threw him out of my house.

At gunpoint.

In the late afternoon I head out to see Nico at the hospital—for the last time, I hope, since he's getting released that evening. I stop dead in the doorway when I see Anna-Vittoria in there already. The nurse has been real strict about one visitor at a time since all of us were crowded in here that time.

"I'll come back," I say, backing up.

"Come in, Fabrizio," Anna-Vittoria tells me with a gentle smile. She looks warmer and happier than I've seen her for many months.

"I don't want to interrupt," I say, but I come into the room.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not interrupting." She holds out her hand to me, gesturing me over. I take her hand as she rises, and she pulls me closer to kiss my cheek, then lets me sit in her chair next to Nico while she moves to the corner.

"Okay, but if the nurse comes by, she'll kick one of us out."

"No, she won't," Anna-Vittoria assures me.

Yeah. I'm pretty sure no one in their right mind would try to order Anna-Vittoria around. I give Nico a gentle hug. He has a sling on one arm and he still looks pretty pale to me, but he grins exactly like he used to. "So I hear you're getting out today," I say.

"Fucking finally!"

"Language, Niccolo," comes Anna-Vittoria's voice from the corner.

"Sorry, Maestra," Nico mumbles with a roll of his eyes at me. "So where's Max? Not with you today?"

I didn't realize how much Max and I have become associated in everyone's minds. It's kind of embarrassing. I glance at Anna Victoria, hoping she didn't overhear that, but the look she sends me suggests maybe she did.

"I'm not sure where Max is today."

"He was in here the other day," Nico says. "I guess maybe he thought today was your turn for a visit."

I frown. "Did he ask you about the job? Whose idea it was?"

"Yeah. Me and Honeybee and Jazz, too, when she came by."

Max must really think he's onto something, if he's asking everyone the same question. Or maybe he's just chasing down another dead lead. Either way, I really need to decide what I'm going to do about him.

"How are your investigations going?" Anna-Vittoria asks, leafing through a magazine from the coffee table, as though she has very little interest in the answer. I know different.

"It's going. Actually, since you're here, Maestra, could you answer a question for me?"

"Always, Fabrizio." She puts the magazine aside.

"Who was it who suggested the bank job? Far as I remember, I suggested the Port."

She thinks for a moment. "I had a risk assessment done. The conclusion was that the Port would be more difficult, due to the Bernardi influence there. I did not want to tangle with the

Bernardis at the time—now, of course, things are a little different, since they are fracturing—and so I went with the second option. The bank.”

Maybe nine in ten people would follow that up with an admission that they regretted it. Not Anna-Vittoria. But I admire that about her. No excuses. No regrets.

“Thanks.”

“I hope it helps,” she says simply. “And now, I will let you two have some time alone.”

As soon as she leaves the room, Nico asks, “Did you hear who my home carer is going to be?” I give him quizzical look. “Honeybee said she’d move in and take care of me for a while. Hottest. Nurse. *Ever.*”

“That’s really gross, Nico,” I tell him, patting him on his good shoulder. “Get it all out of your system now, though, so Honeybee doesn’t have to suffer.”

I’m really pleased for them both, though.

They deserve a little happiness.

I go home after an hour or so to regroup and think about how best to approach the Max situation. But when I pull up in my drive, there’s another car waiting there too.

It’s Tony the Pony. He gets out as I do, with a raised hand in hello. “Hey, Pony. What are you doing here?”

I wish he wasn’t here. I need some time alone. But he’s got that intense look he gets when he’s determined to be heard.

“Got something you need to know, Bricker.”

I knew it. “Alright,” I say, closing the distance between us. “Then talk.”

“Inside,” he says. “Never know who’s around.”

There's something about the way he leans in, eyes darting around, that makes me uneasy. But I gesture at him to follow me into my house, where I call out, "I'm home."

"Oh, is Peds here?" he asks, looking up the staircase nervously.

"No," I say, heading through to the living room. "It's just us. Well? Spit it out."

And Pony does, no preamble. "It's Van. He's the mole."

I stare at him a second. "Pony, you better have something solid behind an accusation like that," I say, struggling to keep the disbelief from my voice. "Van's been with me since day one. He's always had my back—and yours, too."

"Exactly why he'd make the perfect mole, isn't it?" Pony raises his hands, as though setting a stage. "Think about it, Bricker. Who would suspect him?"

I want to laugh it off as a sick joke, but Pony seems to be serious. "Then give me some proof," I demand. "If you're gonna accuse him, I need to see something solid."

"Cap, I wouldn't bring this up if I didn't have evidence. I followed him last night, right to a meeting with a PacSyn asshole. I *saw* the contact handing Van an envelope of cash. It was a fucking pay-off. I swear to God."

"Van wouldn't betray us," I say again, but more slowly.

Pony remains silent, watching me with an unnerving calmness.

"Tell me again—when exactly did you follow him?"

"Last night. Around midnight. Come on, man," Pony insists, his voice hardening. "You think I'd come here and risk our friendship if I didn't have proof? Call him, if you like—tell him you know where he was last night, see what he says."

"I know what he'd say, because Van was right here with me last night. Didn't leave till past one. So you're lying, Pony." My voice is low, dangerous. "You're fucking lying. And I'd like to know why."

For a moment, Pony looks as though he's been slapped. But then his face twists into a sneer, and he barks out a laugh. "Too bad, I was really enjoying myself stirring up all that shit between you."

Oh, God. He's dropped the act now.

That overly-friendly demeanor is gone, replaced by something cold and calculating—and desperate.

"Sorry, Bricker. Nothing personal, you understand." And with those words, Pony pulls out a silenced handgun, aiming it right at me. Time slows down as my instincts kick in, and I dive for cover just as he fires. The bullet rips through the air where I stood moments before, but I'm not fast enough to completely dodge it. Pain sears across my arm as the bullet grazes my bicep.

"Lights out!" The house immediately obeys, plunging everything into darkness. I hear Pony curse, his footsteps momentarily faltering, and I take the opportunity to dive into the kitchen area, hiding behind the counter.

"Lights on," Pony tries, then, "I'm home!"

The system doesn't respond. It's loyal to only my voice, and I can hear him cursing as he snaps useless light switches on and off. But then a bright spotlight sweeps over the kitchen cabinets, and I know he's using his phone's flashlight.

I have to put some distance between us, find my weapon, and take Pony down. But I left my gun upstairs in my bedroom when I went to see Nico, and I have no idea how I'm going to make it there without getting shot again. Pony barges around, unsubtle as fucking always, but sooner or later it'll occur to him where I am.

There just aren't that many places to hide in this open lower floor. And apart from that...

I press my hand against my bleeding arm, the warm blood seeping through my fingers, threatening to leave a trail that Pony could follow straight to me, no matter where I go.

"Come on, Bricker," Pony taunts, his voice echoing through the house. "You can't hide forever."

He's right. But I've got to try. As I edge my way along the side of the counter, praying that Pony won't see me, and I think about Max. If I don't survive this, I'm never going to find out his side of the story about my father.

And I'll never get to see his eyes go soft again just before he kisses me, never hear his surprised chuckle at my jokes again...

"Bricker?" Pony's voice is closer now, and I can hear the sinister smile in his tone. He knows he has me cornered, and it's only a matter of time before he finds me.

But I won't go down without a fight.

There are the knives, of course, but taking a knife to a gunfight? There's a reason there's an old adage about that. I take a deep breath, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in my arm as I carefully creep through the kitchen, just getting behind the end of the counter as Pony rounds it at the other end. But I have a clear run through to the foyer now—and the stairs.

I bolt like hell.

Pony fires wildly, and one bullet goes so close to my head I feel the breeze as it passes, but I make it to the stairs, and I run up them fast as I can, my bloody hand slipping on the railing.

I crash into the wall before I throw myself into my bedroom, locking the door behind me—not that it'll matter. Pony can just shoot the lock out, if not kick the door in. But it might give me the few seconds I need.

My gun is on my nightstand, and I lunge for it just as Pony bursts through the door and throws himself at me. The force of his body slams into mine, sending my gun clattering away. But he can't get a grip on my arm, thanks to the blood, and I manage to get hold of his wrist, the hand holding the gun, forcing it up and away.

We grapple hard with each other on the floor. Neither of us speak. We're too busy fighting for our lives.

Because he must know I'm going to shoot his fucking brains out the second I get the chance.

And I know he'll do the same to me.

CHAPTER 42

MAX

I'M SITTING in my car in the dark, parked outside a fast food restaurant and trying to avoid going back to my place in Glendale, because it feels like I'm trying to live someone else's life when I'm there. Redwood Manor is where I spend most of my time usually.

And these days, when I think of "going home," I picture somewhere very different than either place. Somewhere I'm not welcome any longer.

It's been a long day and I don't feel like making it much longer, but when I get a call from Johnny Jacopo, I pick up at once. "Jack. Things settled down at Redwood?"

"You could say that. Lockdown's lifted. But that's not why I'm calling. My guy got one clear print off the phone—and he also got a hit from the comps you gave me."

"And?"

"Well," Jack draws, "that print on the phone belongs to one Anthony Palombino."

Tony the Pony.

So I was right. All his bullshit stories were only designed to keep the heat off himself. He wasn't very subtle about it. "You dug any deeper?"

"I'm seeing some pretty big cash deposits over the last year into his accounts. Some splashy purchases. Lots of vehicular expenses."

"That tracks. Guy's a rev-head."

I've had my eye on Pony for a while. It was all a little too convenient, him having so much intel to feed us. He hung around Bricker and me like a killer trying to insert himself into a police investigation.

From the first hours after the heist went wrong, he'd tried to stir up our suspicions about Delligatti, who must have seemed like a good patsy. Van's dislike of me, his attitude since I showed up, the fact that he was the tactics guy and his tactics kept failing... Yeah. Delligatti must have seemed like a *great* candidate to throw under the bus. But when that hadn't worked the way Pony had hoped, he threw doubt on Jazz instead, who had made herself a tempting target by not attending Rook's funeral.

And Rook...Rook was Pony's original fall guy, the one who took the blame for the missing bank floor layout, which Pony hid just to mess with us, I'm sure of it. Took it and photographed it, then stashed it, along with Rook's notes, under the sofa cushions at the Lair, where Bricker and I only found it much later.

The fact that Pony *had* actually saved us when we dragged ourselves out of the bank—drove at that PacSynner trying to take us out—had always seemed to me like a point in his favor. But I have a theory about that, too. I think he only did it because of what I said to him, right before I ran out to try to save the rest of the crew.

I swear to Christ I'll send Julian Castellani after you.

It froze him in place long enough for us to escape the bank, and when we all came out, Pony must've just about lost it. He had to make a quick call. Should he keep playing his part, pretending to be on our side? Or drive off, leave us to PacSyn, and hope to God that Julian Castellani never find out who betrayed us?

Pony had chosen to keep playing his part. Maybe the one smart thing he'd done, because Julian would've found him out, one way or another.

He'd *seemed* like a team player when he gunned the car at that PacSynner lurking around outside the bank. But the reality is,

Pony's the kind of guy who'll turn on anyone to save his own skin. He must have expected the whole crew to die there in First National—all except me, at least.

But it wasn't supposed to be me with him there in the van, was it? It was supposed to be Nico...

It was supposed to be the Maestra's son.

A chill runs through me as I wonder exactly what the whole plan was. For Pony to execute Nico? Or had he convinced PacSyn to kidnap the kid, have something to hold over Anna-Vittoria?

It also explains why the phone was burned at the Lair. Pony must have assumed he'd either have time to dump it later, or wouldn't have to at all, since the crew would be dead and he'd be in the wind. But I was with him the whole time from the getaway to the Lair, and he'd had no chance to ditch the phone.

I remember again his agitation at the Lair, his in-and-out for cigarette breaks—or so he'd said. He could've used that time to throw the phone in the oil drum and try to burn it, too jumpy to even wipe it fully clean of his prints.

"There's one more thing," Jack says. "I'm looking into the numbers this burner phone called and texted. Most were hidden, but he slipped up once or twice. Might be something in that, but I need a little more time."

"Hurry it along if you can, Jack. But I appreciate your help."

I sit there after hanging up, conflicted about what to do. Where to go. My first instinct is to find Tony the Pony, knock him the hell out, and drag him in front of Bricker. I know where his apartment is, and I bet he's skulking around there feeling mighty pleased with himself.

But Pony's an Esposito. And the taboo against getting into it with another made man without higher permission is one of the things holding me back...

The other thing is Bricker.

He's Capo. It's his call to make, not mine.

But Bricker sure won't pick up a phone call from me, so that leaves me one option.

As soon as I pull into Bricker's street, I see Pony's car parked outside his house and a cold, unfamiliar wave of fear washes over me. I don't scare easy, but the implications run wild through my head, so that I'm already leaning over to grab my gun from the glove compartment before I even come to a hard stop.

Then I'm out, running low and quiet to the door.

It's open, thank God, and I swing it open carefully and silently. But the moment I step inside, the darkness envelops me, the unnatural darkness of Bricker's house when he commands it to turn off, the blinds all down, the lights all out.

But then I hear it—the sound of struggles coming from upstairs. No shouts, no screams, but there's definitely something going on, and I sprint upstairs, gun in hand. I want to scream out for Bricker, but I keep my jaw clamped shut.

I might need the element of surprise on my side.

As I reach the top of the stairs, the sounds of the scuffle grow louder—grunts of pain, a muffled curse, a crash that sounds like something's been knocked over.

I come through the broken-open bedroom door to see Pony straddling Bricker, his fingers digging mercilessly into a fresh wound in Bricker's arm. Bricker's face is contorted with pain, but he manages to land a glancing blow with his other hand on Pony's chin.

“Get the fuck off him!” I roar, and without hesitation, I fire. The bullet *just* misses as Pony ducks, embedding itself in the wall opposite, and Pony scrambles away from Bricker like a cockroach fleeing the light.

I'm already heading for Bricker when Pony dives for the door, stumbling down the stairs. I hear his footsteps, then his

goddamn muscle car starting up, driving away. And I let him go.

Bricker needs me more.

“Are you okay?” I’m already helping him up from the floor, and I feel the warm wet blood still seeping through his shirt sleeve.

Bricker says nothing, only sucking in air as I try to clamp my hand over his wound, staunch the bleeding. “Max,” he says at last. “It was Pony.”

“Yeah. Can you turn on the lights for me?”

“I’m home,” he says loudly, and the house starts up all over, giving me a clearer view of his arm. “It’s fine,” he tells me, but he gives in to my insistence, and I carefully slip off his blood-soaked shirt. The wound is ugly, an angry red rip across his arm, surrounded by mottled bruises already showing where Pony cruelly pressed his fingers into it. But it hit nothing vital, and it’s not all that deep. He’ll need stitches, but in the meantime—

“First aid kit?”

“Uh. Bathroom.”

I grab the kit and begin to clean the wound with an antiseptic wipe, while Bricker stifles a pained groan. This isn’t the time for heart-to-heart conversations, but I can’t let this moment pass without addressing the thing that’s been on my mind since I last saw Bricker.

“I should’ve told you about Fabi. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I can’t look up at him, focusing instead on the task at hand. “You were right, I could have chosen to disobey the Maestra, tell you who I was. It was easier not to, and it was the coward’s way out.” I finish up with the wipe and pull out a few bandages, checking the widths. “But I swear, Bricker, I never meant to hurt you.”

The silence that follows is only broken only by our breathing as he processes my words. Then Bricker puts a hand on my wrist, making me pause in my actions. “Not even your

enemies could call you a coward. You just can't seem to stop saving my damn life."

I shake my head. "I'm no hero."

He takes a breath. "Did—did you really care about me? Or was I just a job for you?"

"You were *never* just a job to me. I...I tried to fight it, to keep my distance, but I couldn't deny the connection between us. And now...well, hell, I screwed it all up, but I *do* care about you. Deeply. And I'm sorry I caused you more pain."

For a moment, Bricker just stares at me. Then, slowly, he nods, as if making a decision. "We need to call Van," he says. "Get the word out about Pony to the crew. And then I guess, since we'll have a little time to wait, and you can tell me everything. I need to know the whole story about you and my dad."

"I'll tell you. Should have from the start. Because if there's one thing I learned from my time with your father, it's that honesty isn't always the best policy, but it sure is better than the alternative."

Bricker remains silent, his expression guarded. "My phone's downstairs," he says.

I'd offer mine, but there's only a fifty-fifty chance that Delligatti would answer a call coming from my number. "You stay here. I'll bring it up."

I don't want him moving more than he has to, not before he sees a doctor. God knows what other damage Pony might have done to him. So I head down, find his phone, and I sit by him as he calls Delligatti and asks him to give the rest of a crew a heads up and instructions to spread the word that Pony's our mole—and our new target.

Delligatti's reaction is a whole lot of swearing and then a whole lot of violent talk, which I can't help but approve of. I plan to do violence myself, if I get my hands on that treacherous little shit.

"Okay," Bricker says, hitting End Call at last. "You heard. They'll head here to group up once word is out. In the

meantime...talk.”

Talk. Tell him everything.

I’ve never told anyone *everything*, but Bricker is owed the truth.

“Your dad and I, we met in Chino when I was in there for a stretch—I was only about Nico’s age, early twenties. Fabi saved my life while I was in there. Literally, I mean. We became friends, the way you make friends inside. Not necessarily the kind of people you’d spend time with in the real world, but inside...” I shrug. “It’s different. We both got out around the same time, and we met up again—for old time’s sake, I thought. But Fabi had a proposition that we team up. We agreed on a set number of jobs, set dollar amount, and absolutely no casualties, because neither of us wanted to do hard time. Just the two of us, and we’d hire a wheelman, different guy each time, to throw off the law. And that’s what we did for a few years. Everything ran like clockwork. We lasted because we stuck hard to the rules—absolute loyalty to each other and to our creed, and to give it all away when we hit our ceiling. We were supposed to part ways and never see each other again for the rest of our lives. But Fabi broke that final rule, and contacted me with a crazy idea. One last job...”

CHAPTER 43

MAX

WHILE I TALK, I keep cleaning Bricker up, wiping all that blood off his precious skin. It's a peculiar sensation, cleaning the blood off him, and not a sensation that I like. My hands are so cold I'm surprised he doesn't complain, and they have a shake to them that I can't suppress.

I've seen men bleed before, patched them up more times than I can count, but never like this. Never when I *felt* like this.

And never while talking about the one thing in my past I regret so much.

"Fabi talked like this job was supposed to be our grand finale. But I shut him down straight away. Told him we already agreed the last one would *be* the last, and why the hell was he contacting me when we'd agreed to go cold. And you know me, Bricker. I don't like risk. I told him I couldn't be a part of it."

His brow furrows as he processes my words. I wait to see if he has any questions.

He doesn't.

"First National was the target," I go on. "I knew they were aligned with PacSyn. The consequences of fucking up would be...severe." My fingers brush against his wound as I work, and he winces. "Sorry," I mutter.

"Keep going."

"You know as well as I do, stealing from the Pacific Syndicate paints a bullseye on your back," I say. "I told Fabi he'd be

looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life. Told him to think about his girl and his kid. But he wouldn't listen to me."

"So you left him to do it alone?"

I swallow hard, wiping away the last traces of blood from his hand, then keeping his hand in mine. "Fabi liked the thrill, that was the problem. I treated it like a job, but over the years, he got addicted to the rush. I *hoped* he wouldn't go through with it. But I wasn't surprised when he did."

I can feel the walls I've so carefully constructed over the years crumbling down around me, leaving me exposed and vulnerable, all my emotional security measures short-circuiting, flashing danger.

And all I can think about is how much I want to hold Bricker close and never let him go.

"So despite my refusal, Fabi went on with the heist. He hired a fast-talking, second-rate security specialist to replace me, and...well, I guess you know what happened. They didn't stand a chance. The wheelman and the other guy with him were both shot and killed. Fabi was lucky to be taken alive." I pause and look down at his hand in mine. He hasn't pulled it away. Yet.

"Must've felt nice to be proved right," Bricker says, so neutral that I can't even tell if it's a dig.

I scoff. "Are you kidding me? I never felt worse in my life. I *knew* it was my fault, Bricker. I should have been there, or at the very least, I should have helped him. Laid out some plans for him. Maybe if I had, things would have turned out differently."

"Maybe," he echoes hollowly, his gaze drifting away from mine.

As the silence stretches between us, I feel an urge to fill the void with words—explanations, excuses, regrets. But none of those words will change anything. And before I can try to speak, Bricker does.

"You made a choice, Max." His voice trembles, just a little. "But my father made his own choice first, and it was a—well,

a real fucking dumb one. Now that I know you, I can't believe he *ever* ran a job without you. That was *his* mistake. He should've listened to you."

There's something in his voice that sounds almost like... understanding. Hope glows within me, fragile and faint, but warm. "I'm so sorry," I say again, as though sorries could ever make up for it. "Sorry for everything. For your father, for keeping this from you, for...for sleeping with you."

"You're sorry about that?" His head comes up fast.

"No," I say, a little hesitantly. "No, I don't regret that, Bricker. But I do regret not making sure you had a look at all the cards I was holding before we did. And I'll do whatever you need me to do to make things right between us."

There's a softening around his eyes. "You're not the only one with secrets, Max. Don't beat yourself up about that. The sex was good."

It stings hearing him sound so casual about it. "The sex meant much more to me than just...sex."

Bricker gives a small, sad smile. "You really mean that, don't you?" He looks away for a moment as he considers his next words. "The sex wasn't just sex for me, either. But I need time, Max. Time to process all of this—and I don't have that time right now. I just got shot by my own man. I need to put the crew first, figure out what the fuck we're going to do about Pony."

"Of course." I keep the worry out of my voice, but I fear that, given time, Bricker might reject me again. But it doesn't matter what I fear, because Bricker is right; the crew is the most important thing. He and I will always agree on that.

Just as I think of them, we hear the sound of voices at the door. Van thunders upstairs, followed closely by Tank and Jazz, their eyes wide, mouths letting loose all manner of cursing.

"Well, look who showed up in time to miss all the action," Bricker says with a grin that doesn't quite reach his eyes. But he gives me a nod of thanks, and a look that suggests our conversation isn't over yet.

“What the fuck *happened?*” Van demands. “*Pony’s* been feeding intel to the Synners? What the fuck?”

“That’s about right,” Bricker says. “And then he tried to shoot me.”

“But—” Tank starts, but I break in.

“It’s a long story, and Bricker needs to get to a doctor.” Bricker nods in agreement, but before I can move to help him off the bed, he holds up a hand to stave me off for a moment.

“Listen up: I want you three to find Pony if you can,” he orders. “And when you do, keep your distance. Don’t put him down unless there’s no other choice. Not yet. I want to talk to Anna-Vittoria about this. *She’ll* decide his fate. Make sure Giddy and Nico and Honeybee are safe and that they know Pony’s a dead man walking—but I don’t want them involved. Those kids have bled enough for the Family.”

Van nods curtly. “You got it, Cap.”

Tank and Jazz chorus their agreement too, and then I look at Bricker and Bricker looks at me. “Guess I should get to the doc,” he says. “You driving, Max?”

It feels like an olive branch, and I reach out and grab it with relief. “Yeah. Let’s get moving.”

CHAPTER 44

BRICKER

MAX DRIVES me to the Esposito Family medic that we use in cases like these, and I get a few stitches and a booster tetanus shot that hurts worse than the bullet did. I stare out the window on the way back, watching the city streets pass by in a blur, lost in thought. My arm only aches a little now where the bullet grazed me, but it's a stark reminder of how close I came to dying tonight.

If Max hadn't shown up when he did...

How the hell is it that this guy is always saving my ass like some goddamn hero? It makes it real hard to stay mad at him.

And hearing his side of the story about my father, well. That also makes it hard to stay mad. I wish he'd told me earlier, but the fact that he was ordered not to by the Maestra...

I plan to have a conversation with her about that.

We pull into the driveway of my home and Max turns to look at me, his expression unreadable. It's the deep hours of the night, when everything is still and silent, so when he talks, it sounds almost unnaturally loud. "I'd like to stay, if that's okay with you," he says. "At least until Pony's been taken in. I want to make sure you're safe."

I'm a fucking Capo. I shouldn't need a babysitter. But that's just my ego talking, and after everything that's happened—after Max saving my life *three* times now, which is almost embarrassing—I'll sleep better knowing he's here.

And maybe we can finish that conversation we started.

"Yeah. Okay."

We head inside in continued silence. I sink down onto the couch in the living room, suddenly feeling the exhaustion from this endless, fucked up night. Max goes into the kitchen. I hear the sound of glass tinkling and scraping as he sweeps up the mess from Pony's wild shots in the room, and then a different tone of glass clinking, cabinets opening, closing. He returns to the couch with two tumblers of whiskey and hands me one before sitting down in the armchair adjacent to the couch. I take a long sip, and I feel a little better after.

"How's the arm?" Max asks after a minute.

"I'll live," I say wryly. "Doc gave me some pretty strong painkillers. I can barely feel it right now."

Max nods, staring down into his whiskey. I watch the tightness in his jaw, the furrow between his brows. He looks like he's choosing his next words carefully.

"I know you've got no reason to believe a word I say," he begins slowly. "But I meant what I told you before. I'm sorry I kept the truth from you about my history with your father and I wish I'd told you before we...were intimate."

He pauses, but I stay silent, letting him speak.

"You have every right to be angry. All I can say is I genuinely care about you, Bricker. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you. I told myself I was keeping quiet because I was under orders, but you were right—that *was* hypocritical. If I'd really wanted you to know, I would have told you. But I knew it would be a tough conversation and I made excuses to myself to put it off."

"I believe you."

And I do.

Max isn't the type of man to betray others, or take the easy route just because it's easy. I've seen for myself the lengths he's gone to in keeping me and the rest of my crew safe. But there's one thing playing on my mind. "Max...you and my dad. Did you..."

There's a brief silence until Max suddenly understands what I'm getting at, and then he gives a shocked laugh. "*No*. God,

no. Fabi and me—we did time together, we worked jobs together, but that was all. I never even...” He clears his throat. “It wasn’t like that, not at all. I don’t think he even knew I was gay. I never brought it up. He didn’t seem like the understanding type.”

I give a bitter little snort. “Yeah, you got that right.” But something in me relaxes a little, and the next breath I take seems to fill my lungs deeper.

“I wish I’d told you—” Max starts again.

I wave my hand to cut him off. “You were trying to protect me.” Just like every time Max Pedretti kept me safe physically, his first instinct was to protect my heart, too. Am I really going to hate him for that? “And hey, like you said—you *were* under orders from the Maestra.” That’s something I’ll take up with Anna-Vittoria, because I’m pretty damn mad about it. But Max doesn’t need to know that. I take another swig of whiskey before asking tentatively, “What was he like, my dad? Back then, I mean.”

Max leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “He was...well, he was like you in some ways,” he says at last. “He made you feel like anything was possible. A little reckless now and then, but he had this energy about him, when he walked into a room, you couldn’t help but gravitate toward him. You’ve got that same charisma.” Max smiles a little, lost in the memory. “He told the best damn stories, too. Had me in stitches the whole time I was locked up. Made it bearable, you know?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. Hearing Max talk about who my dad *used* to be just twists the knife deeper. The man he describes sounds nothing like the paranoid, angry guy I visited in that prison cell. “He’s not like that anymore. He’s...empty.”

Max’s smile fades. “Prison changes people over the long term. I saw that myself when I was in there. The lifers, they were hard men. When you have nothing to hope for, it makes you stop seeing other people as anything but enemies—or tools.”

“My mother told me the same thing you did, Max. That Dad was a thrill-seeker. That he needed to take chances to feel

alive.” Max nods, his expression full of empathy. “But he was good at the job, right? I mean, up until he wasn’t. If I was *half* as good as him, I should’ve seen Pony a mile off.”

“Hey.” Max’s voice is sharp. “Don’t do that to yourself. You’re young, but you have the makings of a great Capo, and you’re one of the finest men I’ve ever known. A better man than your dad, and that’s the truth. You don’t let the thrill of the job make you reckless.”

I stare down at the floor, emotions churning in my chest. Doubt, grief, and anger all wrestle for dominance. “That’s not true. I pushed ahead with these jobs even after I knew someone in the crew had turned. Making choices that get people killed—how does that make me any different from my father?”

Max has moved closer to me on the couch and grips my good shoulder firmly. “You listen to me. There’s no one better suited to lead this crew than you. They’ll follow you to hell and back, not because they have to, but because they *believe* in you. But a good leader—the best leaders, like Sandro, like Anna-Vittoria—they use the resources around them. You’ve got Van, Tank, Jazz—me, too—and none of us picked Pony, either. But we’re all here for you. You don’t need to shoulder the burden alone. Let us help you.”

Hell, with Max looking at me like he is right now, I feel like I could take on the whole of PacSyn alone.

“You’re right about one thing,” I say with more conviction. “I know the crew has my back. And I...” I cover his hand with my own. “I’m glad you’re here, too.”

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

God, even after everything shitty that’s gone down, just having him close makes something loosen in my chest. Before I can second-guess myself, I lean in and press my lips to his.

For a breathless moment Max goes still against me. Then he kisses me back, a gentle hand coming up to cup the back of my head. It’s different from our frantic, desperate kisses. Slow, unhurried. Like we’ve got all the time in the world.

When we finally break, Max rests his forehead against mine. “We should cool it.”

I snort. “No we should *not*.”

“I don’t want to push you into something you’re not ready for.”

Always the gentleman. But I’m done hesitating, because I know what I want.

I want *him*.

“You’re not pushing me, and I’m sure,” I say firmly. I kiss him again, deeper this time. He makes a low noise in his throat that sends desire spiraling through me, unstoppable.

We shed our clothes slowly, piece by piece, hands roaming without hurry over each other’s bodies, every dip and contour, every scar and shadow. I chase his mouth, nipping at his lower lip. My arm is starting to ache again but I don’t want him to stop touching me, even if it means a little pain.

We end up in my bedroom, where Max lays me back against the pillows, bracketing me carefully with his body. I wrap my legs around his hips, his waist, urging him closer. I want every inch of him pressed against me, because there’s something in the reassuring weight and heat of him that grounds me.

Every kiss, every touch, is deliberate. It’s intimacy in a way we’ve never had before—we’re healing something that was broken between us, bringing it back to life with tenderness and care.

Max moves above me, his hands and mouth running over every part of me until I’m trembling with anticipation, my dick hard and aching as it rolls against my belly. His touch is urgent but soft, like he’s afraid to take too much. But I want more—I *need* more. I arch up into him and he responds by deepening the kiss, pressing his body closer to mine.

I can feel every inch of him against me, from his hot breath on my neck to the press of his thighs against my hips. By now, I can barely think past the need that’s coursing through my veins and making my head spin.

All I can focus on is Max, and how desperately I want him inside me.

He reaches over for the lube, and I watch him squeeze out a load of it into his hand. “Do you want...?” he asks, nodding at the nightstand, where a couple of condoms are still lying there in their wrappers.

“No,” I tell him with a smile. “No. We’re past that. Just you, Max. Just you and me and nothing standing between us anymore. Okay?”

He leans in again to kiss me, his hand nudging its way between my cheeks. “Okay,” he murmurs, and his fingers find my hole, begin teasing me open.

Just when I’m not sure I can stand it any longer, he shifts his weight and pushes into me in one slow thrust. For a moment everything stops as we both revel in the sensation. Then Max starts to move, setting a leisurely pace that slowly builds until we’re both breathing hard and gasping for air. Every movement sends waves of pleasure radiating out from where we’re joined together until all I can feel is him—his heat, his sweat mingling with mine—and the fire that’s building within me with each passing second.

And all through it, he’s so careful. So gentle, so aware of my wounded arm, so concerned with my pleasure, not his...

I bury my head into Max’s shoulder and focus on the stretch in my ass, encouraging him in by tightening my legs around his waist. And then he finds that spot inside me, and I can’t stop the choking cry that tears out of my throat.

His arms come around me, and he starts to fuck me faster, harder, and I’m lost in a haze of pleasure that overwhelms everything else until all I can think about is how good it feels to be with him.

How good and how *right*...

He’s with me every step of the way, murmuring encouragement, making suggestions into my ear that get more and more filthy the closer I get. He’s close too, I can feel it in the way he’s shaking above me, the gasps he can’t hold back.

His thrusts are erratic and his rhythm is faltering. So I tighten my arm around him and start to roll my hips in time with his, and he lets out a low moan that lights up something primal deep inside me.

“That’s the way,” he groans. “Just like that, yeah, just like that...”

His mouth finds my neck as he fucks me hard and deep. I can feel the tension building in him, his fingers digging into my skin.

“Come for me,” I urge him, breathless. “Come for me...come *in* me, Max, come on, give it to me...”

His hand is on my dick and I can feel it building inside me, too, that familiar tingling that spreads through my limbs...I can feel it, right there, just out of reach—just a little more...

His body stills for a second as he comes with a long moan, surging into me, and I feel the surge of his orgasm, the hot spurts painting me on the inside, and it’s exactly what I need. I thrust into his hand one last time and let it all flood out of me as Max encourages me through it, rough affection in his voice.

The aftershocks leave me shaking, head swimming, arm aching more sharply than before. But Max’s weight on top of me is familiar, and his dick is still inside me, softer now, but a comfort all of its own.

The real world only comes back in pieces. The scent of him, the sweat and sex and the gun oil that’s never far from his skin. The feel of his breath on my neck, his warmth against my skin. The thud of our heartbeats, slowing but heavy still.

No one else has ever made me feel like this—so safe, so dangerous, so complete, so utterly *wrecked*, and all at the same time. Like I’m flying apart and he’s the only thing keeping track of the pieces, but I can trust him to put me back together again.

Max eventually gets a damp cloth to clean us up, then makes me take another painkiller before crawling back into bed and wrapping himself around me again. I’ve been looking at my phone in the meantime. Everyone’s checked in—Honeybee

particularly horrified, with a lot of crying emojis, but Nico is with her, and Giddy too, I'm relieved to hear.

But Van, Tank and Jazz all report no sightings of Pony.

With Max's arms around me and the dawn not far away, I finally let the exhaustion settle into my bones. But there's one more thing I need to say before I let sleep take me.

"You were right about the sex," I mumble into the dark. "It's not just sex. Not with you."

There's no response for a moment and I wonder if he already drifted off. But then his arms tighten around me and his lips find the nape of my neck.

I feel rather than hear him saying something, his lips forming words that I think I understand, that frighten as well as fill me with joy, words that are new between us...

Words that I want to hear him say out loud, when the time is right.

CHAPTER 45

MAX

BRICKER and I sleep in a while, and spend the rest of the morning preparing for a meeting with Anna-Vittoria, gathering up all the evidence we've collected against the rat bastard who sold us out. She's already aware of his betrayal, but we want to make her decision easy for her. The fingerprints are the clincher, but I only worry a little about her accepting it from a Castellani. Jack is still working on a few things, but we get together what we have.

And I trust Anna-Vittoria Esposito to make the right decision here. From what I've seen of her so far, she's as fair and honorable as Sandro is...and she has a few decades' experience on him, too.

Meanwhile, the three older crew members are still digging into all Pony's haunts, but so far he's a ghost. Vanished to his PacSyn masters, no doubt.

But even that can't dampen the mood between Bricker and me. I keep catching him looking over at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention. Little smiles that make warmth spread through my chest.

And after everything he's been through, it's good to see the light back in his eyes.

We're shown into the salon, where Anna-Vittoria sits as usual on that little silk embroidery-covered settee. She gestures for us to sit.

Giancarlo Barone is there, along with Martino Gargiulo—the most powerful Capo in the Esposito Family—and of course the Shadow is there, doing his Shadow thing.

“Fabrizio.” The Maestra’s voice is cool. “You have news for me regarding the mole?”

Bricker clears his throat, a little nervous. “Yes, Maestra. As I reported initially, Anthony Palombino betrayed his crew, his Family...and you.”

We begin laying out the evidence, and with each new piece, Anna-Vittoria’s expression grows tighter, those carefully-painted lips thinning into a harsh line. But she doesn’t interrupt, letting us present the full picture.

Finally I hand the fingerprint analysis to her. “This proves conclusively that Palombino handled the burner phone that was used to set up the ambushes. He’s responsible for the bank setup that killed Rocco Laguardia—and nearly got the rest of the crew killed, too.”

Anna-Vittoria is silent for a long moment. When she finally speaks, her voice is deathly quiet. “This is the little worm who dared betray my Family?”

“Yes, Maestra,” Bricker says.

She swears under her breath in Italian, before turning cool eyes on Barone and Gargiulo. “Well?”

“Blood for blood,” Gargiulo says immediately. We convinced him, at least.

Barone is more hesitant. “It’s convincing, Maestra, certainly. But I’d be more comfortable if our own people looked at these things.” He gives me an apologetic smile. “You understand, I’m sure, Pedretti.”

“Whatever the Maestra wants, she’ll get.” It’s not my place to make decisions for the Espositos.

“No, I will waste no more time,” Anna-Vittoria announces after a moment of thought. “I am convinced. The Castellanis have proved themselves valuable friends and with Soldano’s support, I have no reason to doubt this evidence. PacSyn will

pay for this. Turning my own people against me, against their Family...it cannot go unanswered.”

“I’ll organize a crew myself,” Gargiulo rumbles. “Hit them tonight.”

“Maestra, if I may?” Bricker waits for her nod before continuing. “Pedretti and I took the liberty of developing a plan. With your permission, we’d like to move on it right away before they realize we’ve rallied.”

He outlines our plan, which involves targeting PacSyn’s distribution network at the docks. A quick, surgical strike with hopes to cripple them financially for at least the next six months. When he finishes, she sits back, steepling her fingers, and looks at me. “I wish that we had benefited from your experience and advice many months ago, Signor Pedretti, when we first started down this path. But I thank you for it now. I can see you have been of great help to Soldano.”

“He’s a very capable Capo,” I tell her. “I’ve learned a lot being here, too.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And you want to take part in this strike? You are sure?”

“Damn sure, Maestra.”

She gives a brief smile, but her eyes are hard when she says, “Then make them hurt, gentlemen. Show them what happens when they provoke the Espositos.”

“With pleasure, Maestra,” Bricker says, with a cold smile that echoes her own. But as she stands and nods a dismissal, Bricker speaks again. “If I may, I’d like a word in private, Maestra. Alone.”

“Give us the room,” is all she says.

We all file out, even the Shadow, and I’m escorted by him right through the Villa and out the front door, to wait near Bricker’s car under the watchful eyes of the house guards.

CHAPTER 46

BRICKER

THE DOOR CLOSES BEHIND MAX, and I turn from watching him go to look at Anna-Vittoria instead.

“So he’s told you,” she says with a sad smile.

“Max Pedretti has a lot more honor than you give him credit for. He didn’t tell me. I went to see dad myself. *He’s* the one who told me...and then I confronted Max, and he confessed.”

Her surprise is evident, but she wipes it away pretty quickly. “I see,” she says carefully.

“Making Max keep quiet about his relationship with my father? That’s not cool. So when this business with PacSyn is done, we better have a talk about it...Mom.”

She sits down again on her settee with a sigh. “If it will make you feel better to shout at me, Fabrizio, then go ahead.”

I sit opposite her, leaning forward, trying to quell the usual sense of frustration that rises when I deal with my mother. “I don’t want to shout at you, I just want to know why you thought it was better for Max to keep his mouth shut.”

“Because when it comes to your father, Fabrizio, things are... complicated. I did not want you offside with the Castellani from his first appearance, especially since I knew he was the best man—the *only* man—for the job. My cousin Vincenzo’s murder was a terrible thing, may he rest in peace, but it did open a rather convenient doorway to the Castellanis. And I am very sorry if you feel I have failed you as a mother.”

I throw my hands up. “You don’t have to be so damn dramatic about it. All I’m saying is, I would’ve liked to know who I was

taking into my crew. And frankly, Mom, if it had been anyone else, *any* other Capo, you would have told them. You didn't tell me because of who I am, and that's not fair. I have a hard enough time proving myself to the Family as it is. I don't need you keeping information from me that I need."

"You're right," she says simply. I'm so surprised at the admission that I don't say anything, and she goes on. "It's true, I would have told any other Capo, and the reason I did not was because you are my son, and Signor Pedretti was connected to your father. You have a mother's heart to blame."

Ugh, she's really not playing fair. "I'm not blaming you, for anything, Mom," I sigh. "And like I said, we'll talk more about this once business is taken care of. But I wanted you to know that Max and I..." I pause here, unwilling to talk too much about what's going on with Max. Things are tricky enough as it is; I sure don't need my mother getting involved. "Max and I talked it out," I finish. "We're cool."

She gives me a slight smile, and I'm not sure I like it. But all she does is nod. "As you say, when this business with the traitor is over, we can discuss it at length."

"Speaking of Pony," I say, shifting back into Family mode, "there's one more element to the plan Max and I came up with that I wanted to run by you—Maestra."

And with that one word, we put aside our familial bonds for the time being.

It's always been this way. My mother has been afraid my whole life, since my very birth, that if people knew who I was—her son—they would target me. And so for my entire life, we've kept our relationship as quiet as possible. The higher-ups know, of course, but most of the rank-and-file remain ignorant.

My crew don't even know, except for Van, because he grew up with me.

And it's not like she was wrong, either. Nico, the product of a later relationship, is still protected, but he's more widely known as her son in the Family. From time to time, that

information has gotten out—and Nico has had more than one contract taken out on him.

That's why she's always been so reluctant to let him into a crew. Hell, it's why *I* wanted him with Pony in the van during the heist. But Nico has grown to resent our protectiveness, and he's an adult now, capable of making his own choices.

For the rest of the conversation, we talk as Maestra and Capo rather than mother and son.

“One more thing,” I tell her as I stand to leave. “I want to tell Max the truth about you and me. Do I have your permission, Maestra?”

“Ask me as your mother.”

“Do I have your permission, Mom?” She opens her arms and I give her a hug.

“*Va bene,*” she whispers.

When I finally come out of the Villa, Max is waiting patiently by my Charger. I just give him a nod and we get into the car. Once we're out of the gate and back on the road, I say, “She gave the go-ahead for that extra element.”

“Good. I'll set it up.”

“You want to know her excuse for telling you to keep quiet about my dad?”

Max gives a chuckle that sounds like he'd rather eat nails. “Nope. That's Esposito business. You can keep that to yourself.”

“Thanks for the shout-out back there, by the way. Think Marty G just about passed out when you said I was a decent Capo.”

“Just call me your hype man.” Max grins, but adds, “It's just the truth, Bricker. One day maybe you'll believe it.”

Maybe one day. “Listen, there's something else you need to know.” He shifts in his seat like he doesn't like the sound of

that, but I go on before I lose my nerve. “My mother—the woman my dad was with, had a child with? It was Anna-Vittoria.”

There’s a long, long silence, and I keep my eyes fixed on the road. At last, Max lets out a long breath. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. She likes to keep it quiet.”

Another long silence. I’m starting to feel like the world’s biggest hypocrite, given how I acted when Max was hiding something from me.

“Can’t say I blame her,” Max says at last. “Sandro’s mother was the same, up until recent—and Julian had a lot to contend with over the years, people thinking what they thought about his Mom. I assume your mother keeping quiet about her offspring was intended as protection?”

He *gets* it. Gets it so fast that it makes me fall that little bit harder for him. “Yeah. Nico’s heritage is more of an open secret in the Family, and he’s had to put up with more bullshit than I do.”

“Who’s—” He breaks off with a tut at himself. “Ah, never mind.”

“Who’s Nico’s father?” I finish for him with a small smile. “Can’t you guess? Who’s the one guy who’s always with her?”

Max stares at me. “The *Shadow*? I never would’ve...” With a laugh, he turns his face to the window for a moment. When he speaks again, he’s serious. “But there are people in the Family who know you’re her son?”

“The Shadow knows. The Baron. Marty G and most of the senior Capos. They were around when she was pregnant, you know—hard to hide. Anyway, I’m telling you now because I trust you and because I think you should know. She’s a secretive woman, the Maestra. Not without cause, but sometimes...”

“Sometimes secrets cause more trouble than the truth.” I wait for him to give me shit for keeping that a secret, given my complete freak-out at finding out his. But he just says, “Thank you for trusting me.”

“You should rip me a new one,” I tell him. At his bewildered expression, I point out, “I lost my shit when I found out about you and Dad. You find out a secret like this, and you just take it on the chin?”

Max gives a small shrug. “How else am I supposed to take it? The way I see it, it’s Esposito business. Me and your father, well. That’s different.”

I take that in, but I can’t help feeling unbalanced still. “I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe it’s different. Maybe it’s not. But I should’ve given you a chance to explain.”

“You did,” he says simply. “After a cooling-off period,” he adds, and we both chuckle. “And now we understand each other. So let’s move on, eh? We’ve got a job to do. We can talk more once it’s done.”

“Yeah. Let’s get this fucker. Blood for blood.”

“Blood for blood, Capo.”

Several days later, once we’ve done our scouting and gathered more intel, the deep hours of the night find Max, Jazz, Tank, Van and me grouped outside the chain link fence surrounding PacSyn’s section of the docks. A convenient hole has already been cut into it.

Max glances at his watch. “Thirty seconds,” he murmurs. “On my mark.” We’re running this like a damn military operation, and I’m glad about it. Van and Max planned it out together, and they make a surprisingly good team—Van is tactical, Max more strategic, and we needed both for this.

Max raises his hand, counting down silently with his fingers. When his fist closes completely, Jazz and Tank take off, slipping through the hole in the fence and disappearing behind stacks of containers. Two minutes later, it’s Van’s turn.

Five more minutes, and it’s ours.

With Max, I duck through the hole, and we make our way toward the warehouse where PacSyn likes to store their most expensive imports. Max pauses as a group of PacSyn soldiers exit one of the warehouses, glancing around, then start ambling around the structure.

Guard shift, right on time.

Max and I move forward, pressing ourselves into the shadow of a container as another guard appears in the doorway, and sets out after his compatriot, who has just disappeared around a corner.

We reach the side of the warehouse unchallenged and the door there is unlocked, just as our scouts suggested it would be. We won't have to waste time picking the lock.

The interior is dim, cavernous, and seemingly unoccupied. I follow Max as he moves on silent feet, our senses alert for any sign of guards. But the space remains eerily quiet.

Too quiet.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle as we creep through the maze of shelving and boxes and shipping containers. Where *is* everyone? PacSyn's whole warehouse operation appears to be utterly abandoned.

I grab Max's shoulder, stopping him short. "Something's not right," I murmur.

He frowns. "Think we've been made?"

"I don't—"

The sudden thunder of boots on concrete makes us both spin around, and half a dozen armed PacSyn soldiers appear from behind a stack of crates, weapons trained on us.

Well, well. They remembered their guns this time.

"Hands up!" one barks.

Exchanging a glance with Max, I slowly raise my hands. The soldiers surround us, seizing our guns and binding our wrists with zip ties. I strain against the plastic digging into my skin, but it's no use. Then the warehouse door crashes open, and

two more soldiers drag Van inside. His face is tight with anger, an already-purpling bruise along his jawline.

“You okay?” he asks hoarsely, when he catches sight of me.

Before I can respond, the butt of a rifle slams into his back, driving him to his knees with a choked grunt.

“No talking,” one of the soldiers snarls.

Outrage burns through me at the sight of Van on his knees. I lunge forward, only for two sets of hands to force me down again. Max catches my eye, gives me a tiny shake of the head.

Keep cool, Capo. I can practically hear him saying it.

Heavy footsteps sound throughout the warehouse. The soldiers part to allow a tall, slender man to stroll up, regarding us with an icy smile. I recognize him as Blackjack Benny, one of Chuckles Moran’s lieutenants with a taste for gambling.

“Well, what do we have here?” Benny asks softly. His polished shoes stop inches from my face. “A couple of mice, lurking where they shouldn’t be.”

I glare up at him and say nothing. Beside me, Max shifts.

Benny tuts. “Did you really think we wouldn’t be expecting you?” He leans down, gripping my chin roughly. “You know, Soldano, Mr. Moran is very interested in you. Very interested indeed.” He straightens, addressing the soldiers in a bored voice. “Take them out back. Mr. Moran will be here shortly to deal with them.”

Rough hands seize my arms, and Max and Van are hauled along, too. We’re shoved outside into a small courtyard between two warehouses, forced to our knees again. Benny turns up a few minutes later, smiling down at us before he checks his watch idly. “Mr. Moran will arrive shortly. I’d make your peace if I were you.”

Max’s shoulder brushes mine. I meet his eyes, wondering if this whole thing was actually a giant mistake. So much left unsaid, so much undone. I want to tell him how much I—

The cold metal of the gun barrel digs into the back of my neck as the PacSyn goon yanks me up, his beefy hands pulling my

arms up roughly behind me. I stumble a bit but quickly regain my footing, gritting my teeth against the flare of pain in my injured arm. One wrong move and this twitchy lowlife will blow my brains all over the concrete.

Beside me, Max is similarly hauled to his feet, and then Van as well.

“End of the line, boys,” Benny says. “But the Boss wants a word with you before we dump your bodies in the bay.”

I’d say it’s about twenty minutes before I hear the solid, slow footsteps that presage Chuckles Moran’s arrival, getting louder and louder.

CHAPTER 47

BRICKER

CHUCKLES MORAN IS BUILT like a bulldog, stocky but muscular under his immaculate suit as he walks into the courtyard. His small dark eyes find me first, and they ooze smug satisfaction. “Well, now,” he says. “Fabrizio Soldano, in the flesh. Wasn’t sure I’d see you again after that mess at the bank. Gotta say, didn’t expect you to be dumb enough come waltzing straight into my territory after the way my inside man played you for a fool. Yep, your Mama shoulda known better than to fuck with me.”

So Chuckles Moran knows the Maestra is also my mother? Interesting.

He jerks his chin at Max. “*You* shoulda known better, too. Pedretti, right? Your Boss’ll get a message in the form of your head.”

A sudden Fury lances through me at the threat to Max’s life, white-hot. It takes every shred of self-control not to smash my forehead into the bastard’s face.

But Max hasn’t even flinched. Hasn’t said a word. I pull myself together and keep doing the same. Van, next to me, is also silent. All of us just wait and watch.

Chuckles’ smirk falters at the lack of response. He pulls back a little and gives me a slow up and down. When he speaks again, the taunting edge is gone from his tone.

“But say I’m feeling generous, maybe I let one of you walk away. Who’s it gonna be?” His gaze ticks between us. “Time to show where your loyalties really lie. First one to flip gets to live.”

None of us say a damn word.

Chuckles laughs, a harsh grating sound that belies his nickname. “Loyal to the end, eh? Can’t say I’m surprised.” He pulls a pistol from inside his jacket and sighs theatrically. “Just means there’s no reason to keep you around anymore.”

And I feel my lips curve into a grin.

Chuckles pauses, brow knitting. “The hell you smiling about?”

The grin widens. “Oh, just appreciating the irony.”

The goons around the edges exchange confused glances. Chuckles’ eyes narrow. “You think this is funny?”

“No, it’s not funny.” I meet his glare evenly. “It’s pathetic. That you morons are so goddamn arrogant you never stopped to wonder if strolling into an ambush was part of *my* plan.”

Chuckles’ face reddens, but before he can spit back a retort, I press on.

“See, I figured there was a good chance your boys would be waiting here, but what I really wanted? Was *you*, Chuckles.”

From the corner of my eye, I see a PacSyn soldier drop.

Then another, over in the shadows, then another—

Any second now, even *these* unobservant fucks are going to realize they’re being picked off one by one. So before they do, I rear back and headbutt the fuck out of Charles Moran.

He falls back, a crimson spray bursting from his nose as he cries out.

For a split second, the PacSyn thugs stand frozen, long enough for Max, Van and me to hit the ground. Because then the real pandemonium erupts, as a lithe figure drops down from a nearby shipping container in a whirl of blades.

Moving with almost inhuman speed, he slices through the rest of Chuckles’ men in a lethal ballet, punctuated by stray, useless shots from their guns. Arterial blood fountains, coupled with gurgling cries. In seconds, the remaining five are motionless, bloodied heaps on the concrete.

With an elegant twirl, Julian Castellani flicks the last man's blood from his knives and turns to face us with a happy smile. "Pedretti! It's good to see you."

Chuckles Moran, huddled on the ground with blood soaking down the front of his shirt, has gone gray. "*You*," he gasps, staring at Julian.

Julian turns those strange pale eyes on Chuckles. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced. But I shall certainly be getting to know you *very* well in the near future."

Chuckles makes a strangled noise, staring in fear.

"Little help, Julian?" Max says, getting back to his feet awkwardly. I follow suit; it's tough with my hands bound like they are, but Julian comes over and slashes through our bonds one by one. "Apologies for the delay in my arrival," Julian says as he works. "I really did do my very best to be on time."

I grimace as the blood returning to my fingers starts them stinging, and try to work some life back into my numb hands. "Your timing's pretty great if you ask me," I tell him. "Thanks for the assist."

"Oh, my absolute pleasure. I miss this sort of fun. But I'm afraid I *did* make rather a mess for your cleaners." Julian prods one of the PacSyn corpses with the toe of his shoe, wrinkling his nose at the leaking gore. "I trust the remainder of your operation proceeds smoothly?"

I frown at the implication. If he's asking, that means... "Wait, Tank and Jazz aren't with you?"

"They didn't show up at the rendezvous. Hence my being a touch late. I waited as long as I could, but..." He shrugs.

I exchange an anxious look with Max. The others must have run into complications. Images of their bloodied and broken bodies flare through my mind.

No. I can't think like that. They're capable, they knew the plan. They were supposed to cut the lights and the alarms, then meet up with Julian. Something must have held them up, that's all.

“I need to find my people,” I tell Julian. “Can I trust you to escort this asshole to the perimeter? You’ll find Marty G there with a few of his men, waiting with a car.”

“I suppose so,” he says, sounding a little disappointed. “If you’re sure there’s nothing more interesting to come tonight?”

“We’d appreciate it, Julian,” Max tells him. “And no accidental knives between the ribs, eh?”

Julian’s smirk at that is chilling, but he nods. “No accidents,” he agrees.

I walk over to Chuckles, who looks about as far from his nickname as a man can get. “My *mother* wants a word with you,” I tell him, before hauling him up.

He only looks more terrified at that idea, and speech seems to have deserted him. I’d like to kill him here and now, frankly, but the Maestra nixed that idea. She said the balance of power here in LA is too unstable to create another power vacuum right now.

But I know she’ll put the fear of God into Chuckles Moran before she lets him go. I hand him off to Julian, then jerk my head at Van and Max. “We gotta move.”

“Way ahead of you, Cap,” Van says, already heading for the door.

Max falls in beside me as we go after him. I toss a hurried “Thanks, Julian!” over my shoulder.

“Thank you for an entertaining night!” he calls back brightly. “Ciao, Bricker!”

It’s the first time he’s called me by my nickname, and weirdly, I feel like I’ve moved up in his estimation.

Van, Max and I tear through the maze of shipping crates, scanning for any sign of Jazz and Tank. No gunshots or shouting, so maybe they’re laying low, trying to avoid detection...

I whip around the next corner and slam the brakes just shy of barging straight into Tank, gun drawn, coming the other way.

“Cap!” he whispers. “I was coming for you. Guess who Jazz and I found?” Just beyond him, I see Jazz is poised by the metal side door of another warehouse, lockpick at the ready. “We followed Pony into that warehouse, the motherfucker. He was here—and he’s trying to hide.”

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” I tell Tank, grabbing him by the shoulder in relief. “Julian said you never showed up—”

“Sorry about that,” he says, pulling a face. “We had to make a call, whether to follow the traitor or go meet Julian. We figured the Castellani could handle things, and we didn’t want Pony to get away.”

“It was the right call. Chuckles is done. So what’s the situation here?” I ask, as we approach Jazz.

“We tracked him in here,” Jazz replies. Her expression is murderous. “Heard him inside crying on the phone, begging someone to bail his ass out before we caught up with him.”

We’ve got him trapped now. “Anyone with him?”

“Not that we can tell,” says Tank. “Looks like he slithered here alone once he realized his bolt hole with PacSyn wasn’t safe after all. And no civvies, either, not this far from the docks.”

Good. No need to worry about innocent casualties, then. I heft my gun, which I retrieved on the way out of the courtyard, and I look at Max.

He’s been so quiet tonight. He’s not a violent man by nature, I know that—but he *is* a pragmatist. “We all know what needs doing here,” I say.

Solemn nods ripple through the group. These are good people, but they understand how betrayal must be answered. How failure to punish those who violate our code weakens the Family.

And Max nods as well.

Jazz makes quick work of the lock and eases the door open. I slip through first, senses keyed to any sound or movement

within the dim space. The others fan out behind me, covering angles with their weapons raised.

Muffled sobs escape from the office space at the back. No other voices, though. Tony the Pony is alone with his treachery, it seems.

Gesturing for the crew to hold position, I creep along the wall toward the cracked door and catch a glimpse of him: disheveled, crumpled against the far wall, cell phone clutched white-knuckled, pressed up against his ear.

“Please, you gotta get me out of this...I know I fucked up, but what was I supposed to do?” He dissolves into whimpering as the tinny voice on the line replies.

No honor or courage, just a pathetic worm trying to bargain for his miserable life.

With one swift kick, I slam the door wide open. Tony shrieks, dropping the phone as I storm in and grab a fistful of his shirt. The next instant, I jam my pistol under his quivering chin.

“P-please...please don’t do this!” he blubbers, reeking of sweat and fear.

“You got a compelling reason I shouldn’t splatter your brains for selling us out?” I snarl into his tear-streaked face.

He shakes his head frantically, snot bubbling from his nose. “I didn’t wanna...he made me, said he’d k-kill me if I didn’t...”

“Kill you?” My voice drops to a lethal whisper. “What about Rook, huh? You got *him* killed—Giddy and Nico shot—and we were *all* supposed to die, weren’t we?”

“It wasn’t my fault—I never meant—”

I drop my gun to his knee and pull the trigger. He howls, collapsing.

“That was for Rook. And this,” I aim the barrel at his other leg, “is for every minute you made us chase your sorry ass.”

“Please,” he sobs. “Just fucking kill me.”

“Who was on the phone, Pony? Tell me that and maybe I’ll kill you quick.” But his lips only press tighter, and he shakes

his head. “*Now* you find your honor? You might feel different with a bullet in your other kneecap,” I tell him.

But Max’s hand covers mine, staying my aim. “Bricker. Look at him. He’s not worth torturing.” Quiet steel in his tone. “You gonna talk, Pony?” Pony says nothing. He stops crying, even, as though resigned. “Then let the crew decide his fate.”

Reluctantly, I lower my gun. But as my anger recedes a little, I see Max’s point. This isn’t just about revenge for Rook. It’s about restoring faith in the code that binds our whole Family. Pony’s betrayal cut deep, but that wound needs to heal clean for the crew to move forward whole again.

I pick up Pony’s phone and slide it into my pocket. I’m not going to waste time playing *What’s the Password* with Pony. Max is right. This needs to be done fast and clean.

As for Pony, he doesn’t move from the oozing heap he collapsed into.

“Max is right.” I turn to Van, Tank and Jazz, clustered behind us. “He’s yours to judge. Do what you think needs doing.”

Silent looks pass between them. Jazz steps forward, face grave but resolute. “Pony,” she says gently.

He does look up now, a sigh escaping his lips as the barrel of her gun presses into his forehead. He closes his eyes, muttering a quick prayer.

A single shot, and it’s done.

We leave him cooling in a spreading crimson puddle. The dark is making way for the dawn as we exit the warehouse. I sling an arm around Max’s shoulders and pull him close, uncaring about the rest of the crew seeing us, and we make our way back to the fence with a sense of shared peace. Max kept me from tarnishing Rook’s memory in a moment of rage. Justice was done here, not vengeance.

And I saw again how much I need Max’s calm strength to temper me. However it plays out between us in the bigger picture, I know one truth beyond any doubt.

I love this man.

CHAPTER 48

JULIAN IS WAITING by the hole in the fence, looking intensely bored until he catches sight of us. “Your large Capo took Chuckles Moran away,” he tells Bricker. “I thought I’d wait to give Pedretti a lift.”

Bricker snorts. “Nice try, but he’s already got a ride, Castellani.”

Julian’s eyes drift to me with a sigh. “Sandro has been very patient with you, Pedretti, but his patience is not endless.”

I know exactly whose patience Julian is really referring to. “I’ll be back soon enough,” I tell him. “And you can tell the Boss I’m very grateful for his forbearance.”

Julian gives a dismissive sniff.

I’ve already let Sandro know I want a little more time off. I want a damn vacation, for one thing. And for another, I want to spend more time with Bricker.

Find out exactly what we could be to each other.

Julian will just have to put up with my absence a little longer.

“Since we’ve got you here, Castellani, one more favor?” Bricker asks. He takes Pony’s phone out of his pocket and hands it to Julian. “See what Johnny Jacopo can do with this.”

Julian studies Bricker for a long moment before breaking into what, for him, is his most genuine smile. “I do believe we are becoming friends, Bricker.”

He saunters off with a casual wave, and I pull Bricker close again. “Let’s get out of here,” I murmur in his ear, “before I

pull your clothes off right here.”

He lets out a startled laugh that draws the attention of the rest of the crew. “Uh, good work, guys,” he says quickly. “I’ll be in touch tomorrow. Go get some rest tonight.”

“Get some rest?” I repeat as we get into the car. “I hope you don’t think *you’ll* be getting any rest tonight.”

The dirty look of promise he gives me tells me everything I need to know.

Talk between us is minimal on the drive. And then, apart from Bricker’s *I’m home* call to his damn house to wake it up, all I say is “You want me in you?” as soon as the door shuts behind us. He mutters back “Fuck, yeah,” with my tongue in his mouth. I press him up against the wall and he pushes back against me, daring me, provoking me, until I shove him back possessively, his wrists in my hands, and devour his laughing mouth.

I don’t know what it is about Bricker. I’m usually much more gentlemanly in this area of my life, but everything about him sets off some primal instinct in me, makes me frenzied and desperate. Words like *honor* and *restraint* have no place here. They’re too polite. Too civilized.

“Fuck me or I’ll drag you to the floor and sit on your dick myself,” Bricker growls against my neck.

“I’m gonna be in you all night,” I tell him. “I’m going to ride you until you don’t know your own damn name.”

“Good,” he grunts, breaking free from my hold. “Then what are you waiting for?”

With a smirk, he takes off, running up the stairs two at a time, and all my exhaustion evaporates as I chase after him, the beat of my heart a frantic drum as I think about making him submit, mounting him, burying myself in the warm, welcoming sheath of his asshole.

I'm so greedy for him I can't think straight.

He's up in his bedroom, already kicked off his shoes, stripped off his Kevlar vest, and when I catch up with him, I slap away his hands as he starts to pull off his tee. "That's my job."

"Then get to it."

I rip the damn shirt off him, then return to the pleasure of his mouth as my hands work to get his pants undone, yanked down, off. I shove him back, hard, so he lands on the bed and bounces, still laughing. He's a big guy, and I'm not worried about hurting him, but I pause for a moment as he holds up a finger.

"Leave them on," he says, pointing at my clothes.

"I stink like the docks."

"I know." A wicked little smirk twists his mouth. "It's hot."

It's not, or rather it won't be when we need to wash the bedsheets that reek of rotting seaweed and blood, but if Bricker wants it, he can have it. Besides, it slices valuable seconds off of not having my hands on him.

"Get that ass in the air," I tell him. "I want to eat it."

He flips fast, knees pushing up under him, and I get down behind, face to face with my well-earned reward. I finger his nuts with one hand as I spread open his cheeks with the other, weaving my fingers through his silky-soft bush, brushing my thumb down the vein of his cock. He sighs out my name, pushing back against my hands. "Don't play with your food," he mutters. "Come on, get your tongue in me."

"You don't get to tell me what to do right now, Capo," I say, grinning as he gives me a mock-outraged glare over his shoulder. "All you need to do is lie there and take it."

But I do what he wants. I drag my tongue down his crack, savoring the taste of him, the warm, musky scent. He groans as I lap at his entrance, wriggling the tip of my tongue into his folds, stabbing into the ring of muscle until it relaxes, lets me in. He's hot and tight, and I want to stay here all night, drinking in his flavor, making him squirm and whimper. I

reach under to palm his hard cock, roll his balls in my palm. He gasps and bucks, a groaning laugh as I squeeze his nutsack a little tighter.

His thighs spread wider apart, offering me more, and I suck at that sweet little hole as he grinds back against my face. I pull his ass wide as I nuzzle into him, his big warm balls pressing into my chin as he bobs up and down on my tongue, moaning. I match his rhythm, tongue-fucking him as deep as I can, my head buzzing with the taste of him, the feel of his soft, wet ass wrapping around my face as he begins to whimper and beg.

Now I've got him where I want him.

I get to my feet, ignoring his demands that I get my tongue back in his ass right fucking now. Instead, I head to the bathroom, where I splash my face off, giving the beast inside a second to cool off, too. When I head back out, I get the lube, then unzip my pants and stand by the side of the bed, my dick pointing toward him like a compass points north.

"Get me ready for you." I throw the lube on the bed next to him.

He's still in the same position I left him in, face still pressed into the sheets, but he leans up a little and complies, his big warm hand wrapping around my dick and slicking me down with lube, working me until I'm soaked from base to tip. While he does that, I finger his ass, get three in there pretty fast, curling my fingers inside him like he's caught on a hook and I'm about to reel him in.

His mouth is wet and glistening, his eyes heavy-lidded as he looks up at me. I shove my fingers deeper, curve them up, and he jerks and cries out as I find that spot inside him and stroke it. But it's a tricky angle for my wrist, and besides, I want something other than my tongue and my fingers in that tight, slippery hole.

"You ready for me?"

"Yeah I'm ready," he says, voice thick with need.

"Then roll over. Yeah. That's a good boy, like that." He just about preens any time I praise him, and I make a note at the

back of my mind—that stoic, dependable part of me, which is right out of the picture at the moment—to make sure I tell him every day how fucking amazing he is. Because he is, especially spread out for me like this, legs up and bent and spread wide with his hands on his knees, his pouting asshole glistening in the light, squeezing in on itself as I look at it.

“You gonna fuck it, Castellani, or just drool at it?” he asks, and grins when my eyes shoot up to his, outraged.

“You watch your mouth, Esposito, or I’ll fuck that instead and leave you all backed up and desperate.”

It’s an empty threat, and he knows it, practically crowing as I tap the tip of my dick against his knot. It’s an easy push in, one hot, wet slide so that I’m balls-deep before he can even breathe out again, and I pause to really feel it, the stretch of his channel around me. His hands are moving over himself, reaching down to touch his dick as I pull out again and slam back in. His wide chest flushes, and I help him hold up those thickly-muscled thighs as I stroke in and out, a velvet-smooth ride. I could do this forever, pumping in and out of his body as he relaxes into it, moaning and gasping, pulling his dick to the same rhythm I set.

“More,” he pants out. “I need you deeper.”

“You want deeper, you’ll need to do some work.” I pull out and slap his thigh softly, making him shuffle over on the bed. I lie down, biting back a sigh of relief as I relax into the soft sheets, and put my hands behind my head. “Well?” I say with a grin, as Bricker just stares at me. “You gonna fuck it, Esposito, or just drool at it?”

He snorts, but he’s bouncing up at once, and then I get the sweet, sweet pleasure of watching Bricker Soldano lower his ass down on my cock, tightening up as he wriggles around, seating himself. “Oh, fuck. I always forget how big you are,” he gasps, pausing a moment. I can feel his gut fluttering around me and I grip my own hair in my hand, tug a little to make sure I’m distracted enough not to shoot in record time.

“I’m not so big. You’re just—*fuck*—tight.”

He leans over and grins down at me. “You feel good.”

“So do you.”

“Mmmm.” He starts moving, head falling back as he fucks himself on my dick, jacking himself as he does. I want to stay right where I am, acting all lazy and unaffected, but how can I possibly not be affected by the sight of him? I grab at his thighs, my fingers digging in as he bounces up and down on me, taking more and more of me until I couldn’t get any deeper into him without divine intervention, couldn’t be more connected, as he sweats and gasps and writhes around moaning...

I’m surrounded by him, completely consumed by the feel of him, every contraction of his gut, his muscles gripping me, the perfect heat of him, the way he fits like a glove on my dick, like he was made for this purpose—

“I’m gonna come,” I grit out, and that hot ring only gets tighter on me, dragging my pleasure out of me, while words spill out of his mouth, driving me on.

“Come on, Max, God, you feel so good, you’re gonna fill me up, breed me, I wanna feel it, wanna take your load, *come on* —”

I’m overwhelmed by him, my dick buried hard in his ass, my balls screwed up tight as hell, every muscle in my body going taut as I give into it, crying out even before it’s really hit me, my fingers spasming and clawing at his thighs as the sensation builds in my nuts, shoots up my spine, the head of my dick pounding its way through that sweet, viselike ring and into the depths of him. There is nothing left in the whole wide world except my cock in his ass as I grab his hips and slam into him, erupting long and loud into him, the orgasm shaking me down to my bones.

His hole is still milking me as I float back down, and just before it starts to get uncomfortable, he shoots too, emptying out those big gorgeous balls all over me, marking out his territory just as surely as I’ve marked out mine.

Later, after a tired, half-hearted cleaning, his arms snake around me in the dark, tight and possessive.

“I love you,” he whispers. “Oh, God, I love you, Max, and I don’t think I can stop.”

I rub his back up and down in long, soothing strokes. “Who says you have to stop? I love you, too. We can do that. Love each other.”

He takes that in, the seriousness in his voice replaced by what sounds like a smirk when he asks, “Every night?”

“Every goddamn night. Though I can’t promise I won’t pass out occasionally. God, you really put me through my paces, Capo.”

He chuckles, pleased, and I’m slipping into sleep, but I still feel his lips as they press against mine. “Goodnight,” he murmurs. “Love you, Max.”

Love you, Bricker. Goodnight. I try to get the words out; it’s a mumble, but when he snuggles closer, I’m reassured he understood.

And then I’m gone, sleep hitting like a sledgehammer.

It’s my phone that wakes me, early in the afternoon, and I groan as I lean over to pick it up. Bricker, on the other hand, is wide awake immediately.

“Is that Jacopo?”

I grunt, checking the name. “Sure is,” I tell him, then speak into the phone. “Jack. What you got for me?”

“I traced the last call he made from the point of origin to its destination,” Jack says. His voice is tight. “Your guy fucked up; he didn’t use the usual security protocols. But now you’ve got a problem.”

I sit straight up in the bed. “What’s that?”

“The call was received on a cell phone *inside* Anna-Vittoria’s Villa. Don’t know whose—it’s another burner. I’ll send the number through. But if I were you—”

“On it.” I disconnect and get out of bed immediately. “Bricker. We need to hustle.”

He’s already pulling on his clothes. “What’s the story?”

“Whoever got that call today, they were inside the Villa. So whoever they are...they’re close to Anna-Vittoria.”

He freezes for a moment as the implications hit. “I’ll call her, right—”

“We need to be smart,” I break in. “If anyone overhears you on the phone, it could escalate things.”

He takes a breath, does up his jeans. “We have a coded text message for emergencies, just between us two. Not even the Shadow knows it. That would be safer—right?”

I give a nod, shoving my feet into my shoes. “Send it and let’s go.”

I just hope that by the time we arrive, it’s not too late.

CHAPTER 49

BRICKER

I'VE NEVER BEEN afraid for my mother. Even in the worst of times, she seems so all-powerful, so all-knowing, that it never really occurred to me before that she might someday be in danger. And now, with danger so close to her, and me so far away, I'm not entirely sure how to process it.

Thank God for Max, then, who doesn't tell me to slow down as I speed through the streets, heading to the Villa. He just holds on tight as I take corners and exits, and the calm confidence that he exudes is sort of similar to my mom's energy.

Similar enough to quell the rising sense of panic, at least.

We talk it through on the way—what we know, what we *think* we know, and what we plan to do. So by the time we get to the Villa, I feel a little more prepared.

Everything here is perfectly normal, so far as the guards milling around, and the peaceful silence. Except that Max and I are waved through immediately at the gate, and at the door, the house guards don't pat us down, merely stand aside.

They've been given orders, obviously. From the top.

So for the first time since I left my home here as an eighteen year old recruit headed for Basic, I don't wait for a guard to lead me through the house to my mother's salon. I already know she's there. After all, it's a workday, isn't it? I push into the house with Max behind me and we take off at a brisk pace.

"Keep steady," Max he says to me as we arrive at the doors. But I don't even hesitate. I throw the doors open, no courtesy

knock, just me, bursting through into my mother's inner sanctum.

I'm met by three pairs of startled eyes and one pair that only narrows at my sudden arrival. "Fabrizio," my mother says coolly, "we are in a meeting."

Inside the salon, I've interrupted a meeting between my mother, Marty Gargiulo, Giancarlo Barone, and, of course, the Shadow. He stands in the darkest back corner, as usual.

Did she not get my text? But then she gives a flicker of her eyelashes, and I realize she's playing a part.

And that I need to play one, too.

"Unless it's an emergency—" she begins.

"It is," I say at once. Behind me, I hear Max shut the doors. "I've come to give a follow-up report on the mole in my crew. I figured it would be of interest to everyone."

The men seem surprised, but not wary.

"I'm sorry we barged in," Max says from behind me, "but the fact is, Maestra, I do think it's important that you hear what Bricker has to say."

"You are a guest with our family, Signor Pedretti," she replies, "so perhaps you do not understand our ways, but it is not usual for lower-level men to interrupt my meetings on a whim. However...we were, in fact, just discussing the fallout from the infiltration of the family by PacSyn, and the fate of the traitor Palombino. Perhaps you can shed a little more light on the subject for us."

"Anthony Palombino is dead," I tell her. "The cleaners have done their jobs by now. As for the rest of it—" I come closer to the group. "This is about a second traitor in the Family, Maestra, so I would feel better if everyone here put their guns on the table. Right now."

"Watch your mouth," Barone says at once. "You don't give orders around here, Soldano."

"All the same," my mother says calmly. "Fabrizio is my son, my *eldest* son, and will one day lead this Family, Giancarlo.

Long after you and I are gone, of course. But perhaps it is about time that he was involved in a more senior role. And of course, listened to, as my successor. So why don't you all do as he says?"

There's a long pause as both Marty G and Barone consider her request. Gargiulo is the first to shrug, take out his gun, and put it on the table. Barone follows his lead a moment later.

I give an up-nod to the Shadow. "You too, Falco."

"No."

"Humor him, Stefano," my mother says.

Then, and only then, does the Shadow step forward and put his gun on the coffee table along with the others. But from the glare he gives me as he retreats again, I can see he's pretty damn unhappy about it.

Only one of these men is the traitor. But it was Max's idea to disarm anyone in my mother's vicinity, a suggestion made on the drive over, and I'm glad he made it. The last thing I want is for someone to try to be a hero when the truth comes out, and end up shooting the wrong person in the middle of a melee.

"What the fuck is going on?" Marty G says. "We got a lot of business to get through today, Soldano, and far as I know, the business with your mole is done."

"It's almost done," I say, my eyes traveling between the three men. "The thing is, when the crew and I had Pony cornered down at the docks, he got on the phone to someone. Someone who he seemed to think might be able to get him out of the situation. Now, that was Pony's mistake—but whoever picked up on the other end? That was a mistake, too. Pony wasn't in the most rational of minds at that moment. He didn't use the usual security protocols to conceal the phone number he was dialing, like he had on his burner phone."

You could hear a pin drop in this room, if anyone actually had a pin to drop. I can see my mother edging away a little from the men.

"And?" Marty asks. "Whose number was it?"

“Don’t rush the story, Gargiulo,” Max says mildly. “It’s a good one.”

“Last time I came here with evidence, some people in this room objected to the fact that the Castellanis had a hand in investigating. But not my mother. She understands trust better than anyone else in this Family—and she understands when it’s important to go *outside* the Family, too. In this case, I asked Johnny Jacopo for his help again in breaking into Pony’s phone and tracking not the origin of the call, but the destination.”

Barone scoffs. “The Castellanis have been trying to run this city for decades, starting with *Ciro*, and that scar-faced son of his is just the same. We can’t trust them, *Maestra*.”

“It’s interesting, you say that, *Barone*,” I go on conversationally, “because when Jack ran the number, it came from a phone in *this* house. Now, as I understand it, you three were all here yesterday. Correct?”

“There were a hundred people here at the *Villa* yesterday,” the *Shadow* protests. “Staff, gardeners, guards—and yeah, us three.” It’s the most I’ve ever heard him say in one go, I think.

“That’s true,” I go on. “But there weren’t a hundred people here who knew that I’m *Anna-Vittoria*’s son, or who might’ve previously shared that information with *Chuckles Moran*. There weren’t a hundred people in the *Villa* who knew about the job at *First National*. And there’s sure as hell not a hundred people here who have the same phone number that *Pony* rang. There’s only one of them.”

Behind me, I hear the quiet clicking as Max dials the number on his own phone. A few seconds later, a phone in the room starts ringing—and then everything seems to explode.

Giancarlo Barone punches *Marty G* square in the jaw, knocking him to the ground, and then throws himself toward my mother, who stumbles back in surprise.

But I’m already jumping at her, tucking her underneath me in an instinct whose ferocity surprises me. Max moves in front of us with arms outstretched, ready to take on *Barone*—

But it's not necessary.

Behind all of us, the Shadow steps forward, picked up one of the heavy iron models of a corpse from Pompeii, and without a word, smashes it down on Barone's head.

Barone drops at once, dead before he hits the floor.

"Are you alright?" I ask my mother urgently.

"I am perfectly well," she says breathlessly, even with a little irritation, but I'm relieved to hear it. "Please get off me, Fabrizio, you're very heavy. I see why they like to call you 'Bricker.'"

I stand, offering my hand to help her up, but the Shadow rushes over and tries to push me aside, about to hustle my mother into the safe room I know is at the back of the salon.

"I am *perfectly well*, Stefano," she repeats to him, a little more irritation in her voice as she pulls away from us both. "Martino —"

We all turn to Marty G, who picks himself up from the floor and rubs his jaw, glaring at Barone's body. "Motherfucker," he mutters, and then, "Excuse me, Maestra."

"Understandable in the circumstances," she says, smoothing down her skirt and patting her hair back in place. "Martino, if you would be so kind as to contact the cleaners? And now, Fabrizio, I'd like the full explanation, please."

I lay it all out for her as soon as Marty G is gone, and she also sends the Shadow away to let the house guards know what happened.

"You told me you had a risk assessment done on options to disrupt PacSyn business," I remind her. "It was Barone who ran the assessment, right?"

She nods. "Of course. He is—was—my Consigliere," she says. "He was the natural one to go to for the risk assessment. But how clever of him," she says, almost with admiration. "He

never tried to dissuade me from the Port attack, but only focused on how much benefit there would be from the First National job instead. And...I believe he may have played on my sentimentalities regarding your father, Fabrizio.”

Sentimentalities? My mother? I guess we all have our soft spots, even the most unlikely of us.

“There’s more, Maestra,” Max says, looking at me. I give him a nod. If she has to hear it, better from Max than from me. “I think your Consigliere had delusions of grandeur. His deal with PacSyn was going so well, maybe he got the idea that perhaps *he* could run the Family—if only you and your children were out of the way. He knew it would require your deaths, because you and your sons all hold a particular kind of charisma. The kind that breeds loyalty.”

Mom raises her eyebrow at that, but she doesn’t deny it.

“I think the job at First National was intended to kill both Bricker and Nico,” Max goes on. “Or if not kill Nico, hold him hostage, force you to hand yourself over with a false promise of his release. And then Barone would have had you killed, too. He was only waiting for his moment—waiting for the right patsies, perhaps. He wasn’t a man who liked to get his hands bloody.”

She regards Barone’s body on the floor. “If what you say is true, Massimo, then he’s lucky he died so painlessly.”

“He got a little too cocky,” Max says. “You told me, Maestra, that no one in your Family knew who I was—who I was to Bricker’s father, at least.”

“And still they do not.”

“But *he* knew,” Max tells her, nodding at Barone. “So if he wasn’t supposed to, then he’s been eavesdropping.”

My mother’s face is quite terrible to look at as she considers the implications, and I almost take a step back. “He told you that he knew?”

“First damn day we met,” Max says. “He wanted me off-balance, I think, tried to get in my head during the car ride from Redwood to here. He dropped a hint, subtle enough that I

only wondered, but then when you mentioned it, too...well, I figured Fabi had talked after all.”

Anna-Vittoria suddenly looks sadder than I’ve ever seen her. “Whatever else he is, Fabi is no rat. He *never* told anyone your name, never spoke it aloud—except once. After he was sentenced, he asked me to send a postcard for him. A postcard to one Max Pedretti. I did so, against my better judgment. But as it was his only request of me...” She trails off.

I don’t know what postcard she’s talking about, but Max sure seems to. He just nods.

“What about Chuckles Moran?” I ask. “What did you say to him yesterday?”

“I told him a few things that will live on in his nightmares, no doubt,” she says. “But if I’d known of Barone’s treachery when I spoke to him, I don’t think I would have let him leave. Still, Moran is the kind of man who likes to overplay his hand regularly. I’m sure I’ll have another chance to put him down for good.”

She turns to me, holding out her hands, and I take them. This is my mother now, not my Maestra. I can tell from the look in her eye. “Fabrizio,” she says, “I have done a disservice to you and Niccolo these many years. I did not publicly claim you as my sons, because I wanted to protect you.”

“I know why you did it,” I say quickly, “and, frankly, Mom, it was for the best. It made me want to prove myself to the Family. To you.”

“And so you have,” she says. “But I think from now on, since you and Niccolo are grown men who do not need to hide behind your mother, we will make it known who you really are. PacSyn and any other enemies must understand that there will always be people to take my place if they remove me.”

I lean down to hug her, trying not to grin too wide.

“I hope you know you have a friend in the Castellanis, Maestra,” Max says afterward.

She gives him a slightly cynical smile. “You really were the perfect envoy,” she tells him. “How can I possibly reject

friendship now that you have done such a service to my Family?”

“I think she likes you,” I tell Max as we’re once again driving out of the Villa.

“She may change her mind when she finds out about—well.” He glances at me with a rueful look. “Maybe we missed our chance to tell her today.”

I shake my head. “She’s got enough to worry about right now. We can deal with Mom another time. But if you’re up for it... I’d kind of like to deal with Dad, first.”

“Deal with your father?” Max gives a troubled frown. “What exactly do you mean?”

“I mean I’m done wondering and worrying. I want him to understand who I am. And...I’d really appreciate your support, Max. If you’re prepared to give it.”

“Prepared to give it?” he repeats roughly. “Don’t you know by now, Bricker, that I’ve always got your back?” He gives a lopsided smile, and I reach out to take his hand.

“Yeah,” I tell him sincerely. “I know you do.”

It’s just that what I’m about to ask him to do will be—I’m sure—one of the toughest things he’s ever done.

CHAPTER 50

MAX

A FEW DAYS LATER, we pull into the prison parking lot, but Bricker keeps the car running as we stare silently ahead at the blank concrete facade.

Just laying eyes on this place makes my palms sweat. Too many memories inside those walls. I haven't been back since the day I walked out its gate, and I don't relish the idea of walking back in—even as a free man.

But some demons need facing before they can be put to rest, and Bricker wants me here. So here I am.

Bricker kills the engine and turns to me, expression wavering between uncertainty and hope. “So...” he says at last, “you’re sure you’re okay about this?”

Normal rules would prohibit me, as a former inmate, from strolling back in to visit old friends. But one quick call from Anna-Vittoria to an influential friend means that I’ll be waved in...should I choose to go in.

And more importantly, should Fabi choose to see me.

I turn to face Bricker. “If you want me there, I’m there. But you need to prepare yourself, if Fabi refuses to see me.” Bricker picks at a loose thread on his jeans. “Considering our history and all.”

He just nods.

I reach over to still his nervous hands with my own. “All I’m saying is, don’t expect a warm reunion.”

Bricker huffs a mirthless laugh. “With him? Not goddamn likely.” He meets my gaze and I see pain in his eyes. “I do

want you there with me. I need to close this off. And I think you do, too.” Well, he’s not wrong there. “We’ll try it out, see if Dad’ll play along. The worst he can do is say no.” Bricker’s bravado doesn’t quite mask the tightness around his eyes.

I just nod. “Then let’s do this.”

Inside, there’s a fresh coat of paint, but that’s about the only change. It’s not even visiting hours, but they don’t look surprised at our request to see a prisoner. The guards hold us while they check with him, and I expect any second to be turned away. But after fifteen minutes of nervous waiting, we’re both waved through to the visitation room.

The utter familiarity of the place makes me catch my breath. Still the same shitty old plastic tables, bolted to the floor. Chairs have changed—more likely to break over the years, I suppose.

And the guards are still the looming presence I remember from my time here.

We approach our designated station, but I’m so busy looking around that it takes me a second to even recognize Fabi, and when I do, it’s a shock. He’s sitting there waiting for us already, and he’s older and grayer—like me—but still with that same flinty gaze.

It locks onto me now, and all I see is unconcealed loathing.

“Can’t believe you were actually dumb enough to show up here,” Fabi growls as a greeting. “What in the fuck are you thinking, Pedretti?”

Bricker speaks before I can. “*I* asked Max to come with me, Dad. And—hi, by the way.”

Fabi doesn’t return the greeting, and I keep my mouth shut. Nothing I say is going to be taken well, that much is obvious. Bricker and I take our seats and a tense silence descends on the table.

Bricker clears his throat. “I’m...glad you let Max and me both come in,” he says haltingly. “There are some things I want to let you know.”

Fabi merely grunts, but Bricker forges ahead. “I know that last job you did was supposed to go different. But I can’t figure out how things went so wrong. How it ended with you in here.”

Fabi’s lip curls derisively. “You wanna know who’s to blame for landing me in this shithole? Ask your buddy there.”

My hackles rise at the contempt in his tone, the contempt not just for me but for Bricker, as well. But I force myself to remain silent. This isn’t about me. It’s about Bricker.

“Believe me, I’ve spoken to Max and I got his side of the story,” Bricker replies tightly. “And he’s been blaming himself for decades.”

Fabi turns those cold eyes on me. “Oh, yeah. He looks like he feels *real* bad, sitting there in his thousand-dollar suit.”

“This isn’t about him,” Bricker insists. “I only want to understand.” His voice softens. “Help me understand, Dad. Please. You’d agreed to walk away. What changed?”

Fabi’s stony expression falters at the plea. He looks down at his scarred knuckles for a long moment before responding.

“It’s not something you *can* walk away from,” he says gruffly. “There’s nothing like it, Bricker. Nothing like that feeling. I wanted to settle down with you, with your mother, but...” He trails off with a frustrated huff.

“But it was boring.” I can’t stop myself from interjecting. Fabi and I never saw the jobs the same way. He lived for the thrill.

Me? I just wanted to make a living.

Fabi turns on me, eyes blazing. “Don’t you sit there and judge, you son of a bitch. You took everything from me! My money, my freedom...” He sneers. “And now my son. Right?”

“I *do* regret how things turned out for you. But you made your choices, Fabi. I’m done carrying the guilt for your decisions.”

“You put me here, and now you’re trying to wriggle out of the blame?”

Bricker leans forward, whispering angrily as the guards nearby start to look over. “That’s out of line. Max didn’t put you here

—you managed that yourself.”

Fabi just sounds more outraged. “You’re gonna let this smug bastard talk to your old man like that? Let him poison your mind, erase me from your life?”

“What the hell are you talking about, Dad? Max is the only reason I’m here seeing you right now. He saved my life!”

“Hey,” a nearby guard says in a low voice. “Keep it cool.”

Bricker sits back in his chair, but his voice is no happier when he says softly, “You made your choices—no one forced your hand.”

Fabi rears back and jabs a finger at me, face mottling with rage. “You dare defend him after all he’s cost us? I knew you were soft, but whoring yourself out to my backstabbing ex-partner? You got no shame at all, boy?”

“That’s outta line, Soldano,” I say sharply, but Bricker still has things in hand.

“You’re trying to lecture me about shame and respect?” he says. “You showed neither with the way you treated me and Mom. You could’ve given the job away. You could’ve been with us, not shut away in here.”

“So you spread your cheeks for *him* out of spite? Become his bitch just to shame me?” Fabi spits the words out, but it’s the way Bricker flinches that breaks my resolve to be calm.

I surge up from my chair. “That’s *enough*,” I should. “Speak to your son like that again and I’ll—”

“*Max*,” Bricker hisses, grabbing my wrist and yanking me back. But it’s too late. The guards are coming over. But when I glance apologetically at Bricker, I can see the flash of hurt is gone, replaced by something harder. Something resolute. He turns back to Fabi. “Well, I came here for answers, Dad, and I guess I got them.”

Fabi trembles with fury. “You want to stick with your sugar daddy? Fine. Consider yourself cut off, boy. You’re dead to me, you hear?”

Bricker stands at once. “Works for me. Let’s go, Max.”

I follow him at once, turning my back on Fabi's snarled curses. Bricker doesn't look back, not even once, not even when we walk back out the gate and head toward the car.

But this calm facade of his worries me more than any outburst. "Hey," I say, catching him back for a moment just before we reach the car. "Bricker—listen—I'm sorry about that."

"Sorry?"

"For losing my temper. Making a scene."

He actually chuckles. "I've never seen you like that before," he says, looking down between us. "You have nothing to apologize for, Max. If anything, *I'm* sorry." He looks up again, eyes sad. "Sorry I dragged you in there just to hear those ugly words."

My heart clenches. "Nothing he said changes how I feel about you."

His mask finally cracks. "Christ, why did I think he'd ever change?" He drags a hand over his face. "What a waste of goddamn time."

Gently, I rest a hand on his uninjured shoulder. "That can't have been easy."

"You know what's really messed up? Part of me is *relieved*. All my life I just wanted him to be proud of me. But now..." It's a bittersweet smile, but it's still a smile. "Now I don't need it. I've got all the Family I need in the Espositos." His eyes find mine, softening. "And I have you."

Emotion clogs my throat up. I'm not used to it, but I swallow hard and rasp out, "You're damn right you do."

His smile turns sweet, chasing the last ghosts from his eyes. I lean in and kiss him fiercely, not giving a damn who might be watching. Bricker kisses me back just as hard, erasing all lingering hurt and doubt.

When we finally pull apart, Bricker's shoulders fall back, like a weight is rolling off them. He reminds me of something for a moment, a sense of *déjà vu* rolling over me.

My younger self. That's it: Bricker looks like my younger self, walking away from this joint and vowing to never go back.

He looks *free*.

And we have no reasons left to hide the love between us.

Well...maybe one or two. Anna-Vittoria Esposito. And Sandro Castellani. But I'm done being cautious and I'm done wasting time. Mine's running out, whether I like it or not, and I don't want to waste another single second. First, though, I have other plans.

"Where now?" Bricker says, when we get in the car.

"We need to set up a meeting with your Maestra and my Boss," I tell him. "Explain our...situation."

Bricker sighs. "Yeah. I guess we should."

"But first, let's go home. I want to show you just how much I love you."

CHAPTER 51

BRICKER

MAX and I lie in bed together, our bodies still entwined and our breathing finally evening out after our marathon sex. My injured arm aches a little, but I barely notice it with the endorphin high still coursing through me.

“That was...” Max murmurs, trailing his fingers down my chest. His touch still sends little shivers through me.

“Yeah,” I agree with a grin, not even needing him to finish the sentence.

I study his face in the dim light, taking in every line and angle. This man who has challenged everything I thought I knew and turned my world upside down. Who stood by me every time, who saved my life every time, who had the patience to last through the whirlwind of all my bullshit...

And now, after the chaos and heartbreak, we finally found a way to each other.

But I keep wondering what Max will do if his Boss isn't happy about things.

“What happens now?” I ask quietly.

Max's expression grows serious, and he props himself up on one elbow to look at me. “Now? Now we figure out how to make this work. How to be together, despite the complications.”

Complications. That's certainly one way to summarize the massive hurdles we're potentially facing.

He's lying in bed with a Capo from a rival Family.

I've taken an enemy envoy into my confidence...and my heart.

It goes against everything I've been taught my whole life. Family first. *No outsiders*. But I can't make myself regret it. Not when it comes to Max.

"Easier said than done," I point out. "It's not like either of us can just switch Families."

Or...can we?

"No, we can't," Max is saying. "Our vows prevent that. And even if they didn't...well, like I said before. It's complicated."

I think of my mother, of the sacrifices she's made to lead the Esposito Family. Of the crew who stood by me, even when I pushed them away. Walking away from them wouldn't be easy. But some things are worth fighting for, and with things better these days between the Espositos and the Castellanis...

"Maybe I *could* switch," I say. But the words ring hollow.

"No."

"Leo Bernardi managed it," I counter. "He left his Family behind, joined the Castellanis to be with Julian."

Max smiles wistfully. "A rare exception, with an awful lot of extenuating circumstances. And not an event I see Sandro wanting to occur again anytime soon. Besides, I'd never ask you to break your vows for me."

I sigh, frustrated by the web of oaths and traditions we're caught in. Max reaches out and cups my cheek with a gentle hand.

"I don't have all the answers," he says softly. "But I know one thing: I love you, and I'm not going to waste any more time we could have together."

My heart gives a little jump at his words. He's right. We already lost too much time to secrets and misunderstandings. I lace my fingers through his and bring his hand to my lips, pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

“I want that too,” I assure him. “So I guess the next move is sitting down with my Maestra and your Don. Making them understand.”

“We’ll be honest. Lay everything on the table. They may not like it...”

“But they’ll respect us for coming to them directly,” I finish. Maestra always values integrity, even from her rivals. It’s one reason our Families have coexisted in a fragile peace for so long.

“And if not,” Max murmurs, his lips very close to mine, “I have one last card to play.”

I pull back. “What? What card?”

He just grins. “Ah, that’s one I’ll keep close to my chest. If I don’t need it, I don’t want to waste it.” He leans in for a lingering kiss, and I try to put it out of my mind, this last-ditch strategy of his. It’s probably Castellani business. But I trust Max; if and when I need to know, he’ll tell me.

Tomorrow we’ll call the meeting. Tonight still belongs to us.

I run my fingers through Max’s salt-and-pepper hair as we trade lazy, unhurried kisses. Our earlier frantic passion fades into a glowing ember, keeping us wrapped in its warmth.

“We should get some rest,” Max murmurs against my lips after a while. “That arm needs time to heal, and I’m not twenty-eight anymore. The spirit is willing, but the flesh...” He groans. “God. The flesh needs sleep.”

I tighten my hold around his waist. “We can sleep. But make sure you keep hold of me. Promise?” I need the reassurance of his body next to mine, his steady beating heart a soothing timekeeper as I drift off.

“Like you even have to ask.”

I lay down facing him, my head on the pillow next to him, lulled by the rise and fall of his breathing. He rubs gentle circles on my back. I feel safe here. Cherished in a way I’ve never experienced before.

“I love you, Bricker,” he whispers. “Completely. Deeply. Forever.”

I cling to him tighter. “I love you, too,” I tell him.

And I’ll do whatever it takes to hold onto him. To fight for the future I want with Max, no matter who tries to stand in our way. Even my own mother.

But somehow...

Somehow I think she’ll approve.

We stand outside the ornate double doors of Maestra’s salon the next day, steeling ourselves for the confrontation ahead. I adjust my collar for the tenth time, trying to ignore the anxious flutter in my stomach. Max places a steadying hand on my back.

“It’ll be okay,” he says quietly. “Remember, we’re in this together.”

I give him a small, grateful smile. Having him by my side keeps me from losing my nerve completely. And hell, if I can face down trigger-happy rival crews itching to kill me, I can do this.

Max straightens his tie and smooths back his hair. I take a moment just to look at him—so goddamn handsome and elegant in his tailored suit, just like the very first time I saw him, saw him and wanted him—and the sight bolsters my confidence.

A moment later, the doors to the salon open, and the Shadow beckons us in. Maestra sits regally on her pale green silk-covered settee as usual, regarding us with an inscrutable expression as we enter. And then I see Sandro Castellani standing by the window overlooking the garden. He turns to face us with one eyebrow raised.

“Gentlemen,” Maestra greets us evenly. “Please, have a seat.”

We sit on the sofa across from her. Max's knee bumps mine reassuringly as we settle.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with us, Maestra—and Don Castellani," I begin respectfully. "We have something we need to discuss with you. With both of you."

Maestra folds her hands in her lap. "Yes, we gathered as much. It is highly irregular, requesting a private audience with both Don Castellani and me. But I trust you have good reason."

Her tone is neutral, but there's a glint of curiosity in her eyes. Sandro moves to stand beside her, looking down at us. His face gives nothing away. I resist the urge to fidget under their combined gaze.

Max clears his throat softly. "Don Castellani. Maestra. Bricker and I have developed a close bond in the time we've worked together."

I catch the minute widening of Maestra's eyes, the rise of Sandro's eyebrows. They understand immediately what Max is alluding to. Still, protocol dictates we state it plainly.

"We've fallen in love," I blurt out. "I know it goes against tradition. That organizations like ours aren't meant to mix in this way. But...it is what it is. And we want to be together."

For a long moment, the room is silent save for the ticking of the antique desk clock. Maestra exchanges an unreadable look with Don Castellani. I resist the urge to fill the silence with nervous babbling, letting our confession sink in.

Maestra sits back with a thoughtful, though not angry expression. "Well. Thank you for being honest."

"To say the least," Sandro mutters. He eyes Max with a tiny frown before schooling his features.

"I hope you both know we didn't intend for this to happen," Max says earnestly. "My orders were only ever to serve both Families' interests, and I think I can say I've done that, regardless of what developed between Bricker and me."

Anna-Vittoria holds up a hand. "Please, Signor Pedretti. I do not doubt your integrity, nor Bricker's." She sighs. "The heart

simply does not obey orders, it seems.”

Her eyes hold a touch of sadness. I wonder if she’s remembering her own youth, her own relationship with my father.

If she, too, had to weigh love against duty.

“You have my blessing,” she says after a moment, “if Don Castellani will supply his.”

Sandro clears his throat sharply. “I asked you to build trust with the Espositos, Pedretti, but I didn’t mean...” He gives a gesture, and though he has a half-smile on his face, I can tell he’s troubled.

“Believe me, Boss, I didn’t seek it out,” Max says. “But now that it’s happened, I can’t ignore my feelings. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that I *won’t*.”

Sandro turns away with a little huff of frustration. I brace myself for his anger, but when he faces us again his expression has softened slightly. “No. I don’t suppose you will.”

“If it makes it easier all round,” Max says, “I’m happy to retire. I’ve given a long service to the Family, but—”

“There is no question of that at all,” Sandro says immediately, and I know now what card Max had in mind to play.

Retirement.

As if he’s *anywhere* near that old.

Castellani looks between us contemplatively. “The heart wants what it wants, as they say. And your loyalty cannot be questioned, Pedretti. If you believe this is what you truly need...I will not stand in the way.” But he fixes Max with a piercing stare. “There *will* be conditions.”

Max dips his head. “I understand, Boss, and we’re both happy to follow them. All we want is a chance. But you command the way, and I’ll follow, like always.”

The corners of Sandro’s mouth twitch upwards briefly. “Loyal as ever. Commendable.” He turns to Maestra. “However, I

would appreciate a closer relationship with the Espositos, too, if we are sanctioning this.”

Anna-Vittoria gives a nod. “I don’t see how that would not be possible, Don Castellani. Fabrizio is my son, you see. So there are added layers.”

I’ll give Castellani this: he’s got a poker face *almost* as good as Max’s. “He’s your son,” he says at last, looking at me. “I see.”

I’m surprised my mother mentioned it at all. I’ve never objected to people knowing or not knowing as she deemed necessary. But her words come back to me from the other day: *I have done you and Niccolo both a disservice.*

Maybe this is her first act in making up for that.

Sandro gives a little shrug. “Then we should celebrate the closer ties between our Families.”

Maestra has always been willing to adapt to changing times and needs. She just gives a crooked smile at Sandro’s words. “We should,” she agrees, “since it seems each of us here got what they wanted in the end.” She stands. “Why don’t I walk you all out,” she suggests. But when we get to the front door, she holds me back a moment on the steps, as Max points out to Sandro the nearest folly in the garden.

“Sandro drives a hard bargain,” she tells me, “but you appear to have his blessing, however reluctantly given. But Fabrizio, I must confess, this pairing does give me pause.” She looks at me steadily. “You know we Espositos enjoy our privacy. I will expect your continued discretion regarding our business.”

“Of course.”

She looks over my shoulder at the gardens, apparently lost in a memory. “But love should be nurtured wherever it flowers,” she says. “Especially in times like these.”

“Thank you, Maestra.”

Anna-Vittoria is silent for a long moment. “Does your father know?” she asks at last.

My face twists despite myself. “He does.”

“And?”

“And nothing. He cut ties. And so have I.”

She closes her eyes. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. But if you want to make me feel better...”

“Yes?” Her eyes almost twinkle. Almost. But Anna-Vittoria Esposito is not the twinkling kind. I know that all too well.

“Tell me that you’re proud of me, Mom.”

She pulls me into a hug. “Always.”

CHAPTER 52

DURING THE TIME I've been an envoy to the Espositos, the Villa has become more familiar to me. Not as familiar as Redwood, of course, and nowhere near as dear. Today, however, feels a little different. There's a charge running through the Villa's grounds, a sense of occasion as Espositos mill around me chatting and laughing.

Word went out quickly through the ranks about the ceremony today. Anna-Vittoria has formally recognized Bricker and Nico as sons and heirs, and Bricker is back as Capo of the crew he originally chose—minus one traitor and one decent kid.

I take a second to say a prayer for Rook. I know he'd be as proud as anyone here today to see Bricker recognized. And after the chaos and betrayals that the crew has been through, they deserve a chance to celebrate each other, and their leader.

And hell, if Bricker and his crew can pull through something like Pony's betrayal, and come together closer than ever afterward, I have a lot of hope for us Castellanis, so long as we can keep the Bernardis under control. Things have been much better under Sandro's leadership, especially since he started getting on better with Jack and Julian.

I'm the only Castellani in attendance today. The only outsider at all. But I don't feel like an outsider with Bricker next to me, introducing me to everyone who comes up to congratulate him.

"Man, I could use a drink," he sighs to me, after maybe the twentieth conversation.

“I’ll get you a beer,” I offer, and take myself off to the refreshments table. It’s not the kind of fancy party that Darian Thornfield-Hayes would oversee at Redwood, more like a backyard get-together—in a really, really big backyard. So there are bottles of wine and beer and a few soft options, too, sitting in big tubs of ice for anyone to help themselves.

As I pick out a beer for Bricker, Van Delligatti approaches me. There’s a lightness in his step these days, and the scowl I once thought was his natural expression has been replaced with something milder. “Max,” he says. “How are you?”

Max? That’s new, too. “I’m doing okay, Van. You?”

He gives a pained chuckle. “Well, here’s the thing: I owe you an apology. A real fucking big one. I’m sorry I acted like such a dipshit the whole time you were with us.”

“Apology accepted,” I say at once, because it’s always better to have allies than enemies. But as he keeps talking, his sincerity shines through.

The guy really means it.

“Better late than never, right?” he says. “And I appreciate you looking after Bricker the way you have. He’s my best friend, and I’ll always l-love him.” I pretend not to notice the small stutter.

“I know he feels the same. And you’re a great second, Van. He needs your support just as much as mine.”

Van actually smiles at that. “By the way,” he says, dropping his voice, “just so you know, I’m...dating someone. Um. A guy.”

“Good for you. Hope he’s treating you right.”

“Actually, he’s amazing,” Van says, and I get a five minute monologue about the new love of his life. Bricker has already told me about this, the guy Van met on a dating app who’s been texting him regularly. Van, being Van, didn’t click until recently that this guy—Rob—was actually really into him.

But I let Van talk, let him tell me all about it while I stand there patiently with Bricker’s beer in my hand, dripping

condensation over my fingers. I know what it's like to have all those new relationship feelings inside. You can't stop talking about the person, even when you try.

I'm hoping I'll be able to restrain myself from talking about Bricker non-stop when I get back to Redwood. I'm due back Monday, and I'm looking forward to it—but in the meantime, I'm going to enjoy my last few hours with the Espositos.

“He sounds great,” I say at last to Van. “Lucky you. And lucky him.”

He cuts himself off with a laugh. “Sorry, man, I should let you get back to Bricker.” We both look over to him, where he's talking to the Shadow and Nico, and Anna-Vittoria approaches them, too, as we watch.

Odd little family unit they make. But I'm glad Bricker has them. Fabi Soldano hasn't bothered to reach out since we last saw him, and I don't think he will.

And I also think that's for the best.

Bricker seems to have come to terms, too. That's all I want for him: his contentment.

“Enjoy the afternoon, Max,” Van says, clapping me on the shoulder before he disappears back into the crowd.

I make my way over to Bricker again, catching sight of the other crew members along the way. Giddy is laughing raucously at something Tank just said to him. I'm glad to see the brothers out together. Giddy's recovered well, no lasting damage. Nico has run over to Honeybee, whirling her around in a hug that makes her blue hair stream out behind her.

“Ah, young love. Makes you feel alive, doesn't it?” Jazz's amused voice catches my attention, and I pause to smile back at her. She's a lot happier these days, too, since the guys got out of the hospital.

“It's nice to see,” I say, nodding at the kids. Nico steals a kiss from Honeybee, and then drags her off by the hand to one of the food stands.

“Yeah,” Jazz says. “It really is.” She watches them go with a look of satisfaction. “I hear you’re leaving us.”

“Not leaving so much as returning. But I’ll be around from time to time. It’s not a goodbye.”

“You make sure of that,” she tells me, and leaves me with a smile.

I finally get back to Bricker with his drink, and apologize for the wait. “Maestra,” I add, with a nod to Anna-Vittoria. “Nice ceremony.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” she says with a smile. Even she looks lighter today than usual, as though claiming her sons in front of the Family has allowed her to step into her power completely.

I’m glad she’s on our side. She’s as formidable as Sandro in her own way.

“Signor Pedretti,” she says. “Massimo. Will you walk with me a moment?”

I’m expecting a *don’t you dare hurt my son* moment as we step away from the crowd, though the Shadow follows a few feet away. Now that I know the two of them are together, I can see the signs more clearly—the way her whole face changes, softens, when she looks at him, which is why she tries not to look at him too often.

And when we start talking, she does start with her son—though not in the way I expected.

“I think you approve of my claiming Fabrizio and Niccolo today?” She pauses to allow me to nod. “And perhaps I should have done so before now. But I feared for them both, Massimo. I still do.”

“I’ll take care of Bricker,” I promise her. “And he’ll take care of Nico.”

“Yes, of course,” she says. “Do you know why I changed my mind about keeping them hidden? It was La Contessa.”

“Sandro’s mother?” I’m surprised enough that I stop walking for a moment, and she puts an arm through mine to pull me on.

“Yes. Alessandro’s mother. She advised me on her last visit that it would be better to cast my protection over them openly, since things here...” She gives a look around the gardens, so peaceful that it almost seems crazy to imagine anything else. But we both know the reality.

LA is only getting more and more dangerous for people like us.

“Anyway,” Anna-Vittoria goes on, patting my arm, “I will be able to tell her at her next visit that I took her advice.”

“Her next...visit?”

“Yes.” She looks steadfastly ahead. “Her next visit, in about two months.”

I say nothing, just walk on with her. As far as I know, the Boss has no idea his mother will be in town two months from now. And he has no idea that Anna-Vittoria and his mom have been meeting together.

Talking.

I want to ask what, exactly, they’ve been talking *about*, but that’s a non-starter.

“Thank you, Maestra,” I say at last. “But I have to ask—is this Esposito business?” Because I’m still bound by my word to keep quiet about Esposito doings. And for Bricker’s safety, I intend to keep that promise.

“It is Esposito business,” she says, and my heart drops until she goes on. “But it is Castellani business, too, I think. Don’t you?” She looks at me again, a bright smile on her face. “Though you certainly did not hear it from me, Massimo. And now we should get back to the party.”

Come Monday morning, I’m standing out in the backyard next to the hot tub with my coffee, looking skeptically up at the sky. It’s blue and fine, but the weather’s been changeable lately. Much like the underworld scene in LA.

“Max, come on,” Bricker says anxiously from behind me. “Breakfast’s ready.”

With a sigh, I head back inside for Bricker’s bacon and eggs. Once I move in here permanently, we’re going to have to have a talk about nutrition.

Once I move in? I smile to myself as I take a seat. I’m already here most days, and definitely each night. Bricker also bullied me into giving his smart home a voice sample, so now it obeys me like it obeys him, even though I feel stupid calling out instructions to an inanimate object.

The other thing is, Bricker’s place is closer to Redwood, which makes it a shorter commute. I’m just waiting for the lease on the Glendale place to run out later this month, and then I’ll quit pretending I’m not living with the guy.

Because I do love living with him. I never thought I’d be great at co-habitation, but it turns out, I’m not bad.

Plus I get breakfast made for me most mornings.

“You ready for your first day back?” Bricker asks me, digging into his food.

“I am,” I admit. “But I’ll miss you Espositos, too.”

“But duty calls, right?” Bricker says with a grin. “Hope it’ll be a nice quiet day for you.”

It won’t be. But I’ll deal with that when I get there. “You, too. Tell the crew I said hi, will you?”

Bricker even fusses over my tie and shirt collar before I leave the house, and I let him, before pulling him into a long kiss. “Love you,” I murmur into his neck afterward.

“Love you, too.”

Neither of us tell the other to stay safe as I leave. That’s what I appreciate about Bricker. He understands my work. And I understand his, including the demands that will be made of him, not just as Capo, but as the future Don of the Esposito Family.

I wave from my car, drinking in the sight of this Mafia prince standing there in the doorway in his pajama bottoms, hair tufted and messy, smiling and watching me right back.

I'll always see him like this, no matter how old he gets. No matter how old *I* get.

And I'll always love him.

I blow him a kiss, overcome all of a sudden with sentimental feeling, and then I get in the car and drive away, instantly missing him.

It's good to be back at Redwood. But I've only been here a few minutes, and I can tell already, just like I thought, it's not going to be a quiet day. Raffi DeLuca has something on his mind, and there's a lot I've missed while I've been away, based on the brief he sent me last night.

Sandro also told me some of it, but not the extent of what happened. Reading DeLuca's brief almost made me wish I'd been here for it.

Almost.

But I'm glad I stayed with Bricker.

I need to see Sandro and tell him the intel Anna-Vittoria dropped about his mother. And besides that bombshell, the events of the parley are still affecting the house security staff, that much is clear. DeLuca tells me he wants to talk about it even before I'm in the door of the house.

"Let's do that now," I suggest, since Sandro's not in yet. "I want to know everything. I read what you sent through last night, but I want it from your own lips, too."

We head up to the security room, where I clear the men out after a few more happy greetings, and DeLuca and I sit down to debrief. "Okay," I say. "Talk."

He sits opposite me, still nervous. "You want me to just... talk?"

“I want you to tell me how it all went down from your point of view.”

I don't like the troubled expression on his face. But this is the job, and we'll figure things out together.

And tonight, I get to go home to Bricker and his smart home and his bacon and his bed...

And his *heart*.

I get to go home to the man I love. So no matter what happens at Redwood, I know it'll be a good day.

Because Bricker Soldano will be there for me at the end of it.

NEXT: [His Guilty Pleasure](#)

Need more Max and Bricker? Enjoy an exclusive and steamy extra scene when you [sign up](#) for my newsletter.

DEAR SINFUL SWEETHEARTS...

I hope you loved this adventure as much as I loved writing it! If you haven't yet, please make sure you [join my VIP Readers list](#) to get updates for this series. You'll also get a whole stack of free stories and fun extras, including an exclusive steamy extra scene starring Bricker and Max.

One last thing: it would be super lovely and wonderful of you to leave a review of this book at your favorite retailer, or anywhere else you might hang out online. Your reviews will help others find and enjoy my books.

Yours,

LJ

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

MARRIED TO THE MOBSTER

Morelli Crime Family 1

The mob sent him to kill me, but he owed me a debt...

Years ago I saved his life, and we spent one hot night together before he disappeared.

Now this bad boy's all grown up, and living a dangerous life. But when his Family decides to send a message to my father, it's *my* life on the line.

Only he can't bring himself to do it when he realizes who I am.

He bargains for my life.

He argues to keep me as a hostage instead of killing me.

He even agrees to marry me...but not for love.

Marrying me is the only way he can repay the blood debt he owes me.

He tells me he'll keep me alive only as long as his Boss allows it.

What he doesn't know is that I've loved him since the first moment I laid eyes on him. I'll take him any way I can get him. Sleeping with the enemy never felt so good...

But is there someone else who wants me dead?

HIS LETHAL DESIRE

West Coast Mobsters 1

There's nothing more lethal than a hitman in love...

As a hitman for the Castellani Family, Johnny "Jack" Jacopo has always lived by a code. Duty before everything. Never fall in love. But the moment he meets Miller Beaumont, Jack's world turns upside down.

When Miller's sister goes missing, Jack's Boss orders him to investigate. And Jack's only lead is the gorgeous flirt who's been haunting his dreams. Now he has to work one-on-one with Miller, and resist his charms at the same time.

Miller Beaumont is trouble with a capital "T." And Jack knows he can't give in to his desires. He lives in a dangerous world that Miller doesn't understand.

Jack has a job to do. Rules to follow.

But he's never wanted anyone like he wants Miller.

As they edge closer to the truth, danger encircles them. And after years of guarding his heart, Jack finds himself falling fast.

Jack swore he would never be stupid enough to fall in love. But Miller has given him something to fight for.

Something to live for.

But will following his heart instead of his orders be a lethal mistake?

LEARN THE RULES

Rough Love Part 1

Benjamin Ballard always assumed he was straight - in every way possible. They *invented* the term 'vanilla' to describe him. But if Ben's so straight, why can't he get his inscrutable coffee-shop co-worker Xander Romano out of his head? And how come Xander's rough-housing on the basketball court gets Ben so flustered?

Xander Romano keeps his private life *private*, and lives by a strict set of rules. No fooling around with straight guys, and *definitely* no fooling around with vanilla guys. Been there, done that, got his heart broken. All Xander wants now is to focus on his acting career, and keep his darker desires under wraps.

So what is it about Benjamin Ballard that makes Xander want to break all the rules? When Ben begs for a chance to experiment, Xander can't resist taking him in hand. It's just one quick session, after all.

But Ben has other ideas...

WINTER WONDERS

Friends of Friends 1

Jonathan Ashe's Christmas plans: hole up on the opposite coast, mend his broken heart, and cry into his eggnog all alone.

Job-sitting for a friend in Connecticut seems like the perfect way to leave his mistakes behind over the holiday season. But when Jon's car breaks down in the snow, he finds himself saved by Prince Charming's hotter brother, whisked off to a warm log cabin - and an equally warm bed.

It's only when morning comes that he learns the real identity of his rescuer...and things begin to snowball!

Cooper Kincaid's Christmas plans: get his mother off his back by introducing Jon as his new boyfriend...except he forgot to ask Jon first.

As plans for the annual Kincaid family Christmas Gala ramp up, Cooper is trying to deflect his mother's attempts to get him back together with his toxic ex.

After a chance hookup with Jon, Cooper tells one little White Christmas lie. Thankfully, Jon agrees to act the part of boyfriend for the holidays. As they get to know each other, Jon even encourages Cooper's bossy side in bed - something that Cooper has never been able to express before.

But the more time they spend together, the more real Cooper's feelings become. Can Cooper and Jon admit they might be each other's winter wonderful, or will the ghosts of relationships past ruin their chance for true love?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

www.leightongreene.com

Leighton lives with her partner and her cockatiel on the east coast of Australia. Keep in touch via her [VIP Readers newsletter](#), by liking and following her [Facebook Page](#), or joining her [Facebook Group](#) for fun and games with other fans.

